



INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES

Volume 6, Issue 1

Spring 2023

---

Disavowing Naidu: Nationalism and Decadent Poetics in India

Sriya Chakraborty

---

ISSN: 2515-0073

Date of Acceptance: 20 March 2023

Date of Publication: 24 July 2023

**Citation:** Sriya Chakraborty, 'Disavowing Naidu: Nationalism and Decadent Poetics in India', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 6.1 (2023), 58-78.

**DOI:** 10.25602/GOLD.v.v6i1.1725.g1825

[volupte.gold.ac.uk](http://volupte.gold.ac.uk)

---



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

**Goldsmiths**  
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

## Disavowing Naidu: Nationalism and Decadent Poetics in India

Sriya Chakraborty

Florida State University

‘Historical narratives necessarily produce silences that are themselves meaningful.’

Michel-Rolph Trouillot<sup>1</sup>

When I was first introduced to the work of Sarojini Naidu in my graduate class, ‘Globalization and Transnational Decadence’, I was shocked and uncomfortable – shocked because, in my twenty-plus years of education in India, I had only tangentially encountered Naidu’s poetry as ‘nationalist’, or at best, lyrically redolent of precolonial pastoralism; and uncomfortable, because the history of sexual excess, narcissism, and misogyny in decadent literature was sharply at odds with the Naidu I remembered from my middle school English classes. Intrigued by what I thought was a taxonomic inaccuracy, I reviewed the current curricula of a few top- and middle-tier Indian universities, which, predictably, yielded no surprises – Naidu is still being taught in India under modules that examine ‘themes such as nation-building, the politics of language, and the rewriting of history’<sup>2</sup> or ‘the polyphonic images of the Indian society’.<sup>3</sup> While the University of Calcutta syllabus makes a passing reference to the ‘ambivalent attitude towards colonial resistance realized since the latter half of the nineteenth century’, the term ‘decadent’ – which faced conservative backlash after the widely publicized Oscar Wilde trials – is conveniently missing from prefatory accounts of Naidu’s poetry in India. Although Naidu has recently risen to prominence in Western criticism for ‘la[y]ing claim to an at once English yet Oriental poetic voice through the insistent beat of her sultry, decadent refrains’,<sup>4</sup> it seems as if Indian literary history has chosen to elide her allegiance to European decadence in order to dissociate her from its notorious degeneracy, which could potentially undermine her suitability for the role of a patriotic poet and the first female Governor of the United Provinces.<sup>5</sup> Thus, on the one hand, there exists a growing body of Western scholarship that examines the ways in which Naidu ‘wrote a part for herself into the decadent

script that London wove around her'.<sup>6</sup> On the other, a counter-mechanism operates within the Indian context to routinely sanitize her legacy, supported by a complex nexus of literary historians, scholars, and political parties that stand to benefit from such acts of misinterpretation and misrepresentation.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps it might be helpful to take a step back here, and clarify this claim in the context of present-day Indian politics. The gradual assimilation of Naidu into a nationalist canon is one of the many instances of literary censorship and curriculum control that have afflicted the Indian educational system under the broader cultural phenomenon known as the saffronization of India. Admittedly, nationalism can be a strong unifying force, especially in colonies striving for independence, but, when pursued to an excess, it takes on the undesirable qualities of jingoism and xenophobia, which we find in its exclusionary version being preached and practised in contemporary India. In our current climate of toxic partisanship, particularly in the aftermath of the Hindu right's landslide electoral victories in 2014 and 2019, nationalism has become a glorified buzzword to defend structural inequalities and the violation of minority rights by the government. In 'Mounting Majoritarianism and Political Polarization in India', Niranjan Sahoo argues that the 'divide between secular and Hindu nationalist visions of Indian identity', which has existed since the late nineteenth century, has recently been brought to boil with the formation of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 1980, the mobilization of Hindu nationalism during the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992, and the BJP's election to federal power in 2014 and 2019.<sup>8</sup> The most recent blow to Indian secularism has been wrought by the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in 2019, whose roots go back to the final years of colonialism in India. After undergoing several modifications between 1955 and 2015, the proposed amendment to the citizenship bill was passed with an overwhelming majority in both the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha in 2019, becoming the Citizenship Amendment Act, 'which grants religious minorities from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan a speedier path to Indian citizenship, but excludes Muslims'.<sup>9</sup> This exclusion, coupled with the BJP's conveniently-timed decision to create a national database of

Indian citizens – called the National Register of Citizens (NRC) – has resulted in massive discontent throughout the country, turning what ‘could have been otherwise an inane Census exercise [...] into a political slugfest and patriotic competitiveness’.<sup>10</sup> The Union Home Ministry’s decision to selectively close down the nation’s boundaries and deport illegal immigrants is driven by a parochial notion of ‘nationalism’, alarmingly influenced by religious fundamentalism. The social, political, and ethical debates about nationalism have deeply permeated our literary scholarship and pedagogy, which, I hope, will explain the urgency of this intervention, and excuse the polemical charge of some of the arguments that I make in this article.

Regardless of context, one might wonder how Naidu, the first female President of the Indian National Congress, and a celebrated champion of the people’s cause, fits into the right-wing nationalist agenda. Indeed, even though her later works were composed in the service of the nation, the essence of Naidu’s poetry was undeniably cosmopolitan, and there was no clean break with decadence in her poetic career. In her own words from a January 1905 letter to Edmund Gosse, as quoted by Elleke Boehmer, Naidu worked hard to ‘add [her] little exotic flower to the glorious garland of English verse’, reinforcing her aesthetic inheritance and aspirations, often overlooked by later Indian critics.<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, although Naidu was famous enough to be voted among the ten greatest living Indians in a poll conducted by the *Indian National Herald* in 1926, historian Ramachandra Guha reminds us of her Hindu-Brahmin-Bengali ancestry, which might have partially influenced her popularity.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, Makarand Paranjape, a leading scholar of Indian writing in English and the editor of the only authoritative selection of Naidu’s works, *Sarojini Naidu: Selected Poetry and Prose*, argues in his introduction to the *Essential Reader* that Naidu was neither a relentless firebrand like Subhash Chandra Bose, nor an astute politician like Mahatma Gandhi, but ‘a celebrity publicist and public relations officer of the Congress in general and Gandhi in particular’.<sup>13</sup> For Paranjape, Naidu is ‘one of those great people whose greatness is most difficult to identify and substantiate’.<sup>14</sup> While I maintain my reservations about this harsh assessment, Paranjape does highlight a crucial aspect of Naidu’s poetry, which explains why she is endorsed as

a nationalist poet on both sides of the political spectrum. Naidu's colonial angst is sublimated in ornamental language and imagery, and her poetry is too meek to inveigh against the injustices of the system, too delicate to take up arms in defence of the people. Her brand of nationalism – of the nostalgic, idealistic, meretricious kind – poses no threat to the dominant socio-political order, regardless of her political affiliations, which accounts for her presence in multiple anthologies and textbooks even to this day. Therefore, the biggest criticism of her poetry has become, ironically, her greatest claim to fame, for everything that makes her a mediocre poet (according to critics like Paranjape) also makes her the perfect candidate for the role of a right-wing-approved nationalist poet.

Interestingly, while the Penguin anthology of decadent poetry is bookended by Wilde and Naidu, both consolidating her association with the movement and identifying her as one of its key practitioners, Indian criticism has consistently focused on her lyricism, her patriotic idealism, and her keen eye for beauty. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, whose incisive work, *Indian Writing in English* has been effusively acknowledged and recommended by scholars like K. D. Verma, denudes Naidu's poetry of its decadent associations, entirely missing what Elleke Boehmer later calls the 'risqué expressions of feminine sexual submission liberally distributed across her poems'.<sup>15</sup> Foreshadowing Paranjape's qualification of Naidu's works as vacuous – representing a dead aesthetic and nostalgic for a feudal past – Iyengar observes: 'No room for obscurity or profundity here; simplicity and directness are sovereign, and the appeal is the appeal of the old, the unfading, the undying.'<sup>16</sup> Iyengar's rapturous appreciation of Naidu's poems pays particular attention to her visual connoisseurship and sensitivity to beauty – 'the beauty of living things, the beauty of holiness, the beauty of the Buddha's compassion, the beauty of Brindavan's Lord' – but fails to (or more appropriately, refuses to) locate the cultural and literary influences that could have informed such aesthetic predilections.<sup>17</sup> Although contemporary Indian scholarship documents Naidu's indebtedness to Arthur Symons and Edmund Gosse for their sage counsel during the formative years of her poetic career, these records only serve to reinforce the story of her

transformation from an imitator of British Orientalism to a true poet of the Deccan, without substantially touching on the literary implications of these friendships and especially their impact on Naidu's fascination with decadence.<sup>18</sup> Paranjape traces the influence of Shelley, Tennyson, Swinburne, and the Pre-Raphaelites in Naidu's poems, and concludes, 'Sarojini's aesthetics is feudal, though her politics is democratic nationalism.'<sup>19</sup> His analysis of Naidu's 'tendency towards hedonistic self-abandon and escape from reality', coupled with her preference for 'the more ornate, more latinate, more exotic, more unusual' over 'the simple, functional, and ordinary' verges on a tacit acknowledgment of her decadence – or her interstitiality, at the least – but instead of connecting the dots for his readers, he interprets the poems as embodying 'the feudal ideal' and embracing classical Indian aesthetics with their 'emphasis on *alankara* or the "beautiful form" in poetry'.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps Paranjape's insistence on feudal nostalgia in Naidu's poems is not a deliberate obfuscation of her decadence, but a substitution of one form of decadence for another. Nonetheless, this article is both an inquiry into the systemic omission of decadence from patriotic, nationalist, and decolonizing accounts of Indian literary history, and a humble attempt at its rehabilitation. To this end, I will question and complicate the carefully curated legacy of the Nightingale of India, and trace the aesthetics of decadence in the lush textures of her poems in *The Golden Threshold* (1905).

However, before I proceed any further, it would be useful to situate the disavowal of Naidu's decadence in the global context of Queen Victoria's death in 1901, the First World War from 1914 to 1918, and the Wall Street Crash in 1929. As Kate Hext and Alex Murray argue in their joint introduction to *Decadence in the Age of Modernism*, the indulgences of fin de siècle decadence came to be regarded as anachronistic and inappropriate in the aftermath of history's savagery. Even the most vociferous defenders of the movement soon became disillusioned with its blithe insouciance:

In 1928 A. J. A. Symons, himself a great chronicler of decadence, concluded that the Great War had cleaved his age apart from that of Wilde, Arthur Symons, Lionel Johnson, and the Rhymers' Club, who long ago gathered in the Cheshire Cheese to recite their

languorous verses: 'Freed from the restrictions and hypocrisies against which they strove, we are irked by the despairing clamour of their revolt; exhausted by the greatest war in history, we are in no mood for merely introspective woe; absorbed in our own time we forget the problems by which these young men were perturbed. In the twilight end of the nineteenth century there seemed no answer to a bleak materialism.'<sup>21</sup>

Likewise, Gosse – to whom Naidu had dedicated *The Golden Threshold* – retrospectively diagnosed the 'laxity of manners, and [the] wretched sensitiveness to personal inconvenience' as alarming portents of 'national decay'.<sup>22</sup> The rise of modernism and its moralizing deprecation of 'art for art's sake' further weakened the influence of decadent writers by 'paint[ing] them as relics of a bygone age' and paving the way for their institutional irrelevance.<sup>23</sup> In 1960, Harry Levin framed decadence and modernism as fundamentally adversarial movements, claiming that every 'revolutionary generation tends to be succeeded by a reactionary one; to put it less politically and more psychologically, there seems to be a cyclic oscillation between tough and tender minds'.<sup>24</sup> In this oppositional framework, modernism is controversially cast as the 'tough' (and by association, masculine and virile) successor of an effeminate/queer aesthetic which was rendered obsolete by the brutalities of the war. The rejection of decadence around the turn of the nineteenth century also rose out of the cumulative resistance of various decolonizing movements that privileged social realism over gilded abstractions and called for a revisionist poetics of responsibility. The members of the Indian Progressive Writers' Association, for instance, claimed in their manifesto, published in English in the February 1936 issue of the *Left Review*, that 'the object' of their association was

to rescue literature and other arts from the priestly, academic and decadent classes in whose hands they have degenerated so long; to bring the arts into the closest touch with the people; and to make them the vital organs which will register the actualities of life, as well as lead us to the future.<sup>25</sup>

The cultivated indolence and alleged moral degeneracy of fin-de-siècle aestheticism, which was also cast as decadent, were deemed incompatible with the social and ethical obligations of this fraught moment, not only in India, but, as Robert Stilling argues in *Beginning at the End: Decadence, Modernism, and Postcolonial Poetry*, in all 'cultures emerging, like spokes on a wheel, from the same declining empires around the same time'.<sup>26</sup>

As a sense of national identity began to crystallize in India around the end of the nineteenth century after the Sepoy Mutiny, the demand for a national literature that would capture the heart of India and celebrate a distinctively Indian sensibility grew louder and stronger in different parts of the country. Interestingly, in a letter to Gosse dated January 1905, not long after the annual meeting of the Indian National Congress in December 1904, Naidu – who was already a popular orator and a determined champion of the nationalist cause – wrote with barely-concealed excitement (and perhaps, a hint of irony), ‘far from being the insignificant little provincial I had thought myself I was treated almost as a national possession. I!’<sup>27</sup> Naidu was, of course, not oblivious to the enormity of the task at hand: ‘My public was waiting for me’, she continued, ‘no, not for me, so much as for a poet, a national poet, and it was ready to accept me if I would only let it’.<sup>28</sup> The ending of the letter – ‘if I would only let it’ – is playfully narcissistic, but it also makes a crucial point about Naidu’s tacit endorsement of her reception as a ‘national poet’ of an emerging India. Additionally, in a speech for 1917 entitled ‘The Soul of India’, Naidu also poses ‘decadence’ – possibly in the more social and political sense of the term, but not without its concomitant associations with *fin-de-siècle* literary decadence – as the antithesis of nationalism: ‘The British were a ‘bold and vigorous race with a glorious literature and a glorious heritage of freedom’, but they ‘reaped in India a disintegration of all the national life and a decadence of the national culture’.<sup>29</sup> What, then, do we make of Naidu’s complicity in her gradual assimilation into a nationalist narrative? More importantly, would it even be fair to argue that existing historiography has done a great disservice to her poems if she consciously gave in to reductive taxonomies of her craft?

Of course, for those who are familiar with the trajectory of her life, Naidu’s tactical adaptability requires no introduction. Naidu had sailed for England in September 1895 to continue her studies at King’s College, London, and later at Girton College, Cambridge. Here, as Boehmer observes, the ‘relatively stable local and regional identities and belief systems [she] brought over from home were thrown into new, unpredictable, and quintessentially modern mixes’.<sup>30</sup> As a young



Indian girl of sixteen, who required access to the cultural institutions of the West and the publishing world of important writers and critics like Symons and Gosse, she soon took to writing what Gosse called verses

that were skilful in form, correct in grammar and blameless in sentiment, but they had the disadvantage of being totally without individuality. They were Western in feeling and in imagery; they were founded on reminiscences of Tennyson and Shelley [...] this was the note of the mockingbird with a vengeance.<sup>31</sup>

Yet Naidu's colonial mimicry was masterful enough to earn her the attention and curiosity of important men in literature, who not only read her poems with care and patience, but also offered her advice on how to break through the smokescreen of fustian and fantasy.<sup>32</sup> For example, Gosse wrote in the introduction to *The Bird of Time* (1912) that in order to reconstitute herself as 'a genuine Indian poet of the Deccan', Naidu must tap into both her authentic Indianness and her delicate femininity:

I ventured to speak to her sincerely. I advised the consignment of all that she had written, in the falsely English vein, to the waste-paper basket. I implored her to consider that from a young Indian of extreme sensibility, who had mastered not merely the language but the prosody of the West, what we wished to receive was [...] some revelation of the heart of India, some sincere penetrating analysis of native passion, of the principles of antique religion and of such mysterious intimations as stirred the soul of the East long before the West had begun to dream that it had a soul.<sup>33</sup>

Despite his Orientalist assumptions about native authenticity, Gosse seems to have discerned the exact strain of Romantic escapism in poems like 'The Snake Charmer' and 'Village-Song' that blunted the revolutionary edge of Naidu's earlier poems. Later Indian critics such as Iyengar or Paranjape would diagnose this belated echo of Romanticism as hedonistic, preserving the colonial hierarchy that decolonization was striving to undo. Paranjape writes in the introduction to the *Essential Reader*: 'Not only did Naidu represent a dead aesthetic, but her romanticism was of a particularly meretricious kind'.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, what she needed was a radical transformation – a break away from the formulaic, Orientalist tropes of the West, in favour of a poetry that could retaliate and strike.

The enthusiastic reception of Naidu's subsequent collection, *The Golden Threshold* (1905), attests to the successful completion of what Boehmer calls her 'western make-over' – the combination of 'technical skill learned outside the 'magic circle' of the Orient with inside knowledge', to produce poems 'as luminous in lighting up the dark places of the East as any contribution of savant or historian'.<sup>35</sup> In his introduction to the book, Symons writes that the poems

hint, in a sort of delicately evasive way, at a rare temperament, the temperament of a woman of the East, finding expression through a Western language and under partly Western influences. They do not express the whole of that temperament; but they express, I think, its essence; and there is an eastern magic in them.<sup>36</sup>

Early reviews of *The Golden Threshold*, catalogued in Iyengar's history of Indian writing in English, also indicate that Naidu, the 'national poet', had finally arrived upon the literary scene with this perfectly timed collection:

'This little volume should silence forever the scoffer who declares that women cannot write poetry', so wrote the *Review of Reviews*; 'Her poetry seems to sing itself as if her swift thoughts and strong emotions sprang into lyrics of themselves', cooed *The Times*; and the *Glasgow Herald* made an important point: 'The pictures are of the East it is true: but there is something fundamentally human in them that seems to prove that the best song knows nothing of East or West' [...] In India she was hailed as the Nightingale of Indian song, and J. B. Yeats's portrait of her made her a figure of pure romance. She emerged from seclusion, and she appeared on the Congress platform. The times too – those were the days of *Bandemataram* – were propitious for her entry into politics, and she moved among leaders a leader, lending colour and music and humour and vivacity to their meetings.<sup>37</sup>

However, while this national turn in her poetry certainly helped her political career – Naidu was appointed as the President of the Indian National Congress in 1925 and later became the first woman to hold the office of Governor in 1947 – a nuanced reading of *The Golden Threshold*, '[c]arven with delicate dreams and wrought | With many a subtle and exquisite thought', reveals the decadent underpinnings of her patriotic poetry and the political motives behind their convenient misinterpretation.<sup>38</sup>

As intimated earlier in this article, the association with decadence – derived etymologically from the Latin verb 'decadere', which means 'to fall' – could have jeopardized Naidu's involvement in the struggle for a 'new India', rising from the ruins wrought by British colonial rule. The

decadent connoisseurship of beauty in all its perverse and transgressive forms also made it injudicious for Naidu to openly ally with the rich and problematic heritage of Huysmans and Wilde. Furthermore, the tender and delicate aesthetic of fin-de-siècle literature was fundamentally irreconcilable with the tough and robust rhetoric of nationalism which Naidu had to co-opt as a way of surviving in the male-dominated world of Indian politics. Considering the ramifications of admitting to her decadent loyalties, it made perfect sense for Naidu to let herself be canonized as a poet of the independence movement, while *performing* this stereotyped identity, particularly for her Indian audience, to innovative and subversive ends.

*The Golden Threshold*, which cemented Naidu's reputation as a nationalist poet in 1905, was written, quite literally, at the threshold of India's independence, at a time when Naidu herself was at the threshold of a revitalized poetic and political career after her brief but productive stay in Europe. However, as Ana Parejo Vadillo observes, *The Golden Threshold* introduced 'the languages of India into [Naidu's] verse' in turn producing 'a new decadent symbology', such that 'words became thresholds to a new literary and political world'.<sup>39</sup> The idea of liminality immanent in the word 'threshold' also offers valuable insight into the assortment of Oriental imagery that features throughout the collection. As Paranjape asks, 'is the collection a sort of threshold or passage to India itself for Western readers?' According to Paranjape, the nationalist in Naidu 'would want to introduce her readers not to an earthen or clayey India, but a magnificent, golden India, embellished by her imagination and carefully ornamented so as to be pleasing and delectable to her foreign readers'.<sup>40</sup> Thus, while 'threshold' evokes a sense of in-betweenness that is central to Naidu's poetics, 'golden' alludes to her affiliation with the decadent history of ornamentation and artifice. Besides, the book seals its decadent credentials through its own fin-de-siècle ornamentation and publication history, even as it announces the birth of a new India, on the cusp of a golden era. *The Golden Threshold* opens with a portrait by Jack Butler Yeats, the brother of W. B. Yeats, and was published in London by William Heinemann, who also published Max Nordau's

*Degeneration* (1895), Symons's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), Henry James' *The Awkward Age* (1899), and Symons's *Poems* (1902).

'The Snake Charmer', from *The Golden Threshold*, illustrates the tensions between decadence and nationalism in Naidu's poetry. By exoticizing a familiar scene from rural India, where a snake charmer hypnotizes venomous snakes by playing a flute-like instrument, locally known in Hindi as the 'pungi', it serves as an apt example of her self-orientalism:

Whither dost thou hide from the magic of my flute-call?  
In what moonlight-tangled meshes of perfume,  
Where the clustering keovas guard the squirrel's slumber,  
Where the deep woods glimmer with the jasmine's bloom?

I'll feed thee, O beloved, on milk and wild red honey,  
I'll bear thee in a basket of rushes, green and white,  
To a palace-bower where golden-vested maidens  
Thread with mellow laughter the petals of delight.

Whither dost thou loiter, by what murmuring hollows,  
Where oleanders scatter their ambrosial fire?  
Come, thou subtle bride of my mellifluous wooing,  
Come, thou silver-breasted moonbeam of desire!<sup>41</sup>

The poem is composed in three quatrains, each with the abcb rhyme scheme of a traditional folk ballad, harking back, in its formal conservatism, to the overwrought poems of decadent predecessors like Wilde's 'Athanasia', Symons's 'Javanese Dancers', or 'The Absinthe Drinker'. The lack of formal experimentation is complemented by its anachronistic language ('whither', 'thee', 'thou', etc.) and a cloying excess of Oriental clichés like the 'deep woods', the 'palace-bowers', the fragrant 'jasmine bloom', the 'golden-vested maidens', and finally, the 'milk and wild red honey', reminiscent of the 'honey-dew' and 'milk of Paradise' in Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan'. The last stanza of the poem is also indebted to Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', which idealizes and exoticizes Greek antiquity. The negotiation, dialogue, and overlap between Romantic and decadent sensibilities have been the focus of scholarly attention since the publication of Symons's *The Romantic Movement in English Poetry* (1909), so one might argue that the echo of Romanticism in Naidu's poetry is symptomatic of her decadent affiliation.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, instead of capturing the

authentic essence of rural India, Naidu seems to synaesthetically recreate (and corroborate) the mystical, remote, and luxuriant India of the Western Romantic imagination, constructing an idea of the nation that could not be farther from its wretched reality of successive plagues, famines, and economic hardship, which Romesh C. Dutt documents in *The Economic History of India* (1904). Paranjape vindicates Naidu's Orientalism by bracketing it with the strain of wistful nostalgia that was common in patriotic poetry of her time:

What Sarojini tried to do was to offer an entry into this unspoiled India. Of course, it would have been too painful to portray it with all the horrors of its poverty, inequality, disease, and suffering; if only these were glossed over, then a very attractive image of India would emerge, traditional, vivid, vibrant, colourful, and joyous.<sup>43</sup>

Paranjape's 'defence' of Naidu's *incidental* decadence is symptomatic of her slow but steady interpellation into normative modalities of nationalism that I have hinted at throughout this essay.

To the Western reader, Naidu's sensualization of India is unequivocally decadent in its challenge to realism, which behoves art to be faithful to social realities – especially when said art is tasked with rallying support for a patriotic cause. Indeed, the integration of myth and history, realism and fabulation in Naidu's works at a time of unprecedented political turmoil promoted an orientalist panorama of 'deep woods', 'murmuring hollows', and 'golden-vested maidens' that one would have expected her to critique as a prominent leader of the Indian nationalist movement. After all, the publication of *The Golden Threshold* coincided with the territorial reorganization of the Bengal Presidency (also known as the Partition of Bengal) along religious lines, which caused a tremendous furore and spurred nationwide protests that consolidated into the Swadeshi movement in India. The Swadeshi movement was a drive for self-sufficiency through domestic production, which Gandhi described as the soul of 'purna swaraj' or self-rule. Evidence of political backlash and civil unrest in the wake of the Partition are copiously documented in newspapers of the pre-Independence era, such as the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, *Bande Mataram*, or *Bengalee*. For example, an article titled 'Partition Proclamation and Swadeshi Movement: Public Meetings'<sup>44</sup> in the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, published on 30 October 1905, shortly after the implementation of the

Partition, describes anti-Partition meetings along with the names of prominent participants and a list of speeches delivered in Tangail. Another article, 'Notes from Capital', printed in the *Bengalee* on 1 September 1905 offers a robust first-person commentary on the 'ever-increasing pitch of anti-Partition and boycott movement[s] in Bengal'.<sup>45</sup> While political tensions continued to simmer all over the country, exposing frictions and fault-lines within the Swadeshi Movement as a result of the radicalization of Indian nationalism, Naidu's poems remained unsullied by the political fray, painting an idealized image of India rather than representing the reality on the ground. Paranjape observes that Naidu's

palanquin-bearers, wandering singers, Indian weavers, Coromandel fishers, snake-charmers, itinerant beggars [...] are all made to deny the hardship and toil of their occupations, hide their dispossession and marginalization, and celebrate their lowly and oppressed state. They become picturesque, exotic figures in tableaux, frozen in various attitudes of quaintness.<sup>46</sup>

All the alleged flaws of decadence, Paranjape ascribes to Naidu's poetry. However, a preference for artifice, 'the heightening of sensuality in the imagery until every sense is stimulated to excess', and the 'definite tendency towards hedonistic self-abandon and escape from reality' become, in his historical-materialist critique, a measure of her 'feudal aesthetics', as opposed to a clear indication of her decadent sensibilities. Although Naidu's nationalism remains restricted, by and large, to the domain of the performative, her aesthetic predilections are dismissed as the excesses of patriotic idealism and not, explicitly, the excesses of decadence. Padmini Sengupta, in her brilliant (but incomplete) biography of Naidu, asks: 'Did Sarojini Naidu exult in two forms of existence? One in the glare and turmoil of political agitations, youth movements, and women's emancipation, and the other in the sweet-scented, heavily-curtained drawing rooms of a secret woman's world?'<sup>47</sup> The answer is yes, but Sengupta too misidentifies the decadent strain in Naidu's poetry as feminist sentimentalism, thus failing to theorize the influence of the dichotomous 1890s in the exhilarating anticipations of renewed vigor and the simultaneous regress into lyric melancholy throughout her oeuvre. Paranjape justifies Naidu's idealizing, Orientalist, and belatedly Romantic poetics in such a way that downplays the aesthetic inheritance of her verse, emphasizing instead its cultural

aspirations for India. However, a closer analysis of her work reveals how she draws on and resists these seemingly incompatible literary modalities to create a push-and-pull effect within her poems, making it difficult – and sometimes impossible – for the reader to distinguish between the affiliative and the contentious, the sincere and the subversive.

As noted earlier in this article, Naidu's poems cannot easily be mapped onto a parochial framework of nationalism rooted in religious fundamentalism and minority persecution. For example, 'Wandering Singers' begins with a direct reference to Naidu's cosmopolitan vision:

Where the voice of the wind calls our wandering feet,  
Through echoing forest and echoing street,  
With lutes in our hands ever-singing we roam,  
All men are our kindred, the world is our home.<sup>48</sup>

The eponymous singers migrate across space, from wilderness ('echoing forest') to civilization ('echoing street'), and across time, from a harmonizing present where 'all men are (their) kindred, the world is (their) home' to a decadent past 'of cities whose lustre is shed | The laughter and beauty of women long dead'. Connecting these itinerant communities to the figure of the *flâneur* in decadent history, Vadillo remarks that the 'poem evokes the urban decadence of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857), of James Thomson's *The City of Dreadful Night* (1880), of Amy Levy's 'A March Day in London' (1889), and of Rosamund Marriott Watson's 'The City of Dreams' (1895)'.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, the 'wandering singers' resemble the *flâneur* in their emancipatory unbelonging, but their outsiders' gaze does not attempt to collapse and contain the infinity of the Other as they move from one place to another, making the world their home. Although not explicitly articulated anywhere in the poem, it may be assumed that Naidu's singers belong to the precarious underclass that was forced into migratory existence by changes in land settlement and revenue systems under colonial governance.<sup>50</sup> Pollinating the acquired tropes of decadence with the poignant cadences of marginalized voices, Naidu brings the arts closest to the people, and glorifies them as the real harbingers of change. 'Wandering Singers' claims that the peripheral status of the singers provides them with a penetrating insight into happiness, simplicity, and sorrow ('Our lays are of [...] |

happy and simple and sorrowful things'), which gives nuance to their art and colours their vision of the future:

What hope shall we gather, what dreams shall we sow?  
Where the wind calls our wandering footsteps we go.  
No love bids us tarry, no joy bids us wait:  
The voice of the wind is the voice of our fate.

The poem does not end on a hopeful note of impending liberation, as one would expect of a 'nationalist poem', but instead vacillates between the 'dreams' of dead civilizations and the 'hope' of a forward-dawning futurity. Interestingly, Vadillo quotes a 1918 political address by Naidu at the Kanya Mahavidyalaya in Jullundur, which establishes a direct connection between her poetry and her political speeches:<sup>51</sup>

You have seen in your cities, it is a very common sight in India, the wandering singer with a stick on his shoulder with two bundles tied up on its each end, going from city to city singing songs. I stand before you today as a wandering singer like that with all my possessions carried in my two bundles – one a little bundle of dreams and another growing bundle of hopes. These are the only two things which I have in this world.<sup>52</sup>

In identifying with the wandering singers, Naidu admits to her own yearning for an unsullied past as well as her uncertainty and ambivalence about the future of the Indian Independence Movement. Given its denial of harsh social realities and the economic hardship of migratory workers deprived by colonial policy, one might wonder how a poem like 'Wandering Singers' ends up in school textbooks to this day. However, as I have tried to argue in this article, Naidu's decadent anti-realism aligns so closely with patriotic idealism that it is easy to mistake (or misread) one for the other. And it is precisely this aesthetic overlap between two distinct, and even oppositional, ideologies that challenges Paranjape's dismissal of Naidu as a 'minor figure in a major mode'.<sup>53</sup> Matthew Potolsky writes that

antinationalism [was] central to decadent writing after 1870, arising in a variety of contexts and in many different works. Decadent antinationalism attacks a powerful new conception of political community not, as one might expect, from the perspective of the individual monad but from that of a rival community united by taste rather than origins or geography.<sup>54</sup>



However, unlike Huysmans's *Des Esseintes*, Naidu manages to straddle the line between decadence and nationalism, ironizing her own canonization by both Indian and Western critics, and questioning what political or aesthetic ends such collections might serve.

The diversity of subject-positions that Naidu adopts within *The Golden Threshold* gives her the freedom to be infinite in a Whitmanian sense, proving that decadence and nationalism are not diametrically opposed, but rather mutually constitutive of her anti-colonial poetics. For Naidu, the only way to avoid being someone is to be everyone at once. Even though the collection begins with a sketch of her as a 'precocious, prepubescent Victorian poetess', she immediately rejects the pose of exaggerated Western femininity in favour of a fluid selfhood that manifests as variously as possible and resists invasion and appropriation by the reader's gaze.<sup>55</sup> Perhaps the most brilliant instance of Naidu's ad hoc subjectivity can be found in the short poem, 'Humayun to Zobeida' (translated into English from Urdu), which replicates in content the effusive overtures of Elizabethan sonnets or the French *blazon*:

You flaunt your beauty in the rose, your glory in the dawn  
Your sweetness in the nightingale, your white-ness in the swan.

You haunt my waking like a dream, my slumber like a moon,  
Pervade me like a musky scent, possess me like a tune

Yet, when I crave of you, my sweet, one tender moment's grace,  
You cry, 'I sit behind the veil, I cannot show my face.'

Shall any foolish veil divide my longing from my bliss?  
Shall any fragile curtain hide your beauty from my kiss?

What war is this of Thee and Me? Give o'er the wanton strife,  
You are the heart within my heart, the life within my life.<sup>56</sup>

In this poem, Naidu uses the framework of European decadence to allude to the decadence of Mughal courts – finding in the failure of the erstwhile Mughal Empire a historical parallel for the fall of Rome, and, in its ruins, the inspiration for a decadent poetics of beauty and decay. She equips Humayun, the mighty emperor, with the Oriental rhetoric of European decadence to exalt the beauty of his beloved – and yet, as the poem unfolds, we are slowly made aware of the sexual

motives that underlie his lyric exuberance. Unlike Humayun, whose life and achievements have been exhaustively documented in sprawling volumes of history, Zobeida, the poem's exoticized addressee (and possibly, his secret mistress) does not exist in anywhere in the archival discourses and secondary scholarship on the Mughal Empire. We see Zobeida only through Humayun's eyes, and hear her only through his voice, but the stolid finality of her utterance – 'I sit behind the veil, I cannot show my face' – even when it is refracted through a petulant Humayun, conveys an impression of strength and dignified intransigence. By giving Zobeida a name and imbuing her with an indomitable spirit of resistance, Naidu manages to both deflate the ornamental insincerity of Humayun's verses and draw attention to the historical processes of obscurement that regulate the politics of presence and absence.

Humayun's imperial genealogy sets up an uncanny resemblance between the Mughals and the European colonial empire that craved to 'pervade' and 'possess' the Oriental body politic by means of violent loot and plunder. Interestingly, while Naidu usurps the subject-position of the colonizer vis-à-vis the exoticized Orient, we hear an echo of her *real* voice in Zobeida's response, which, as we have noted earlier, is ventriloquized by the colonizer and probably goes through several layers of distortion and silencing before it reaches our ears. Like Zobeida, who refuses to 'lift her veil' and accede to Humayun's entreaty, Naidu also denies the West an authentic vision of India by recreating, as Paranjape notes, 'the picture of India painted by Anglo-Indian and English writers – a land of bazaars, full of bright colours and perfumes, and peopled with picturesque beggars, wandering minstrels and snake-charmers'.<sup>57</sup> Yet, even though she fails as a social realist, Naidu's tactical idealism presents no obstacle to her assimilation into the role of a nationalist poet.

Zobeida's insistence on hiding her 'face' brings to mind the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas and his foundational contribution to the ethics of Otherness. At the heart of Levinasian ethics lies a transformative encounter with the Other, who *faces* the subject directly, accuses and shames him for his complacency, and calls him into responsibility. As the subject reaches out of his corporeal prison and responds to this call, he becomes beholden to the Other, for they facilitate

his Becoming and rescue him from social determinations. The appeal of the Other lies in their irreducible alterity that can neither be fully apprehended, nor reconstituted as per the subject's stipulations. Prior to the ethical encounter – to being elected by the Other – the subject is the sole epistemic custodian of his world that is ordered by *his* consciousness, and the Other is an extension of *his* selfhood, commandeered at will, depending on *his* whims and fancies. Levinas categorically enucleates this egotistical 'I' that represses the Other, or tries to contain the chaotic syntax of their infinity in the syntagmatic and paradigmatic orders of language. The fission of the imagined core of selfhood is triggered by the overwhelming strangeness of the Other's face that judges and commands, and brings the subject to account. In the ideal ethical relation, the subject ceases to evaluate the Other against an arbitrary checklist and allows himself to be confronted by their staggering difference, which cannot be absorbed into his limited, narcissistic vision of the world. The encounter thus reveals to him his own ontological debt to the Other, as his subjectivity derives from the severity of their indictment.<sup>58</sup>

Thus, Levinasian ethics theorizes the prospect of a recuperative interaction between the erstwhile colonizer and the Orient, provided the two remain categorically distinct, as the moment the 'I' of the colonizer tries to seize upon the 'you' of the Other, they cease to be infinite, and slip back into the loop of social indexicality from which there is no escape. However, in the specific context of 'Humayun and Zobeida', the importunate zeal of the speaker to collapse the distinction between 'thee' and 'me', and subsume Zobeida's alterity within the narrow terms of decadent exoticism, immediately forecloses the possibility of an ethical encounter based on love, care, respect, and mutual obligation. Thus, Zobeida sits resolutely 'behind the veil' and does not 'show [her] face', much like Naidu herself, who refused to play into the 'hidden agenda' that Paranjape detects in Gosse's patronizing counsel:

a hidden agenda is evident in the task which Gosse set for Sarojini. His expectation of her for 'some revelation of the heart of India, some sincere penetrating analysis of native passion, of the principles of antique religion and of such mysterious intimations as stirred the soul of the East' betrayed the deep longings of the post-Industrial West for, some area of experience untouched by modernity, unspoiled, pristine, and authentic, in brief, a

longing for its Other. To escape the oppressive and overpowering advance of the machine age seemed to be the compelling challenge before Victorian poetry. The poetic medievalism of the Pre-Raphaelites was one way of meeting the same need as was the search for fresh locales and topics in Browning and Tennyson. In its search of its Other, a convenient place for Europe to look was in its vast colonial spaces. Here, it could find, to its own reckoning, all the savagery, primitivism, irrationality, and mysticism that it had suppressed within itself.<sup>59</sup>

Naidu's poems co-opt this Oriental framework of 'savagery, primitivism, irrationality, and mysticism' with a view to ironizing the terms of Otherness formulated by the West. These poems are 'decadent' insofar as they manipulate the anti-realist objectives of the fin de siècle to carve out an *artificial* image of India – of 'spice and scent | Of rich and passionate memories blent' – but an attentive reading exposes the cracks in its foundation, and alerts us to the elaborate constructedness of both her decadent project and of the national ideal.<sup>60</sup>

Like her ambivalent poetry, Naidu also stands at the 'golden threshold' between nationalism and decadence, 'evok[ing] the decadent movement to construct [her] own literary genealog[y] against the grain of various calls to formulate a national literature'.<sup>61</sup> As I have tried to show in this article, her poems expediently oscillate between a subtle ironization of fin-de-siècle decadence and an optimistic investment in its possibilities, uncovering the potential for alternative poetic modalities within its morass of ideological and structural contradictions. Although later critics have cleansed her reputation by sleight of hand, and misattributed her decadence to feudalism and feminist sentimentalism in ways that have enhanced her eligibility as a nationalist poet, Naidu's decadence was integral to her nationalism. In the context of colonial India, and particularly during the Partition of Bengal in 1905, decadent anti-realism was a tool of anti-colonial nationalism, which makes Naidu's poetry more complex, unique, and intellectual than some of the contemporary scholarship in India would have us believe.

---

<sup>1</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Global Transformations: Anthropology and the Modern World* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> BA English Honors syllabus, Jadavpur University:

[http://www.jaduniv.edu.in/upload\\_files/dept\\_file/1313490111-1.pdf](http://www.jaduniv.edu.in/upload_files/dept_file/1313490111-1.pdf) [accessed 2 November 2022].

- <sup>3</sup> MA English syllabus, University of Calcutta: <https://www.caluniv.ac.in/cbcs-pg/pg-files/Eng-11-1-19.pdf> [accessed 2 November 2022].
- <sup>4</sup> Elleke Boehmer, *Indian Arrivals 1870–1915: Networks of British Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 13.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 133.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup> ‘In a landmark 1923 book *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?*, the conservative leader and revolutionary V. D. Savarkar coined the term Hindutva (Hindu nationalism) to challenge the secular conception of Indian nationhood propounded by Gandhi and Nehru. Pro-Hindutva political activists turned Savarkar’s idea into a mass movement in 1925 by founding the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a paramilitary volunteer organization dedicated to promoting Hindu nationalism. The RSS, which became the fountainhead of the Hindu nationalist movement, rallied support from a network of sister organizations known as the Sangh Parivar’. Niranjan Sahoo, ‘Mounting Majoritarianism and Political Polarization in India’, in *Political Polarization in South and Southeast Asia*, ed. by Thomas Carothers and Andrew O’Donohue, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, p. 10. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/08/18/mounting-majoritarianism-and-political-polarization-in-india-pub-82434> [accessed 17 April 2023].
- <sup>9</sup> Sahoo, p. 13.
- <sup>10</sup> Ganesh Devy, ‘NRC: An Idea Turned into a Political Slugfest’, *Deccan Herald*, 10 September 2019. <https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/main-article/nrc-an-idea-turned-into-a-political-slugfest-760522.html> [accessed 5 February 2023].
- <sup>11</sup> Elleke Boehmer, ‘East is East: Where Postcolonialism is Neo-orientalist – the Cases of Sarojini Naidu and Arundhati Roy’, in *Stories of Women: Gender and Narration in the Postcolonial Nation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), pp. 158–72.
- <sup>12</sup> Ramachandra Guha, ‘Choosing the Ten Greatest Indians’, *Hindustan Times*, 8 April 2018. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/columns/choosing-the-10-greatest-indians/story-cNUwGfVx1B6079SWs5JBVM.html> [accessed 16 May 2023].
- <sup>13</sup> Makarand Paranjape, ‘Introduction’, in *Essential Reader: Sarojini Naidu* (Gurgaon: Penguin Random House, 2022), p. xiv
- <sup>14</sup> Paranjape, ‘Introduction’, p. xiii
- <sup>15</sup> Boehmer, *Indian Arrivals*, p. 63.
- <sup>16</sup> K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1985), p. 212.
- <sup>17</sup> Iyengar, p. 225.
- <sup>18</sup> See Boehmer, *Indian Arrivals*, p. 11, where she quotes the historiographer Hayden White: ‘Events are made into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others.’
- <sup>19</sup> Makarand R. Paranjape, *Making India: Colonialism, National Culture, and the Afterlife of Indian English Authority* (New York: Springer, 2003), p. 182.
- <sup>20</sup> Paranjape, *Making India*, p. 184
- <sup>21</sup> Kate Hext and Alex Murray (eds), *Decadence in the Age of Modernism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), p. 3.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 5.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 6.
- <sup>25</sup> Mulk Raj Anand et al., ‘Manifesto of the Indian Progressive Writers’ Association, London’, *New Left Review*, February 1936, n.p.
- <sup>26</sup> Robert Stilling, *Beginning at the End: Decadence, Modernism, and Postcolonial Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), p. 17.
- <sup>27</sup> Sarojini Naidu, *Selected Letters: 1890s to 1940s*, ed. by Makarand Paranjape (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1996), p. 45.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup> Padmini Sengupta, *Sarojini Naidu: A Biography* (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1966), p. 124.
- <sup>30</sup> Boehmer, *Indian Arrivals*, p. 14.
- <sup>31</sup> Edmund Gosse, ‘Introduction’, in Sarojini Naidu, *The Bird of Time: Songs of Life, Death and the Spring* (London, Heinemann, 1912), pp. 1–7 (p. 5).
- <sup>32</sup> In a letter to her soon-to-be husband Govindarajulu Naidu, Sarojini wrote, ‘(e)verybody, of course, here as elsewhere [...] makes a pet of me – you see I am far the youngest and a curiosity – so I shan’t be left long to myself’. See Naidu, *Selected Letters*, p. 30.
- <sup>33</sup> Gosse, ‘Introduction’, p. 5.
- <sup>34</sup> Paranjape, ‘Introduction’, p. xv.
- <sup>35</sup> Boehmer, ‘East is East’, p. 159.
- <sup>36</sup> Sarojini Naidu, *The Golden Threshold*, ed. by Arthur Symons (London: Heinemann, 1905), p. 10.
- <sup>37</sup> Iyengar, p. 215.

- <sup>38</sup> Naidu, 'Alabaster', in *The Golden Threshold*, p. 53.
- <sup>39</sup> Ana Parejo Vadillo, 'Decadent Women Poets: Translingual Thresholds', *Feminist Modernist Studies*, 4.4 (2021), 1-20 (p. 8).
- <sup>40</sup> Paranjape, *Making India*, p. 173.
- <sup>41</sup> Naidu, 'The Snake Charmer', in *The Golden Threshold*, p. 33.
- <sup>42</sup> 'Keats was more than a decadent, but he was a decadent, and such a line as "One faint eternal eventide of gems", might have been written, in jewelled French, by Mallarmé [...]. Keats, at a time when the phrase had not yet been invented, practised the theory of art for art's sake. He is the type not of the poet, but of the artist'. Arthur Symons, *The Romantic Movement in English Poetry* (New York: Dutton, 1909), pp. 305-06.
- <sup>43</sup> Paranjape, *Making India*, p. 182.
- <sup>44</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 'Partition Proclamation and Swadeshi Movement: Public Meetings', 30 October 1905, Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections, British Library, London.
- <sup>45</sup> *Bengalee*, 'Notes on Capital', 1 September 1905, Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections, British Library, London.
- <sup>46</sup> Paranjape, *Making India*, p. 182.
- <sup>47</sup> Sengupta, *Sarojini Naidu*, p. 44.
- <sup>48</sup> Naidu, 'Wandering Singers', in *The Golden Threshold*, p. 2.
- <sup>49</sup> Vadillo, p. 12.
- <sup>50</sup> Anand A. Yang, 'Peasants on the Move: A Study of Internal Migration in India', *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 10.1 (1979), 37-58.
- <sup>51</sup> 'Kanya Mahavidyalaya, Jalandhar, [was] one of the first girls' schools in the Punjab, which developed into a college and served as a model for women's institutions not only in the Punjab but in many other provinces as well'. Madhu Kishwar, 'Arya Samaj and Women's Education: Kanya Mahavidyalaya, Jalandhar', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 12.1 (1986), 9. <https://www.epw.in/journal/1986/17/review-womens-studies-review-issues-specials/arya-samaj-and-women-s-education-kanya#> [accessed 16 May 2023].
- <sup>52</sup> See Vadillo, p. 13.
- <sup>53</sup> Paranjape, 'Introduction', p. xv.
- <sup>54</sup> Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p. 71.
- <sup>55</sup> Sheshalatha Reddy, 'The Cosmopolitan Nationalism of Sarojini Naidu, the Nightingale of India', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 38.2 (2010), 571-89 (p. 571).
- <sup>56</sup> Naidu, 'Humayun to Zobeida', in *The Golden Threshold*, p. 50.
- <sup>57</sup> Paranjape, *Making India*, p. 179.
- <sup>58</sup> Emanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond the Essence*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Norwell: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991).
- <sup>59</sup> Paranjape, *Making India*, p. 179.
- <sup>60</sup> Naidu, 'Alabaster', in *The Golden Threshold*, p. 53.
- <sup>61</sup> Stilling, p. 17.