

## **‘Palanquin Bearers’ by Sarojini Naidu**

"Palanquin Bearers" is a poem by Sarojini Naidu, an Indian poetess known for her evocative and lyrical verses. The poem paints a vivid picture of a palanquin being carried through the streets of an Indian town.

### **Context:**

The poetess vividly recreates the scene of the 19th century and the early decades of the present century when the cars were not in fashion for carrying the brides to their husbands' house. On those days even the ladies of royal families were carried in the palki to their relatives. The brides too were carried in the palki. In any city of Northern India, particularly in Hyderabad palki was in fashion. The curtains were hanging as windows through which the ladies and brides could get the glimpse of outside. Palkis were carried on shoulders of two- or four-persons using bamboo-sticks for support. In order to avoid the physical tiredness and boredom of the way, the palanquin bearers used to sing.

### **Critical Points of the Poem:**

1. The palanquin sways like a bird, floats like a laugh and looks like a pearl on string.
2. She looks to be hanging like a star on a dew drop.
3. She falls like a tear from the eyes of a bride.
4. The bearers sing to relieve themselves of the tedium of the journey.
5. While carrying the palanquin, the palanquin bearers feel happiness and sing song.

### **Summary:**

The poem begins with the poet addressing a group of palanquin bearers who are carrying a palanquin through the streets of an Indian town. She speaks to them with admiration and respect, acknowledging their strength and endurance. The palanquin bearers are described as strong and skilled, with muscles like iron. They move swiftly and gracefully despite the heavy burden they carry. The poet marvels at their ability to bear the weight of the palanquin, which symbolizes the burdens and responsibilities of life. As the bearers continue their journey, the poet imagines the palanquin as a throne, carrying a queen or a bride. She envisions the

palanquin as a symbol of grace and beauty, gliding through the town's bustling streets.

The poet contrasts the bearers' strength and agility with the delicate and precious cargo they carry. She highlights the contrast between the world of labor and toil represented by the bearers and the world of privilege and luxury represented by the palanquin's occupant. In the final stanza, the poet expresses her hope that the bearers will be rewarded for their hard work and dedication. She suggests that their labor is like a divine service and that they deserve blessings and rewards in return.

Overall, "Palanquin Bearers" is a poem that celebrates the physical strength, skill, and endurance of the bearers who carry the palanquin, while also highlighting the contrast between their world and the world of luxury and privilege they serve. It is a tribute to the unsung heroes who play a vital role in society's functioning.

### **Style and Form:**

There are two stanzas in the poem, each of six rhymed verses. The first and fifth verse in each stanza serves as a refrain, begin with a dactyl and softly deviate into anapests, and the other verses begin with an iamb and glide into anapests. The palanquin sways along with a swift movement with a rise and fall in the palanquin bearers' footsteps, which is deftly caught by the poetess by using as rhythm of comparatively swift movement with stressed and unstressed sounds, so that strict correspondence is maintained between the swift movement of the palanquin-bearers and the rapid rhythm of the poem. The tune and movement are simultaneously felt. The poem is very simple. The sweet melody of the poem and gentle touch of imagination have added to the beauty of the poem. The smooth lines and the lilting rhythm produce pleasing musical effect. The poetess has given a graphic picture of the movement of the palanquin. There are glimpses of simile in the lines "She sways like a flower"; "She skims like a bird"; "She floats like a laugh"; "We wear her along like a pearl on a string." The poetess uses the pronoun "she" for the palanquin. It is good idea to show respect. The poetess has also used the figure of speech metaphor in the line "the brow of the tide".

### **Imagery:**

The poem is an exquisite piece of poetic art. It expresses the feelings and admiration of the bearers. The theme of the poem is purely Indian. Sarojini wrote in English but she invariably chose her themes from the Indian life. This poem

also shows Indian tradition. By presenting the image of palanquin, she presents the simplicity of Indian life. It may be called a representative poem of the poetess. The scene and song of the palanquin bearers provide a kind of peace and relax. The two images "she falls like a tear from the eye of a bride" and "she springs like a beam on the brow of the tide" are indeed remarkable and bring us close to the Indian experience. The first image bears out the age-old story of an Indian bride's sadness, whatever be the reason, on being separated from the parents or the husband or any other thing. It may be nostalgic, but approximates closely to the Indian experience. The other image of a beam of light flashing across the "brow" of a tide is apt in so far as it suggests a psychic and spiritual illumination, a ray of hope through despair, a beam of light through sorrow, a flash of light through darkness.

### Questions & Answers

Q 1. What is the poem "Palanquin Bearers" about?

It is a folk song of the palanquin bearers, typically sung while carrying a newlywed bride. While carrying her to her father's home to the groom's home, bearers often sang such songs in order to cheer the bride up. This song features a variety of epithets used to adorn the delicate beauty of the lady.

Q 2. Why is the bride referred to as "a pearl on a string"?

By using this phrase, Naidu describes how precious the bride is for the bearers. She is like a pearl, hanging delicately from a string. Here, the string is metaphorically compared to either the palanquin or the bearers. Collectively, they form a pendant and the pearl enhances the value of the chain.

Q 3. What is the meaning of "Palanquin Bearers"?

The term "Palanquin" originated primarily from East India. It means a covered box, often used for a single passenger. The large box is carried on two horizontal poles by four or six bearers. In this poem, Naidu features the song of such bearers while carrying a lady in the palanquin.

Q 4. In which year the "Palanquin Bearers" was published?

The poem was first published in London, the United Kingdom in 1896 and later it was published in 1905 in Hyderabad. It appears in Sarojini Naidu's first poetry collection *The Golden Threshold*.

Q 5. Who sang the poem the "Palanquin Bearers"?

In this poem, the palanquin bearers sang the song while carrying the bride.

Q 6. What is the tone of the poem "Palanquin Bearers"?

The tone of this piece remains cheerful, cajoling, and heartwarming throughout. It changes slightly to a sad one in the fourth line of the second verse. However, the poet stylistically maintains the overall tone.

Q 7. What is the mood of "Palanquin Bearers"?

The mood of this poem is high-spirited, light, and celebratory. This song is sung to cheer the lady up while traveling to her destination.

Q 8. Why do the palanquin bearers carry the bride lightly?

The bearers, by no means, want to make the bride feel tiresome throughout the journey. Hence, they sing a song while carrying the palanquin as lightly as they can.

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Q 10. How do palanquin bearers carry the bride?

They carry the bride lightly and softly. Besides, they sing a beautiful song that adorns her features.

Q 11. Who is being carried in the palanquin?

A newly married lady is carried in the palanquin.

Q 12. How do the palanquin bearers feel while carrying the bride?

The bearers feel happy in the whole process. They gaily carry the bride as she is a precious gift given to those humble men to take care of.

Q 13. Why is the bride compared to a “flower” and a “bird”?

The bride’s calm and soft features are compared to that of a flower. Besides, the way the palanquin is carried makes it feel that the lady is gliding in the air like a bird.

Q 14. What are the two adverbs used to describe the way the palanquin bearers were carrying their passenger?

The two adverbs that are used to describe the movement of the bearers are “Lightly” and “Softly”.

Q 15. How do we know that the palanquin bearers think that the bride is delicate and must be treasured?

From the last line of each verse “We bear her along like a pearl on a string”, it becomes clear that the bride is delicate and must be treasured.

Q 16. What is the meaning of the expression “a tear from the eyes of a bride”?

This expression hints at the mental state of the bride. She sheds tears as she is leaving her father’s home.

Q 17. What is the message in “Palanquin Bearers” by Sarojini Naidu?

Through this poem, Naidu conveys an interesting message to readers. It concerns how precious a bride is for the palanquin bearers. They feel blessed to bear her.

Q 18. What does the phrase “brow of the tide” mean?

This phrase refers to the upper portion of a tide. “Brow” means the summit or peak. It is also a reference to an eyebrow. Hence, this phrase can be interpreted in two ways.

Q 19. What do the palanquin bearers want to mitigate?

They want to mitigate the bride’s sadness as well as her weariness by singing the song.

Q 20. Do you think the palanquin bearers are sensitive to the presence of the bride?

They are indeed sensitive to the presence of the bride. She is a pearl for them that they are given to take care of.

Q 21. Where are they carrying the palanquin?

They are carrying the palanquin to the home of the bride’s husband.

Q 22. How do palanquin bearers carry the bride?

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Q 33. How does the poet describe the movement of the palanquin?

The poet describes the movement of the palanquin by comparing it to a beam gliding over a stream.

Q 34. What purpose do similes serve in the poem "Palanquin Bearers"?

In this poem, similes are used to describe the delicacy, softness, and embalming beauty of the lady.

Q 35. Why does the poet refer to bridal laughter and bridal tears?

The poet refers to the bridal laughter as well as her tears in order to depict the state of a bride's mind. She is happy to begin a new journey. Besides, she feels sad to leave her home for the first time.

Q 36. Why do the palanquin bearers say they carry the palanquin lightly?

They carry the palanquin lightly as the passenger sitting inside is like an invaluable pearl for them.

Q 37. Why do the palanquin bearers feel privileged?

They feel privileged to carry the bride. Along the journey, there is none from her family to take care of. Only the bearers are there to protect, cheer and take care of her.

Q 38. What does the poet mean by "lips of a dream"?

The lady is as transient as a dreamer's laughter. Before marriage, she brought a smile to her parent's faces. After marriage, her presence will bring a smile to her husband's face. In this way, she floats like a peal of laughter from one's face to another's.



Q 39. For what purpose were palanquins used in the past?

Palanquins were used for transportation in the past. Newly married brides, kings, and queens traveled to faraway places by palanquins.