

# SRI AURABINDO'S SAVITRI AS A LEGEND AND SYMBOL: A CRITICAL STUDY

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**Accepted:** 15.03.2022

**Published:** 01.04.2022

**Keywords:** Sri Aurabindo's *Savitri*, Legend, Symbol, Divine Philosophy, Feminism, Love.

## Abstract

*Savitri : A legend and symbol is Sri Aurabindo's masterpiece and the longest poem in English. He follows the story of Mahabharata, but also superimpose his theory of 'The life divine' on it Savitri represents Sri Aurobindo's vision of women hand a vision which has been developing all through his literacy career in poem, plays and prose works. Here he dreams the picture of a woman as the devoted, self-sacrificing lover, strong and determined to save her love through heroic and victorious fight against heavy odds. Savitri's achievement of the highest spiritual attainment coupled with her distinct humaneness makes her the grandest among all woman portrayed in world literature. She is in sum, the mirror image of the Divine Mother the Mahashakti on earth. It is feminism that is characteristically a product of the Indian mind. It is distinguished from feminism of the present day in as much as it does not plead for empowerment and woman since it address her as the power it self.*

*Savitri: A Legend and Symbol is not only Sri Aurabindo's masterpiece but it is also the longest poem in English and the only completed epic in the language after Milton's Paradise Lost. This unique poem retells the story of Savitri's life and her encounter with the god of Death from whom she wrests back the life of her husband, Satyavan . Sri Aurabindo follows closely the story as given in the Vanaparba of the Mahabharata, changing , however , a few of the details in order to incorporate his evolutionary philosophy of 'the life divine' with description of such mystical and spiritual experiences as are associated with the philosophy. The poem present an elaborate treatment of subjects like man's aspiration after immortality and divine knowledge ; his endeavour to liberate himself from the bondage of time, death and nescience; the course of human evolution from matter and lower mind to the Supermind; and the intervention of divine grace in realizing "the life divine" on earth. The legend of Savitri is said to be thus extended in to a symbol of man's spiritual quest blessed by Divine grace.*

*The legend of Savitri in the Mahabharata had already been turned into a symbol before Sri Aurobindo superimposed his personal symbolism of the spiritual quest on it. The primary symbolism has become a living reality through the ritual worship of the goddess Savitri by generations of Indian women, both wives*

## Paper Identification



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and maids ,on the new Moon Day of the lunar month of Jyestha every year, when they pray to the goddess fervently to bestow on them great power of true wife's love and devotion whereby they would never be widowed Thus, the personality of Savitri has been inspiring men and women as the most patent symbol of womanhood, of wife's intense love and unflinching devotion that can overcome all evils including devotion that can overcome all evils including the greatest of those, death. The reader's familiarity with this symbolism as an integral part of the legend, naturally guides his understanding of the meaning of the poem. Sri Aurobindo's secondary symbolism, lacking often concrete embodiment and being merely asserted, fails to suppress or erase the working of the original symbolism in the reading experience.

Sri Aurobindo has not been able to inject sufficient life into all his major characters in order to make them carry the load of his symbolism with success. The one and the only developed or rounded character is Savitri, while the two of the major figures, Satyavan and Aswapathy, are more or less flat ones and the symbolism associated with them either does not work or is confusing. Satyavan, the most sketchily portrayed of three main characters, has confusing symbolic significance and evokes varied interpretations from the critics. For Iyengar, Satyavan is Truth, presumably because of his name and not for any thing in the poem. "And Styavan is Truth. Beauty, love and power (the power of devotion and chastity) allied to truth can dare anything, achieve anything." Therefore, Sri Aurobindo has chosen as the fit symbol hero and heroine of his epic of the evolving soul the immaculate Satyavan and Savitri (Iyengar ,192).

Once the critical cobwebs surrounding the interpretation of Savitri are cleared, one cannot fail to see that Savitri represent Sri Aurobindo's vision of womanhood-a vision which has been developing all through his literary career in poems, plays and prose works. It is the woman's identity and her role in life

that constitute the central concern of Sri Aurobindo in all his narrative poems and plays; Urvashi, Love and Death, Chitrangada, Ilion ,The Viziers of Bassora, Vasavadutta, Eric, Perseus the Delivery and like. In all these works are designed as love romances, the stress in them is not on romantic longing or love, courtship or wooing. They are poetic-dramatic representations of an exalted conception of women's love and its power of transforming the life of man. Aslaug, the heroine of Eric, sings of the nature of such love for all Aurobindonian women:

*Love is the hoop of gods*

*Herts to combine*

*Iron is broken, the sword*

*Sleeps in the grave of its lord:*

*Love is divine. ( Collected plays And Short Stories, 1971:477)*

Love is the divine force that conquers hatred and violence. It is not just a physical passion, but the strong bond that ties one with his fellow human beings as well as which nature and God. It is a union of two hearts, giving one soul to two different bodies .

Obstacles may threaten the course of love but such is its grand power that it can surmount all of those to effect the happy union of the lovers.

The grandeur of the power of such love lies in bringing an end to discord and disharmony, violence and brutality, hatred and jealousy, vanity and insolence and making peace, harmony, amity and bliss prevail. The source of this transforming power is the woman's boundless love, her overflowing pity and compassion her utter selflessness and spontaneous urge to give joy to others.

In Urvashi, Love and Death and Savitri, indomitable love of the woman conquers death. The poetic and dramatic romances, thus etch the distinctive Aurobindonian picture of woman as the devoted and self-sacrificing lover; strong willed and determined to save her love through heroic and victorious fight against all add; and in her being, the very embodiment

of divine grace transforming the life of man. It is this image that gets splendidly magnified and is given the noblest and the most impressive expression in Savitri which Sri Aurobindo has lovingly fashioned through repeated drafts over almost fifty years of his career as a writer.

We first meet Savitri on the morning of the fateful day when Satyavan is to die. In appearance, her supernatural beauty and charm is all the more captivating for the magnanimity of her heart: “A wide self-giving was her native act” and “The Universal Mother’s love was hers”:

*Love in her was wider than the universe,*

*The whole world could take refuge in her heart.*

She is acutely conscious of her innate divinity that is imprisoned in the human mould and knows that it is only the power of her spirit that can “lift the yoke imposed by birth in time”. Her growth from childhood to youth has already familiarised her with the greatest human problem-transience and mortality; and it evokes in her a constant experience of pain and suffering for mankind. Her own calamity, therefore, gets universalised through her habitual sympathy and compassion and in putting up her lone fight against death, she also takes up “the load of an unwitting race.” Conscious of her conjugal felicity with Satyavan in the course of last twelve months, calm and courageous, she prepares her foe for the great question of her life:

*Whether to bear with ignorance and death*

*Or hew the ways of immorality,*

*To win or loss the godlike game for man,*

*Was her soul’s issue with the destiny’s dice.*

Now, deeply aware of the presence of divine light in her, the immutable and immortal soul, she grows into “a flaming warrior” and

*Her soul arose confronting time and fate,*

*Immobile in herself she gathered force.*

The beginning of the epic narration *in medians res* is followed by flashback from Book 1, Canto 3 on

Aswapathy’s yoga, Savitri’s birth, childhood and youth and, in due course, we are led to the climactic occasion of Savitri’s meeting with Satyavan in the forest in Book V. There is glamorous, mutual love at first sight, neither romantic fancy nor infatuation, but the soul’s longing for another – “The soul can recognize the answering soul” because of past affinity and intimacy. The meeting “summed the drift of numberless births.” At the sudden sight of Satyavan in the sylvan surroundings of the forest, Savitri felt “A mystic tumult from her depths arose” and “Her soul flung wide its doors to this new sun.” On the other hand “Satyavan looked out from his soul’s doors” and “He turned to the vision like a sea to the moon” and felt that “his life was taken to another’s life.” After an exchange of information about each other, Satyavan invited her to “Enter my life, thy chamber and thy shrine” and Savitri responded “I know and only thou art he.” She bowed and touched his feet and Satyavan “gathered all Savitri into his clasp” consummating the ritual of marriage. In the purity and ecstasy of human love, it is one of the rarest of scenes in literature.

On returning to the place, Savitri reported her choice to her parents then in the company of sage, Narad. The latter being pressed by her parents, revealed Savitri’s adverse fate: “This day returning Satyavan will die.” The Queen became deeply aggrieved and asked Savitri Savitri remained firm and calmly replied, “once my heart chose and chooses not again” and “I will have joy only in union with Satyavan.” The independent, strong-willed Savitri is not to be cowed by the prophecy of doom and speaks defiantly:

*My heart has sealed its troth to Satyavan*

*Its seal nor Fate nor Death nor Time dissolve*

*Fate’s law may change, but not my spirit’s will*

Narad consoles the Queen saying that Savitri is not weak---kneel and is conscious of her soul’s force and will, therefore be left alone to face her Fate.

Savitri's life at the hermitage with Satyavan and his blind parents reveals another aspect of her character, the devoted and loving housewife willingly undertaking "the labour of broom and jar and will" even being the Princes, and giving joy to all while suffering alone the anxiety and fear of her impending fate. Her yoga undertaken in response to the voice inside her roused her latent soul-force and liberated her from the bondage of body in order to establish her identity with the universal consciousness—Force, the Divine Sakti. While the yoga is meant to prepare her in spiritual strength to face the challenge of Death, it also serves to throw a flood of light on her character, particularly through the episode of "The Triple Soul-- Forces." The three women whom Savitri meets in course of her search for the soul symbolize the three essential aspects of her human personality—love and compassion; might and majesty; knowledge and wisdom.

These parts of herself now get united with "the secret Deity" and become one being through her soul—realization. Thus completely liberated from time and the world, Savitri becomes the divine in her will and action although she continues to live in her human body. Savitri's achievement of the highest spiritual attainment coupled with her distinctive humanness makes her the grandest among all the women portrayed in world literature. Her subsequent encounter with Death is designed as a trial of her soul-strength and it highlights her intense love and devotion, overflowing compassion and concern for others, adamant determination and courage, and her rock—like endurance and fortitude. She patiently undergoes the trials and temptations, cajoling's and sophistry of Death, but finally impose her will on the latter through the revelation of her achieved divinity. Once Death is Vanquished and Satyavan's life is set free, Savitri is offered the choice of Nirvanic peace and felicity as the fruit of her soul-realization. But her womanhood

rejects such lonely personal bliss and prefers to be the agent of divine grace on earth and work.

Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol is the apotheosis of woman and her essential power. The Mahabharata story stressing the power of woman's chastity and purity of conjugal love was composed from the perspective of the Vedic and Puranic ideology of woman as Sahadharmini and Ardhangani of man. This ideology, while recognising the equality of the sexes, labours under the masculinist bias against woman as being weak and dependent on man. From what has been observed about Sri Aurobindo's portrayal of women in the narrative and dramatic romance and in Savitri, the culmination of those works, it is clear that Sri Aurobindo's ideology is a repudiation of the Vedic—Puranic one. For him, the woman has a distinctive and separate identity, self-sufficient and independent of man. Her glory is the tremendous power of her love and compassion that can withstand all challenges against the same and transform all dross in to gold. She is, in sum, the mirror—image of the Divine Mother, The Mahasakti, on earth. This exalted view of the woman is derived from the tantric feminism as developed in Sankta philosophy and mystical practice. It is a feminism that is characteristically a product of the Indian mind and which its hoary ancestry in Pre-Vedic times. It is distinguish led from feminism of the present day in as much as it does not plead for the empowerment of woman since it adores her as the Power itself.

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