



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Unveiling The Divine: An Exploration Of Sri Aurobindo's Epic Poem, Savitri

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Abstract

This paper takes a deep dive into Sri Aurobindo's iconic poem, *Savitri*, a work that's both a masterpiece of Indian philosophy and a spiritual treasure trove. By closely examining the poem's symbolism, themes, and literary style, we uncover how Aurobindo's magnum opus captures the human journey towards self-discovery, spiritual growth, and connection with the divine. We also explore how *Savitri* fits into the broader context of Indian thought and Aurobindo's own vision, revealing why this poem remains a powerful inspiration for those seeking truth and beauty. This paper offers a fresh perspective on Aurobindo's work and the enduring significance of *Savitri* as a spiritual and philosophical classic. Aurobindo's philosophy and spirituality has always been a source of motivation and upliftment and the story of *Savitri* has been a fascinating one. The combination of the religious and philosophical aspect of the story described in a poetic style is something which is found in Aurobindo's version of the same. Inspired by this beautiful work of literature this paper is an effort to comprehend the understanding of the epic.

Keywords: Spiritual, Self-discovery, Divine, Radical Politics, Self – realization, Mysticism

Introduction

It is no exaggeration to say that Aurobindo Ghose (Sri Aurobindo) is one of the greatest minds of the twentieth century. The modern poetry writer was a Mahayogi, a philosopher, an interpreter of Indian thought, a critic and a radical politician. In a letter Aurobindo comments on the achievements of the world's greatest poets and classifies them into "three rows". Homer, Shakespeare and Valmiki are assigned the first row; Dante, Kalidasa, Aeschylus, Virgil and Milton the second row and Goethe the third row. The front Benchers Homer, Shakespeare and Valmik have according to Aurobindo, "at once Supreme imaginative originality, Supreme poetic gift widest scope and Supreme creative genius." (Verma, p.1) The most famous and his outstanding work of art was *Savitri – A Legend and a Symbol* published in 1950. This beautiful epic which took almost 35 years of Aurobindo's life is a narrative closely following the famous episode of *Mahabharata*.

Sri Aurobindo's magnum opus, *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol*, is a sprawling epic poem that embodies the quintessence of Indian philosophy and spirituality. Written over the course of three decades, this monumental work is a testament to Aurobindo's profound vision and mastery of language. Through the ancient legend of Savitri and Satyavan, Aurobindo explores the eternal human quest for meaning, self-realization, and union with the divine. This paper delves into the poetic and philosophical landscape of *Savitri*, unravelling its symbolism, themes, and spiritual significance. By examining Aurobindo's unique blend of mysticism, philosophy, and literary craftsmanship, we will uncover the enduring relevance of *Savitri* as a modern epic that continues to inspire and guide seekers of truth and beauty.

Savitri – The story from Mahabharata

The oldest version of the story of Savitri and Satyavan is believed to be found in *Vana Parva* (*The Book of the Forest*) of the *Mahabharata*. In *Mahabharata*, when Yudhishtira asks Sage Markandeya, whether there have been any women whose devotion matched that of Draupadi's, Markendeya answers by narrating the story of Satyavan and Savitri. Savitri, a beautiful girl born as a gift by God to Ashwapathy, the King of Madra kingdom, was a result of his obligations and endless prayers to the Sun God - Savitr, and hence was named Savitri. The princes were a beautiful and pure soul and as she grew older, she turned out to be more and more beautiful, making it difficult for her father to find an appropriate match for her. This failure resulted in the king ordering Savitri to go and find a husband on her own. She sets out on a pilgrimage for this purpose and finds Satyavan, the son of a blind king named Dyumatsena of Salwa kingdom. Dyumatsena lost everything including his sight and was living in exile as a forest dweller with his wife and son.

Savitri returns to her father Ashwapathy in order to tell him about her decision, but finds him talking to sage Narada. The sage was telling Ashwapathy that what a wrong choice Savitri has made by choosing Satyavan, because the boy is destined to die one year from that day. Ignoring her father's pleas to choose for a more suitable husband, Savitri is determined on her decision and gets married to Satyavan. After the marriage Savitri goes along with Satyavan to live in the forest. She wears a clothing of hermit and lives in perfect obedience and respect to her new parent's in-law and husband. Three days before the foreseen death of Satyavan, Savitri takes a vow of fasting. Although Dyumatsena tell her that she is being too harsh on herself but later on he supports his daughter in law.

The morning when Satyavan was destined to die, Savitri insisted on accompanying him to the forest. Successful in convincing her parents in-law, she accompanied her husband to the forest. After a while of splitting the wood, Satyavan suddenly becomes weak and puts his head in Savitri's lap. Soon *Yama* (the God of Death) arrives to claim Satyavan's soul. Savitri follows *Yama* as he carries away her husband's soul. When the God of Death tries to convince her to return back she puts different arguments of *Dharma*, friendship and noble conduct. *Yama*, impressed by her speech is ready to offer her any boon except her husband's life. She first asks for her father-in-law's eyesight and restoration of his kingdom then a hundred children for her father and a hundred children for herself and Satyavan. Impressed by her dedication and purity, *Yama* once more offer her to choose any boon, this time omitting "except for the life of Satyavan." To this Savitri instantly asks for Satyavan's life. *Yama* grants her the wish and bless both Savitri and Satyavan to attain a life of 400 years. Based on this story, a *Savitri Vrata* is observed by married women in different parts of India.

There have been many versions of the story produced. Sri Aurobindo wrote and published his epic poem in blank verse titled - *Savitri – A Legend and a Symbol*; Gustav Holst's composed "Chamber *Opera*" in one act in 1916, his Opus 25, named *Savitri* based on this story; Dadasaheb Phalke directed a silent film in (1914) named "*Satyavan Savitri*"; Franz Osten in 1937, produced "*Savitri*". The 1923 version, *Savitri* also called "*Satyavan Savitri*" was an Italian co-production directed by Giorgio Mannini and J.J Madan produced by Madan Theatres Ltd and Cines. "*Savitri*" (1933) was the first film produced by East India Film Company, Directed by C. Pullaiah. It received an Honorary Certificate at the Venice Film Festival. (web) Besides this there are several research papers published on the same one amongst them is "*Aurobindo's Savitri – a Modern Re-rendering*" by Santhi.V, Jeya. (2012). Another is "*Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol - Sri Aurobindo's Modern Epic, the Vision of Savitri - Sri Aurobindo's Greatest Odyssey of the Spirit*" by Merchant, Vasant V. (web) Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri* is an epic poem, retelling of the well-known legend of prince Satyavan and his loyal devoted wife Savitri, who rescued him from Death, narrated in the *Vana Parva* part of *the Mahabharata*.

The epic is divided into 3 parts, further divided into 12 books or 49 cantos, a total of about

24000 lines (Iyengar, p.191) is a poem of high spiritual challenge of Divine Union or goal of self-realisation in present scenario as well. Sri Aurobindo makes no substantial changes in the outline of the narrative. (Jyotspriya). But he invests the major characters with a symbolism all his own and also adds a new dimension to the original of the projected 51 cantos, the last in book VII (*The Book of Yoga*) is without a title and is presumably incomplete while the first two in books VIII (*The Books of Death*) are missing- they weren't or couldn't be written. Although the epic is thus apparently incomplete, when one reads it at one spell (and what a long spells) one is rather stuck by the rounded fullness of the poem, one feels that nothing could relevantly be said has been left unsaid. (Iyengar, p. 191).

As the subtitle is '*A Legend and a Symbol*' it states both the main aim and the poetic strategy of the epic. Aurobindo uses the ancient legend as a vehicle to symbolically express his own philosophy of man's realization of the life divine on this earth to quote. The symbolism has been explained by Sri Aurobindo himself. Savitri is 'the Divine Word, daughter of the Sun, goddess of the Supreme Truth, who comes down and is born to save'; Satyavan is 'the Soul carrying the Divine Truth of Being within itself', but descended into the grip of death and ignorance'; and Ashwapathy, Savitri's father, who does penance for eighteen years is 'the concentrated energy of spiritual endeavour' that helps man 'to rise from the mortal to the immortal planes'. (Naik pp. 55-56)

The poem begins in the Mediasres, describing the day on which Satyavan is destined to die "The huge foreboding mind of Night, alone In her until temple of eternity turned from the insoluble mystery of birth and the tardy process of mortality." (Iyengar p .192)

Part I, composing of first 3 books, is devoted mainly to Ashwapathy. Aurobindo's version or vision of Ashwapathy is no more a childless king, he is rather in Mr. A.B Purani's words, "The aspiring human soul down the millennium of evolution in his search for the truth himself of the world and of God." (Iyengar p194). The description of Ashwapathy's Yoga or trance of seeking takes up about 370 pages. As stated by Aurobindo – Aswapathy's Yoga falls into three parts. First he is achieving his own ...That is described in the book of the *Divine Mother*. (Iyengar p.195) Part II (Book IV to VIII), narrates the story of Savitri's birth and upbringing and her search for her life mate. (Naik p56) Part III (Book IX to XII), shows the struggle between Savitri and God of Death (Yama) who captures Satyavan's Soul Savitri now demands the soul of the world called Satyavan to be freed from to Deaths clutch and death tries to argue, but all in vain. (Naik p.56) At last Savitri wins and is able to save Satyavan. But the conclusion of the story- being the conclusion of *A Legend and a Symbol*, not of an action in historic time – is for us still a conclusion yet to be concluded. Like Satyavan we all are bewildered on how Savitri with her enchantments has tuned round everything right.

Structure – Themes, symbols and verses

The poem is written in blank verse without enjambment (except rarely) each line a thing by itself and arranged in paragraphs of one, two, three, four or five lines, in an attempt to catch something of the Upanishadic and Kalidasian movement as far as that is possible in English. It has a diction and imagery mostly influenced by Miltonic and Romantic models. (Naik p.58)

The poem is crafted in blank verse, which is unrhymed iambic pentameter, allowing for a fluid and flexible exploration of its subjects. It is divided into three main books: the first, "The Book of the Beginnings," introduces the key characters and sets up the narrative's cosmic and spiritual framework, focusing on Savitri's early life and her meeting with Satyavan. The second book, "The Book of the Traveller of the Worlds," delves into the spiritual journey and trials faced by the characters, emphasizing Savitri's quest and her interaction with the divine. The final book, "The Book of the Divine Mother," concludes the epic with a transformative and redemptive resolution, showcasing the triumph of spiritual truth through divine intervention. The poem's structure integrates multiple narrative layers, blending mythological elements with philosophical and metaphysical insights, where characters and events often serve as symbols of broader spiritual concepts. This structure effectively weaves together the divine and human aspects, exploring the relationship between them and highlighting the transformative power of spiritual realization. Overall, the organization of "Savitri" supports its thematic complexity, offering a rich and multifaceted exploration of spiritual evolution and cosmic principles.

Conclusion

Savitri, although a beautiful and a strong work of art seeks attention from critics too. The diverse critical reaction to this epic epitomise the highly polarised critical response to Aurobindo's oeuvre. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar closes his discussion of the poem by approvingly quoting the opinion: 'Savitri is perhaps the most powerful artistic work in the world for expanding man's mind towards the Absolute.' (Mehrotra, p.141) The poem is a cosmic answer to cosmic question in view of Nolini Kanta Gupta. (Gupta, p.1) It is not merely a piece of writing, but the expression of poet's own yogic experience and spiritual version. The poem is full of symbolic expression and keeps its relevance in present as well as the future times.

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