SRI AUROBINDO’S SAVITRI - A CRITIQUE

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ABSTRACT

Nothing could hold back Rishi Aurobindo from his quest for soul or dissuade him from becoming a world famous poet; a poet who understood human psyche, who realised inner being of human beings, who seriously thought of well being of human beings. Sri Aurobindo himself on his epic poetry Savitri, has opined, "I used Savitri as a means of ascension. I began with it on a certain mental level, each time I could reach a higher level I rewrote from that level... In fact Savitri has not been regarded by me as a poem to be written and finished, but as a field of experimentation to see how far poetry could be written from one’s own yogic consciousness and how that could be made creative". Savitri of Sri Aurobindo is depicted to overcome the ills of the earth to save Satyavan. She does this by overcoming the limitations of life including conflict, duality, pain, darkness, etc. Savitri is the divine word, daughter of the Sun, goddess of the supreme truth, who comes down and is born to save. Sri Aurobindo is also credited with offering a few plays in verse. These plays boast of characters, mythical and historical who belong to different countries.

KEYWORDS: Consciousness, Creation, Epic, Human, Inner, Savitri, Mysticism, Psyche, Spiritual, yoga.

INTRODUCTION

Neither name nor fame, neither office nor wealth, neither yoga nor revolution, and neither trenchant criticism nor adverse view could hold back Rishi Aurobindo from his quest for soul. This could neither dissuade him from becoming a world famous poet; a poet who understood
human psyche, who realised inner being of human beings, who seriously thought of well being of human beings. And the path chosen was to pick a character from the epic Mahabharata, and the character so chosen critically was Savitri, an all pervasive soul, purity personified, divinity amplified, immortal, serene and goddess of the supreme truth.

Sri Aurobindo himself on his epic poetry Savitri, has opined, "I used Savitri as a means of ascension. I began with it on a certain mental level, each time I could reach a higher level I rewrote from that level... In fact Savitri has not been regarded by me as a poem to be written and finished, but as a field of experimentation to see how far poetry could be written from one's own yogic consciousness and how that could be made creative".

Sri Aurobindo read Savitri episode of the epic, The Mahabharata, in Sanskrit while he was residing in Baroda. But this is controversial because another school suggests that it happened while he was in Pondicherry. Savitri, the masterpiece, the tale of Satyavan and Savitri, as described by Sri Aurobindo himself is recited in The Mahabharata as a tale of conjugal love concurring death. But this legend is shown is of a human tale, one of the many symbolic myths of the Vedic cycle. Savitri is the divine word, daughter of the Sun, goddess of the supreme truth, who comes down and is born to save.

“Still this is not a mere allegory, the characters are not personified qualities, but incarnations of living and conscious sources, with whom we can enter into concrete touch and they take human bodies in order to help man and show the way from his mortal state to a divine consciousness and immortal life”. Rishi Aurobindo’s companion and spiritual collaborator, the Mother, had this to say of Savitri “Everything is there; mysticism, occultism, philosophy, the history of man, of the Gods, of creation, of nature, how the universe was created, why, for what purpose, what destiny- all is there. You can get all the answers to all your questions there. Everything is explained, even the future of man and of the evolution, all that nobody yet knows. He has described it all in beautiful and clear words, so that spiritual adventurers who wish to solve the mysteries of the world may understand it more easily”. Savitri can truly be described as Aurobindo’s literary life’s works. 1916 is the year when draft of the work on Savitri came to light. Savitri, the epic poem, consists of 12 books, and has more than 20,000 lines. This can be described as a modern epic, and this is also written in a language and style modern enough for everybody to grasp the true spirit in which this is written.

Savitri of Sri Aurobindo is depicted to overcome the ills of the earth to save Satyavan. She does this by overcoming the limitations of life including conflict, duality, pain, darkness, etc. Here comes in the very important role of Savitri’s father, King Aswapati. The king was then going through the process of wilful conscious evolution; and this is nothing else but yoga itself. And this exercise helps him acquire new strength and energy to rise again and he scales new heights. He encounters difficulties in his efforts to reach higher levels of consciousness; but he however, develops equality of being and this development helps him have immunity from the experiences of the lower consciousness which works to pull him down and down and further down.

As we resume his inner spiritual ascent this helps him experience a personal evolution which culminates in spiritual transformation. This again helps him truly know his soul and his own true self within; transcended spiritual reality dawns on him and he perceives the real force of the
divine mother within himself. Consequently he realizes the true meaning and the very purpose of life. This brings about freedom from the essential ignorance and many other limiting factors which invariably weigh down the normal consciousness of human beings. This newly acquired awareness and experiences makes him aspire for the world for further progress, newer evolution and more transformation for the human beings.

Savitri visits the earth for the comprehensive fulfilment of the king’s wishes. In order that she gets her success in her efforts she must endeavour overcoming Satyavan’s eminent demise.

Savitri, the magnum opus of Sri Aurobindo is essentially a treatise of revolutions. This is a book which contains secrets into inner worlds and the worlds above and this holds the key to their discovery. Sri Aurobindo in his Savitri propounds ‘the psychic being’ which is essential for self growth and broadening of consciousness. This philosophy is central to integral yoga. The most interesting things to be mentioned here is that the term ‘psychic being’ does not find a place in Savitri. The only reference closest to this is to the use of the word psyche. However Sri Aurobindo has referred to some of these terms in his ‘Synthesis of Yoga’. He says that It is one of the decisive moments of the integral Yoga when this psychic being liberated, brought out from the veil to the front, can pour the full flood of its divinations, seeings and impulsions on the mind, life and body of man and begin to prepare the upbuilding of divinity in the earthly nature.”

The key to the fact that Sri Aurobindo was indeed referring to the psychic being appears in the line, ‘a being no bigger than thumb’. Elsewhere Sri Aurobindo further says ‘ that even when a semblance of the the psychic being is present it is still in all but a few smaller portion of the being no bigger in the man of a body than the thumb of a man’.

A further confirmation of this can also be drawn by analysing the content in the following lines (Aurobindo,1970b, pp.526-527)as follows:

A being stood immortal in transience’

Deathless dallying with momentary things,

In whose wide eyes of tranquil happiness

With pity and sorrow could not abrogate

Infinity turned its gaze on finite shapes

Some of Aurobindo is extremely difficult to explain in words. One needs to dig very deep into the epic treatise to get a real taste of it, the flavour of it, the essence of it; in other words, to truly understand how big is the treasure house represented by Savitri of Sri Aurobindo. One possibly never gets to know what or for that matter who is Savitri- even after several attempts at grasping its marrow. Savitri is not Sri Aurobindo’s creation; it is his recreation. In fact it was rediscovered and it was there for the entire world to see in all its brightness. It dazzles, it flashes, and it shines in all hue and colour mesmerizing the viewer’s judgement and intellect.
“I was a poet and a politician, not a philosopher” Sri Aurobindo expressed. I am inclined to disagree with him and I have my unqualified apologies for this disagreement. Every time I open a page of Savitri I find altogether a new entity standing tall before me with all its splendour and glory and again at next turning another and a fresh new reflection stares into my eyes. Like this every time I attempt pursuing Savitri I am confronted with a ‘stout and vigorous being’; it truly perplexes and exerts influence on my judgement.

His Savitri, the corpus running into several cantos and books has influenced a genius of a critic like Margaret Robinson. That she proclaimed him a ‘supreme master of English poetic expression and the greatest innovator in this language since Shakespeare’. Realities of life are such that at the other end of a pole there is one Kathaleen Raine claiming loudly ‘I do not see Sri Aurobindo as a poet at all’. As against this Ronald Dixon’s opinion is interesting- ‘In the years of darkness and despair such a poem should have appeared, let us salute the Don’.

An American journalist’s views on Savitri are also worth considering, ‘Sri Aurobindo is also engaged upon one of the longest and worst epic poems of all times called Savitri’. It seems this journalist has caustic view of the length of the poem Savitri. Why do I speak on American journalists? Eminent critics in India like P. Lal and Nissim Ezekiel, were no exception; they did not approve of Aurobindo’s creations. However, one K. D. Sethna, a follower of Sri Aurobindo adequately rebuffed them. Mr. P. Lal, however, understood the position and retraced his views vis- a- vis Sri Aurobindo. There was however, one Keki N Daruwalla who appeared to be very much opinionated; he thought of Aurobindo’s poem Savitri, “A terribly inflated verse”. He further said although jocularly that “I will need a gunman to protect me, if I enter Pondicherry again.” It is worth mentioning Ann Margaret Robinson comments who also observed very forcefully, “Sri Aurobindo’s vision and language tower so immensely beyond everything that has gained recognition as poetry in the present century- perhaps particularly in Britain . . . that for most of those who live and breathe in that tiny air, he is simply out of sight.”

Delving deeper into Sri Aurobindo we find many thinkers have expressed their own balanced views of his poetry. One James Cousin, while appreciating the quality of Aurobindo’s poetry, indicated that he was more of a philosopher- poet than poet –philosopher. This debate is endless. It is more interesting to note here how Sri Aurobindo himself has responded to it; it is actually a very appropriate reply. The reply is specifically to Cousin. Ignoring the poem, ‘The Rishi’, he commented that if only Milton his Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained in Cousin’s time, he would possibly have offered, ‘This is not poetry, this is philosophy’. Sir Herbert Read on receiving a copy of Savitri, and going through it wrote, ‘Savitri is undoubtedly one of the world’s greatest poems, making myself familiar with my message’

Aldoux Huxley wrote on Savitri “Poems like Savitri and Illion must wait for the return of an age of serenity, and meanwhile will only find a few readers who are capable of abstracting themselves from the confused anxieties of modern civilization.” (Huxley. Mother India).

Sri Aurobindo is also credited with offering a few plays in verse. These plays boast of characters, mythical and historical who belong to different countries. A biographer writes voraciously that ‘if his earlier play suggest that he was searching for his ideal life partner, Vasavadutta seems to
hint that he found the woman he was seeking and was waiting for the moment when she would join him’.

Let us face facts. Sri Aurobindo married Mrinalini Bose, an extremely beautiful young lady hailing from Calcutta. But Sri Aurobindo lived few days with her. He never embraced family life. Mother, addressed as such by Sri Aurobindo lived in the Ashram as a spiritual companion of his. Sri Aurobindo willingly embraced a life of seclusion and lived that way for 24 long years from 1926 till the last days of his life; and throughout this period he was intensely seeking the supramental and doing the sadhana for achieving this. Whatever is said or remains unsaid or whatever is written or remains unwritten on or about Sri Aurobindo, what stands out beyond saying and writing is his unique creation Savitri, which is the end product (a word used in holy common parlance) of his 50 years painstaking effort. Sri Aurobindo didn’t spare any effort to reach the pinnacle of perfection in his efforts at bringing out the very best; yet as an epic poem Savitri is the best. Of course it is better than his other poem, better than his sonnets, better than his prose, better than his all other creative efforts.

Savitri is his reflection as a genius. He is a yogi but before that he is a poet of distinction. He is a revolutionary. But before that he is a poet beyond critic’s sharpened tool. He is a philosopher, but before that he is a poet of philosopher’s dream world. And his creation of Savitri of epic proportions remains unique in its own domain.

To conclude I would suggest that Savitri and Sri Aurobindo should be pronounced together. Nothing could stand between the Rishis in Sri Aurobindo and his epic creation Savitri; it looked as though Savitri was his life’s mission and vision and the only goal he was possibly dreaming of.

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