



SRI AUROBINDO'S SAVITRI AS A FEMINIST EPIC

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of this investigation is to look at Sri Aurobindo's masterpiece Savitri as a feminist epic where the female character, Savitri plays a pivotal role breaking the conventional trends of the contemporary society and literature where male characters dominate in the domain. Usually women are taken into consideration as inferior to men socially, biologically, financially, psychologically, and also religiously. Feminism demands women's liberation and the rights of women on the ground of the equality of the sexes. This article has been attempted to probe deeper into the story in order to bring out the evidences which will establish the final confirmation regarding Savitri as a feminist epic.

Keywords: *Feminism, Liberation, Discrimination, Marxism, Capitalist*

INTRODUCTION

It is the aim of this essay to look at Sri Aurobindo's masterpiece **Savitri** as a feminist epic. It is a great poem and this is a very restricted view, but so far as is known to the present writer no such study has been attempted so far and it is hoped that this will help us in understanding it better. Before we turn to the poem itself however a few remarks on feminism are needed.

The feminist movement is mainly a twentieth century one and is divided into three different stages known as waves. The most important writer of the First Wave, Virginia Woolf is a late nineteenth and early twentieth century figure. But the first important literary work of feminism goes back to the days of the romantics for it was written Mary Wollstonecraft who later became the wife of Godwin. **A Vindication of the Rights of Women** needed considerable courage to write and publish in those days of rabin patriarchy. She wrote very strongly about the intellectual and the other capacities of women. One of her sentences runs thus:

It then women are not a swarm of ephemeron triflers, why should they be kept ignorant under the specious name of innocence? Men complain, and with

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reason, of follies and co- prices of our sex, when they do not keenly satirize our headstrong passions and groveling vices. (Wollstonecraft, 100)

The Feminist Movement of the twentieth century started first of all as political movements Women's right and suffrage Movement . called for social, political and economic reforms . The most important of the demand was for voting right for women. Virginia Woolf in England and Simone de Beauvoir in France were the two important figures of the first wave. The Second Wave in the 1960s referred to the ideas and the actions associated with the women liberation movement. This movement asked for and campaigned for legal and social equality for women. The Third Wave pertained to the flows and the failure of the second wave and the reactions to it. In a way it is continued the main contentions of the earlier movement.

Feminism, to put it in a nutshell, opposes women's subjection to men, whether in the family itself or in the wider perspective of society. It also challenge men's claims to define what is the best for women without event pretending to consult them. It opposes patriarchy in all forms. Discrimination against women like gender-based violence economic discrimination, reproductive health inequalities and harmful traditional practices are pervasive in society. Women are not even conscious of the fact that they are being exploited and imposed upon . This is nothing new in a patriarchal society woman has been made to shoulder many burdens, justified or not. Yet the lamentable fact is that women are not aware of this. They have to be awakened to the injustice that is being done to them.

The concept of Motherhood and child-rearing was one of the most debatable issues of the movement, particularly of the first wave stage. That is why the daughters of the suffragette activists of the First wave. The concept of the feminism implies the individual identity of women. Feminism, then, continues in the Third wave and still continues its struggle to establish it's as a ground for political, economic, social and cultural ascendancy for women in the place of all opposition .It has made women aware of their place in society. This had been a most difficult task for the feminist activists. The problem had been faced by the suffragettes early in the century and We is still being faced in the under developed countries. They had to be awakened first. As time passed more and more consciousness di-reaction was developed and modern consciousness has shed a new light on the entire movement. Now feminism is looking at its tends from a wider angle and one of the feminist writers says in no less a militant spirit than the early ones:

Equally between women and men is a matter of human rights and a condition for social justice and is also a necessary and fundamental pre-requisite for equality in development and peace. (Davis, 40)



There is a greater social awareness today, as the use of the term “human rights” denotes and a more civilized and sophisticated attitude equates development with peace. Such an attitude was not possible a century ago. A certain measure of development in women’s condition has made it possible. The very fact that a sentence like this can be written today makes it clear how much the condition of women has changed since Virginia’s Woolf’s day.

The conservative view of the concept of feminism is that the treatment of women as a group of different from men is not unjust. They allow that in certain cases individual women do suffer discrimination of because of it have to undergo unmerited hardships. But, they argue, this suffering is accidental and not the result of a system and of deliberate social oppression. In essence, the difference, between the social role of women and that of men is equal. It is surprising that men of the calibre of Rousseau, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Freud hold this view.

Against this there is a liberal feminism. This goes back to the Mill’s day. It is highly sympathetic treatise *The Subjection of Women* he advocates liberation for women and the freedom to determine the individual social role. He also takes the daring view that women should be allowed to compete with men on the basis of equality. He is surprisingly modern in his view and to make it possible for women to compete with men he advocates the ensuring of equality of opportunity.

With the rise of Marxism another, a completely different outlook, came into existence. The classical Marxist view of feminism looks upon the oppression of women as a direct result of the institution of private property. It is seen as a part of a broader struggle to achieve a communist society. The long-term interests of women are , however , limited to the working class. Women have an equal interest with men in eliminating a society in which one particular dominates another. As Marxism is deeply rooted in the concept of capitalism ,women have a crucial role to play in the removal of a capitalistic society. The feminist who holds Marxist view sees the oppression of women part of a socio economic system. These theorists believe that the restructuring of society will bring freedom to man from his traditional responsibility of being the provider for his family and wife.

Thus there are many schools of thought within feminism and about it which there is no need to explore here. It is a complex movement and as time goes on is developing more and more in complexity. For the purposes of this essay a rough and ready idea of the movement and the theory behind its all that is necessary. Let us know the term of the topic of epic which is as important as the one in that has just been discussed. The topic of this essay is **Savitri** as a

Feminist epic so there are two aspects of the poem that should be discussed . Let us now turn to the second.

The Epic

Aristotle has not given such a comprehensive definition of epic as he has given such a comprehensive definition of epic as he has given of tragedy or of comedy. But throughout *Poetics*, there are many remarks on and discussions of the epic from which it is not difficult to build up a picture of what he meant by it. His scattered remarks are given below, though it is not attempted to explain them.

Thus in chapter V of poetics he says

- (1) *It is an imitation in verse of characters of a higher type.*
- (2) *Epic poetry admits of but one kind of metre and is narrative in form.*
- (3) *Epic action has no limits of time. (Butcher,21-23)*

Then again in chapter. VII he says in connection with episodes:

- (4) *In drama the episodes are short, but it is these that give extension to epic poetry.(Butcher, 63-65)*

In the next chapter XVIII he says in connection with the structure in relation to tragedy :

- (5) *By an Epic structure I mean one with a multiplicity of plots. .. In the Epic poem, owing to its length, each part assumes its proper magnitude(.Butcher, 67)*

Then in chapter XXIV which is a long chapter, we have several valuable observations on the nature of epics:

- (6) *Epic poetry must have as many kinds as Tragedy: it must be simple or complex or "ethical" or "pathetic"(Butcher,91)*
- (7) *In Epic poetry, owing to the narrative form many events simultaneously transacted can be presented and these if relevant to the subject can add mass and dignity to the poem.(Butcher,93)*
- (8) *The poet should speak as little as possible in his own person.(Butcher,93)*



(9) *The irrational, on which the wonderful depends for its chief effect, has wider scope in epic poetry because there the person acting is not seen.*(Butcher,95)

(10) *The poet should prefer probable impossibilities to improbable possibilities.*(Butcher,95)

This gives a quite comprehensive idea about the epic. Though Aristotle has not given as long and detailed a consideration of the epic as he has done with tragedy he has given quite a detailed picture of the epic. As we shall see, these the poem under discussion fulfils most of these requirements.

Let us now look at the definition of the epic as given by Sri Aurobindo. It might be said that this his definition will naturally be written with *Savitri* in mind, but it will be seen that it does not conflict with that of Aristotle in any particular, but rather it increases the scope of the epic as given by Aristotle. His definition runs:

The epic, a great poetic story of man or world or the gods, need not necessarily be vigorous presentation of external action ... the journey of the seer through the three worlds beyond us are as fit themes as the primitive war and adventures for the imagination of the poet creator. (Iyenger, 190)

He calls such an epic “epics of the soul”. It will be clear that this definition does not change Aristotle’s concept of the epic in any way. Rather, it adds a spiritual dimension to the epic. Aristotle’s definition takes care of all the worldly details, there is nothing spiritual in it, as there is not in Homers either. Homer’s or Virgil’s poem gives us gods in plenty, yet the spiritual dimension is lacking in them. *Savitri* is entirely on the spiritual plane.

Both Aristotle’s and Sri Aurobindo’s concepts taken together will help to clarify the nature of epic poetry in our mind, particularly of the poem under discussion. It will take too much time to explain Aristotle’s points but, after all, there have been more than a millennium of commentary upon him. In any case, being familiar with the three western and two Indian epics the reader is conversant with the characteristics of epics, even if they are not equally conversant with Aristotle or Sri Aurobindo.

What is clear from all these comments of the two great literary artists, the second of them a practitioner, is that there can be no gender restriction in an epic. The chief protagonist can be a hero as well as heroine, as is the case with *Savitri*. It is after we have gone through the



poem that we shall be able to access its spiritual qualities. But it can be asserted that, while fulfilling all the requirements of an epic, *Savitri* is the only epic in which the woman gets protagonist's part. That is, to say the least, extraordinary because, first of all, there is not just one protagonist in all epics with which we are familiar. It is only *The Odyssey* and *The Aeneid* in which there is just one hero Ulysses and Aeneas respectively. Among the two Indian epics Rama is the one and hero of **Ramayana**. But **Mahabharata** has no less than five Pandava brothers. *Savitri* is an epic that has just one figure and that too a female one, as the protagonist.

It can be said about the role of women in an epic that it is as is to be expected in a patriarchal society. All of them are written against the background of such a society and women holds a subsidiary part. She is the cause of great wars in three of the great epics but it is, all the same, a subsidiary role. It is exactly the opposite in *Savitri*. Here woman reigns supreme. *Savitri* is the be-all and the end-all of the poem. In fact there is no one else. This will become clear as we go through the poem.

A Reading of Savitri

Savitri is a poem that is looked upon with awe and veneration but little read. There are certain basic facts about it that should be clarified at first. First of all it is the longest poem in English, 24000 lines long. Browning's *The Ring and the Book* which is used to be known as the longest, shorter than our poem by 3000 lines. *Paradise Lost* has 10,563 lines. It has three parts and each part is divided into books and each book into several cantos. Altogether there are three parts, twelve Books and forty nine cantos. It was written over nearly fifty years during which time over every line, every phrase has been reputedly revised and polished. It is a truly awe-inspiring work, very heavy for casual reading. It is, in fact, rarely read by anyone except those who are followers of great saint. It is not only a masterpiece, it is the only epic written in India in English – a unique piece of work.

It begins in authentic epic tradition, in media res, that is, begins on the dawn of the day of Satyavan is to die. It is to be a day of trial and struggle for Savitri, the day for which she has been preparing herself with rigorous *tapasya*, for the past one year. It is in the pre-dawn darkness that Canto I opens, a darkness that is momentarily leading towards the light of a new day. He stresses the spiritual quality of the poem (after all, it is an "epic of the soul") with the very first line.

It was the hour before the Gods awake. (Sri Aurobindo, 01)



After dwelling on the significance of this dawn for more than 5 pages the poet mentions Savitri and proceeds to highlight her importance:

*In her there was the anguish of the gods
Imprisoned in our transient human mould,
The deathless conquered by the death of the things. (Sri Aurobindo , 06)*

After thus describing her divine and human aspects and her spiritual strength the poet says she braces herself:

*Immobile in herself she gathered force,
This was the day that Satyavan must die. (Sri Aurobindo, 10)*

The Canto ends here. The first Canto, thus, describes Savitri and her significance for the poem. This is very different from the classical epics, none of which do so. They each describe the contents, the subject of the book. None of them begin by creating by female figure of surpassing significance. This stress on the figure of Savitri. This stress on figure of Savitri at once sets the poem apart from other epics. Starting in medias res, in exalted language, it has the spirit of an epic, but it is an epic stressing the importance of a woman at the very beginning.

This entirely feministic beginning does not falter in the next Canto for that too is also entirely about her. It is a description of her past seen through her memories. After this she vanishes for 22 cantos and more than 300 pages. These Cantos are all concerned with the *tapasya* of the King her father. Devoted to the spiritual exploits of a male character, these cantos are intensely feministic in the end for it is a daughter the King wants, not a son, and he pays to a Goddess, not a God. In the original he is a Shaiva but here he pays to Divine Mother. Here he have a creatrix, not a creator.

The whole of Bk III is devoted to her. A swapati, after many spiritual experiences, is at last in her presence:

*A Mother Mighty brooded upon the world
A Consciousness revealed its marvelous front
Transcending all that is, denying none
.....
She is the Force, the inevitable Word
The magnet of our difficult ascent. (Sri Aurobindo , 313-4)*



She is not only limitless Force and Might but the very fountain of peace and bliss:

*Towards her our knowledge climbs, our passion gropes
In her miraculous rapture we shall dwell
her clasp shall turn to ecstasy our pain. (Sri Aurobindo, 314)*

When this entity tells the king to ask for a boon he does not ask for immortality or limitless power or a son. Instead in this feminist epic he asks the creatrix for a daughter—a daughter who will be an incarnation of herself.

*Mission to earth some living form of thee one moment fill with thy eternity let
thy infinity in one body live. (Sri Aurobindo, 345)*

He does not want these for the mere selfish pleasure of having such a daughter but because of the human Goddess will ring about salvation of suffering mankind, of entire humanity. This goes far beyond the feminist ideal of quality. Such concepts seem trivial in this context. Yet, for the purposes of this essay, this is an extremely important facet of Sri Aurobindo's doctrine that a mortal woman, however Divine she might be, is to succour and save mankind, not a god-man. Savitri will be an avatar, but a female entity, not of Vishnu, is as hallowed by tradition.

The boon is granted. It is promise by the creatrix:

*A seed shall be sown in Death's tremendous hour
A branch of heaven transplant to human soil;
Nature shall overleap her mortal step;
Fate shall be changed by an unchanging will. (Sri Aurobindo, 346)*

After this the Divine takes on mortal life and Savitri is born. Right from her childhood her divinity shines forth:

Even in her childish moments could be felt

The nearness of a light still kept from earth. (Sri Aurobindo, 355)

In her beauty and innocence she is one with nature. There are lines of great beauty describing how she communicate with nature, the natural objects really communicate with her.



Then she grows to young womanhood and decides to go on a quest for a husband. The whole quest, through lovely valley and forest is beautifully described. She travels through green valleys and flowery forests filled with friendly animals and finally reaches the destined meeting place:

*To a space she come of soft and delicate air
That seemed a sanctuary of youth and joy
.....
Peacocks and parrots jeweled soil and tree
The dove's soft moan enriched the enamoured air
And fire-winged wild-drakes swam in silvery pools.(Sri Aurobindo, 389-90)*

In this pastoral surroundings she meets Satyavan. Here one canto is devoted to him. The poet does not minimize him in any way, but there is no doubt that he plays a passive part. This passive quality, however, is inevitable since the most important activity of the heroine takes place when he is dead. He cannot possibly take part in the crucial activities of the epic. That is left for Savitri — it is a feminist epic.

Narada comes and tells them of the cruelly brief lifespan of Satyavan—a year only. But she remains firm in her resolve and the marriage takes place. Savitri, right from then, prepares herself for the final spiritual struggle. Her Sadhana is described in Bk. 7, *The Book of Yoga*, in six Cantos. After this, Bk. 8, *The Book of Death*, contains one canto, **Death in the Forest** which tells us of Satyavan's death. Pt II ends here.

Pt III contains the history of Savitri's struggle with the Lord of Death. It is a struggle, a conflict, of truly epic proportions on an entirely spiritual level. There are no external events. The poem, after all is an "epic of the soul." So here we find all that is to be found in an epic and much more. A sentence from Iyengar will make it clear:

We are treated to a Gita, we are overwhelmed by a Vishwarupa, we are made to follow the vicissitudes of a Kurukshetra, we catch glimpses of death's Other Kingdom, the hedonist's Bower of Bliss, the paradisaal splendor of Vaikuntha, the ineffable void of Nirvana. (Iyengar , 201)

But, after all, Savitri triumphs and meets the creatrix. She is given the choice of Nirvana but she refuses because it will benefit only her and satyavan whereas she wants to save the whole humanity. Of what use is personal salvation to her,three who is born to save mankind? So she wants that entire mankind may be saved and that is the boon she gets:



*Nature shall live to manifest secret God,
The spirit shall take up the human play,
The earthly life become the life divine. (Sri Aurobindo, 710)
So she comes back from the spiritual world, down to the world of mortality
with Satyavan. The epic ends with the union and joy. We have in the **Epilogue**
the last three lines:*

*She brooded through her stillness on a thought
Deep- guarded by her mystic folds of light
And in her bosom nursed a greater dawn. (Sri Aurobindo,724)*

Thus we have the triumphant conclusion of our feminist epic. All the features of an epic are present here. The variety of episodes that give an epic magnitude and grandeur are provided in the account of the yoga of the king and of Savitri. War, which is the main subject of an epic is provided by the conflict between Savitri and Dharma. As to the element of the wonderful or the marvelous Aristotle talks of only two kinds, the improbable possible or the impossible probable. Our Indian theorists go several steps further. Acharya Ksemendra gives ten kinds of *camatkara*. If analyzed properly perhaps all of them can be found in our poem. Definitely the wonderful meeting between Savitri and Satyavan is of the *avicharita ramaniya* variety because it does not depend upon *vichara* or analysis or intellectual consideration, but going into these will be rather beside the point. Less intricate demands of an epic as being a narrative poem in the same metre throughout is self- evident. It is highly impressive poem, quite successful as an epic, but epic of no ordinary kind—it is a feminist epic.

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