

## RESEARCH ARTICLE



## SRI AUROBINDO'S SAVITRI: A TAPESTRY OF FEMALE LIFE-FORCE

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## ABSTRACT

Woman, who, according to the biblical myth of creation, has brought woe to man, has been the centre of literary studies for being subjected to man since the feminist movement took the whole world by storm during the late twentieth century. But the ancient Indian literature, which may be taken as an authentic record of the contemporary socio-cultural scenario, represents woman in a grand image. Almost all of the female characters of the Mahabharata are raised to lofty heights of grandeur and glory in the great epic. Savitri, the one idealized as a wife most loyal (Pativrata), has been one such character and she has been immortalized for her womanly virtues in Sri Aurobindo's grand epic poem Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol. In the present paper I endeavour to bring out the Purusha element, the life-force of Savitri, sublime yet quite noble in her demeanour, divine yet most human in her traits of character. Through my paper I intend to emphasize the fact that Vedic philosophy of creation as the unification of Purusha, the spiritual element, and Prakriti, the material being, sees no discrimination between the male and female forms of human beings and Savitri's character supports the idea in the most effective manner.

**Keywords:** creation, Purusha, Prakriti, soul, life-spirit, matter, divinity, humanity.

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Feminism, in India and Indian writings—be they in English, Hindi or any other Indian language, has been a relatively modern concept. Feminism has originated as a reaction to the consciousness that woman, in the scheme of creation, is inferior to man and hence, needs to be assigned a subjugatory position. Indian history and theological studies, undoubtedly, point at woman's subordinate status since the division of the society took place on the basis of the nature of jobs assigned to various sections. But if we consider the ancient Indian literature and the portrayal of women characters in it, we find female characters more assertive, decisive, determined, educated and enlightened than their male counterparts. While Christian and Mohammedan theologies attach a

sense of sin and guilt to woman and hold her responsible for man's fall, the Hindu Vedic philosophy believes that both man and woman are complementary to each other's existence. In fact, it holds that the whole of the universe is conceptualized as a conjugation of *Purusha* and *Prakriti*. In other words, the world comprises two principles, life and matter. *Purusha* or the pure consciousness represents life and *Prakriti* or nature represents matter or material world. Thus, the ancient Indian philosophy assigns the position of *Purusha* and *Stri* not on biological basis but as embodiments of cosmic essence and substance. *Sankhya*, one of the six orthodox systems of philosophy of the *Vedas* sees the world as:

... a result of two principles, *Purusha* and *Prakriti*. *Prakriti* is the active principle, the potentiality of all nature, through which the material and psychic world comes into being. *Purusha* can be translated as soul. In each living being, there is a *Purusha* yet essentially, all *Purushas* are the same. The empirical self is the union of the free spirit, *Purusha* and of *Prakriti*. (Dalal, *The Vedas: An Introduction to Hinduism's Sacred Texts*)

The concept of *Purusha* and *Prakriti* is explained in the verse nineteen of chapter thirteen in the *Bhagavad Gita* as:

Prakritim purusham chaiva viddhyanadi  
ubhavapi,  
Vikaramshcha gunamashchaiva viddhi  
prakrtisambhavan. (13:19)

The verse means:

"Know that both *Purusha* and *Prakriti* are beginningless; and know that all manifestations and qualities (*gunas*) are born of *Prakriti*." (*God Talks with Arjuna: The Bhagawad Gita* 889)

The *Geeta shloka* suggests that *Purusha* and *Prakriti* are to be considered in unison, not individually. In the *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, Monier Williams defines *Purusha* as "the primaeva man as the soul and original source of the universe; the personal and animated principle in men and other beings, the soul or spirit; the Supreme Being or Soul of the universe (sometimes with *para*, *parama* or *uttama*; also identified with *Brahma*, *Vishnu*, *Shiva* and *Durga*. (927)" the definition reveals the sense that the noun (*Purusha*) does not ascribe specifically to males only, but can be applied to both the sexes depending upon the human attributes.

*Savitri* of Sri Aurobindo's grand epic *Savitri* is a mythical character taken from the *Vana Parva* of the *Mahabharata*. She is the illumination incarnate while *Satyavan* is "the soul of the earth"—the matter. *Savitri*, as the very name suggests, is the daughter of the sun; one who has descended from the sun, one who has descended from illumination itself, one who has come to the earthly life to bring light. A. B. Purani discusses the derivation of the word "*Savitri*". He says:

The word *Savitri* is derived from the word "*Savitru*" which in turn is derived from the

root "Su", 'to give birth to'. The word "*Soma*" which indicates "an exhilarating drink", symbolizing spiritual ecstasy or delight, is also derived from the same word, "Su". It links therefore to creation; "*Savitru*" therefore means the creation. (*Sri Aurobindo's Savitri* 2)

*Savitri*, an incarnation of the divine Mother, descends on the earth as a result of eighteen long years of penance and austerities which King *Aswapati* observed to invoke the Divine Mother in order to get a son. But the pleased Mother gave him a daughter as a bonus, as she would be her own human form. Hence, when *Savitri* was born, she was a dazzling beauty draped in divine iridescence.

Outlined by the presence of this new descent

A lovelier body formed than earth had known." (Canto I, Book IV *Savitri* 354)

*Savitri* was given to *Aswapati* as a boon in lieu of his penance. Later on, *Savitri* becomes instrumental in bringing *Satyavan*, her husband's soul back from the clutches of the Death-god. Still, the connection with *Aswapati* (*Jitendriya*—the one who has won his desires represented by horses) does not stop. Sri Aurobindo gives no less space to the character of *Aswapati* than to that of *Savitri*. During the course of his yoga *Aswapati* broods over the divine question:

How shall thy mighty spirit brook repose  
While Death is still unconquered on the earth.  
And Time a field of suffering and pain?"  
(Canto IV Book III 335)

The answer, which descends on him as a realization is:

A power that lives upon the heights must act. (Canto II book III 315)

Hence, the supramental power, that concedes to the entreaties of *Aswapati*, comes down in the form of *Savitri* as a Saviour of the human race from ignorance and death:

A conscious frame was here, a self born force. Canto II book I 18)

Despite *Savitri's* birth as a human form, she is pure consciousness. In order to obtain fulfillment, she needs some base, her *Adhar* which

she finds in Satyavan—"the soul of the earth, "the earth" "the body," or "matter" That is why Savitri weds herself to Matter, in order to divinize it and save it from the grip of Death. Savitri says to Satyavan: "Thou art he my spirit has sought." (46) Here, it is emphasized that it is in unison with Satyavan that Savitri is complete. She is still tells her mother:

"I have seen God smile at me in Satyavan;  
I have seen the Eternal in a human face."  
(Canto I Book VI 436)

They looked upon each other, knew themselves, the secret deity and its human part, the calm immortal and the struggling soul. Then, with a magic transformation's speed, "they rushed into each other and grew one." (598)

The same is true for Satyavan also:

In her he found a vastness like his own,

.....

In her he met his own eternity. (Canto II Book I 16)

Savitri, though "in her the superhuman cast its seed", lives like a plain housewife in Satyavan's hut and patiently performs the daily chores calmly bearing in her own heart the pain that her days with her husband are numbered. Her suffering is the suffering of an Avtar. She speaks to none of her impending calamity.

Accustomed to the eternal and the true,  
Her being conscious of its divine founds,  
Asked not from mortal fragility pain's relief,  
Patched not with failure, bargain or compromise. Canto II Book I 19)

Sri Aurobindo writes that the great never share their sufferings with others. It is the small who speak of theirs. Here, Sri Aurobindo describes how the incarnations of God came here to save the suffering humanity and they themselves had to suffer; he who would save the race must share its pain.

Nonetheless, it is Savitri's human aspect, her purely human traits that provide substance to her character. Sri Aurobindo does not focus on Savitri's character in spiritual light only. She is not a mere abstraction, a translucent concept which can only be imagined as a divine, otherworldly idea. Rather, Aurobindo paints her in real human colours where we can see her as a concrete manifestation

of human desires and emotions, willpower and determination which is a unique feature of humans only. When the divine sage Narada predicts the doom of Savitri in selecting a husband who is fated to die in twelve months, the queen mother is furious and tells Savitri to go out once again and make another choice. But Savitri replies:

Once my heart chose and chooses  
not again. (Canto I Book VI 432)

She is firm on her decision and speaks out her iron-will:

I am stronger than death and greater than  
my fate;

My love shall outlast the world, doom falls  
from me

Helpless against my immortality. (432)

When Savitri is united with Satyavan, she broods over the approaching doom and prepares herself for the war she has waged against Death. She does this by plunging into her inner self, for she knows: "No helper had she save the strength within.", crossing the various planes where she meets the mother of sorrow, the mother of might, the mother of love, she reaches a stage where she sees her own secret soul; where the human Savitri regards the Divine Savitri, where both rush into each other and they become one.

On the fated day, Savitri accompanies Satyavan to the green world. The destined hour arrives and she feels the presence of Yama, the god of Death. She, seeing that the Death-god is taking away the soul of Satyavan, soars out of her physical body and follows the Death-god. Now a crucial debate ensues between Savitri and the Death-god who offers her many materialistic pleasures even offers her a place in heaven. He also tries to dissuade Savitri from her aim by dragging her into idealistically escapist philosophies. But Savitri is firm in her resolve. When the god of Death asks her to go back to earth, as she will find fresh lovers, she disdains the suggestion and is persistent in her chase. When he asks her to choose whatever boon she wants, she asks him to give all that Satyavan wanted for his parents. Even when she is offered a place in heaven, she declines, saying, "Nothing I claim but Satyavan alone." (Canto III Book X 636)

When the God of Death becomes furious and declares that he is the only the guardian, he is

God, ultimately everybody comes to him for peace, for rest, Savitri replies that Love is greater than death. Death says that love is only the passion of flesh. He calls it "A sweet secretion from the erotic glands", "Flattering and torturing the burning nerves (Canto II Book X 618)" and claims that, "Not on earth can divine love be found.(619)" Savitri, countering every argument put before her by Death, says:

When unity is won, when strife is lost  
And all is known and all is clasped by love  
Who would turn back to ignorance and  
pain? (633)

With great command, Savitri tells death:

...O Death;

My love is stronger than the bond of fate;  
Our love is the heavenly seal of the  
Supreme. (Canto III Book X 633)

She also says:

...love is the bright link 'twixt earth and  
heaven.

Love is the far Transcendent's angel here;  
Love is man's lien on the Absolute. (Canto  
III Book X 633)

Ultimately, when the Death-god throws her a challenge to show what her real power is, Savitri looks on Death and turns into "A halo of indwelling Deity." The Death God plays many tricks but ultimately flees the scene. Savitri returns to the Earth along with Satyavan. Savitri rises to the transcendental realms in order to bring back her husband's soul and thereafter, enjoys the nuptial life on earth.

Though Savitri's encounter with the Death-god seems a purely transcendental phenomenon, Aurobindo saves his epic poem from assuming a shape of the merely mystic genre by giving it a subtitle "A Legend and a Symbol". By providing almost all major characters a symbolic significance, Aurobindo offers the readers a multifaceted, multilevel study of the poem. The debate between Savitri and the Death-god is a juxtaposition of light and darkness, good and evil, knowledge and ignorance and cramped versus illumined insight. Savitri, at the end of the poem emerges as a champion of the cause of the whole humanity. She, like Christ, opens the doors of heavenly bliss for man and returns to earth with the message that

only a human being is capable of developing his consciousness and his capacities to the level of divinity itself. As M.K. Naik writes in *A History of Indian English Literature*, Savitri "is a distillation of Sri Aurobindo's philosophy of Integral Yoga according to which 'God must be born on earth and be as Man/That Man being human may grow even as God.'" (58)

Describing Savitri, the poet says in book 1:

A wide self-giving was her native act;  
A magnanimity as of sea or sky. (Canto II  
book I 15)

Had her arduous journey to the world of Yama been only for own personal gain, she would have thankfully accepted Yama's offer of heavenly abode. But Savitri's concerns are greater:

Love in her was wider than the universe,  
The whole world could take refuge in her  
single heart. (Canto II book I 15)

She tells Yama that her mission is to conquer death in order to bring everlasting peace to earth. And ultimately, she emerges victorious in her mission when:

The frontiers of Ignorance shall recede,  
.....

This earthly life become the life divine.  
(Book XI 710)

Savitri's victory over death and revival of Satyavan—an embodiment of *Prakriti*, is symbolic of the union of the spirit and the creation itself. Without the support of the life spirit, creation is lifeless. In the same manner, spirit without any manifest phenomena is ephemeral. It seeks fulfilment in concord with its other half. Hence, thus, the treatment of Savitri brings to light the elevated status of the woman who was conceptualized in the *Mahabharata* more than five thousand years ago and who was fictionalized by Sri Aurobindo in an era when feminism had hardly knocked at the Indian doors. Despite Savitri assuming the centre stage, the emphasis is not on downgrading the male counterpart. In Savitri-Satyavan relationship, none claims superiority over the other. Both Savitri and Satyavan complement each other indispensably. Ancient Indian philosophy emphasizes through its concept of *Purusha* and *Prakriti* the man-woman relationship where none is subordinate to the other; none is the

'subject' or the 'other' as described in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1960); where *Purusha* is not a biological truth but a qualification which can be ascribed to both male and female beings depending upon the nature of attributes one's character has.

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