CHAPTER - VII
SAVITRI – AN EPIC OF THE SOUL

Savitri is the epic of Modern Age. As an epic of the soul Savitri stresses that the world is the manifestation of the ‘Divine’ and therefore it is meaningful. It also reveals that man is not just “an image of clay”; he is really a son of God. His final destiny is to become equal to God. Savitri, tells the story of Love that conquers Death. It also narrates the adventures of spirit, from the Inconscience to the Superconscience. Besides, it presages that man is to emerge as Superman after the descent of the Supermind in the Terrestrial Consciousness. The action of Savitri takes place only in the soul of man. It is, says Aurobindo, “the record of a seeing, of an experience, which is not of the common kind.” It transmutes the secular and theological structure of traditional epic into a spiritual one. Lotika Ghose rightly says; “In the Iliad, we have the highest reach of the Hellenic mind. In The Divine Comedy, we have the highest attainment of Christian mystical experience; in Paradise Lost we have the highest elevation of Christian ethical striving. Unlike these, Savitri has the clarity of direct revelation which is the characteristic of the Vedas and the Upanishads. It has therefore the utterness of the speech of the spiritual and not the glimmering beauty of mystical experience; it is not the sybil who speaks here but the seer”.

Savitri has the outstanding features of both Primary and Secondary epics; Savitri deals with spirituality; so it is appropriately regarded as an epic of the soul. Sri Aurobindo explains the epic of the soul as follows:

“The epics of the soul most inwardly seen as they will be by an intuitive poetry, are his greatest possible subject, and it is this supreme kind that we shall expect from some profound and mighty voice of the future. His indeed will be the song of the greatest flight that will reveal from the highest Pinnacle and with the largest field of vision the destiny of the human spirit and presence and ways and purpose of the divinity in man and the Universe”.

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Savitri has been compared with the western epics to point out that it uses their structure for its own purposes. But it differs from them in its subjects matter and it is more lyrical than a narrative poem in its essence.

**Homer’s Epics and Savitri**

Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey are primary epics which deal with the heroic deeds in order that such deeds may not be forgotten. Homer draws the picture of human life at a high intensity of impulse and action. Sri Aurobindo says: “When we read the Iliad and Odyssey, we are not really upon this earth, but on the earth lifted into some place of a greater dynamics of life, and so long as we remain there we have a greater vision in a more lustrous air and we feel ourselves raised to a semi-divine stature.”

Like Homer, Sri Aurobindo plans his Savitri on a cosmic plane and links this earth with many occult worlds. Again, like Homer, he adopts a popular legend to explain the meaning of immortality. Like Homer, Sri Aurobindo also repeats the key ideas, phrases, epithets and situations, in Savitri. He says: “The repetition of the same key ideas, key images and symbols, key words or phrases, key epithets, sometimes key lines or half lines is a constant feature. They give an atmosphere, a significant structure, a sort of psychological frame, an architecture. The object here is not to amuse or entertain but the self-expression of an inner truth, a seeing of things and ideas not familiar to the common kind. This kind of repetition I have largely used in Savitri.”

**The Aeneid and Savitri**

Virgil’s the Aeneid is a literary epic; the theme, and not the character, is its dominant motif. It depicts the destiny of a nation. There Aeneas struggles and suffers for Rome, and so he stands for what a Roman hero is. According W.A camps the Aeneid is a poem wholly different from the Homeric poems. Yet it recalls them on every page, and is constructed largely by the remoulding of Homeric materials.

Virgil adopts the technique of enlargement to gratify the events and characters. Like Virgil, Sri Aurobindo, divides his epic into twelve books and
stresses the themes of the poem which are yoga and spirituality. Moreover, he employs the techniques of ‘enlargement’ to interpret the significance of each incident.

The divine comedy and Savitri

Dante’s *The Divine Comedy* is really a wonderful fusion of allegory and philosophy in poetry. It is a voyage through hell, purgatory and heaven; but allegorically, it is a search for the understanding of the order and the nature of the universe.

Like *The Divine Comedy*, *Savitri* is an epic of the soul that harmonises philosophy and poetry in a symbolic language. The mystic travels of Aswapathy and Savitri might be connected with the journey of Dante. Like Beatrice of Dante’s epic, Savitri too becomes one of the two protagonists in the struggle that the wages both as woman and a cosmic power, her victory affecting both the individual and the universe as a whole. In *The Divine Comedy*, we are reminded of Dante’s descent into hell. Dante sees the penitents purging their sins through prayer coming to the tree of knowledge. Similarly, Aswapathy perceives mankind aspiring to get rid of matter’s weight by pigmy thought, intelligence and reason. Both Dante and Sri Aurobindo writing in their respective cultural milieu, reveal a total vision of the cosmos.

Paradise Lost and Savitri

Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and Sri Aurobindo’s *Savitri* are Literary epics which are cosmic. Like *Paradise Lost*, *Savitri* opens with the introduction of a crisis which leads us directly to the middle of the story. It also reminds us of the ending of *Paradise Lost* which suggests a new world where man can redeem himself from his sins through constant efforts. Milton seems to believe that paradise can be regained by one’s control of thoughts, but Sri Aurobindo emphasises that one has to realise one’s soul in order to achieve one’s lost divinity.
The Faerie queene and Savitri

Spenser's *The Faerie Queen* is allegorical while *Savitri* is symbolical in form. *The Faerie Queen* examines human life from ethical viewpoints; whereas *Savitri* interprets earthly life from the spiritual point of view. *The Faerie Queen* glorifies twelve moral virtues suggested by Aristotle in his *Ethics*, allegorically. It depicts the world of chivalry “to fashion a gentleman or noble person in virtuous or gentle discipline.” According to Sri Aurobindo, “Spenser’s work was to have been a rich and beautiful romance and at the same time a great interpretation by image and symbol, not here of the spiritual but of the ethical meaning of human life. A faery-tale and an ethical symbol in one is his conception of his artistics task”.

Indian Epics and Savitri

The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, the great epics of India, are called *Itihasa*. Sri Aurobindo explains the term *Itihasa* thus:

“The *Itihasa* was an ancient historical or legendary tradition turned to creative use as a significant tale expressive of some spiritual or religious or ethical or ideal meaning and formative of the mind of the people.”

Both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are “products of inspired intelligence with a high poetic tone”, and both are “ensouled images of a great culture”. These epics give us the spiritual significance of individual and collective life from a strong and noble thoughout-power of a mind that has high social, political and ethical ideas and is artistically delicate and refined. *Savitri* too offers us a whole world of experience, but it is altogether a new world in which the life of man-in-fact the whole view of the cosmos-undergoes a radical change. *Savitri* is a vision of the world in terms of current laws of human evolution as seen by the ideal mind.

*Savitri* like the *Ramayana* is a poem of dharma, which is related to love and compassion. Sita is a wife devoted to her husband. Like Sita, Savitri is also a devoted wife who is ready to lay down her life to save her husband from Death. *The Ramayana* deals with the struggle between the Forces of
Truth and the Powers of Falsehood and affirms that Truth ultimately triumphs. Savitri’s encounter with Death is really the struggle between the forces of the Good and the Evil. Sri Aurobindo says, “It has been planned not on the scale of Lycidas..., but of the larger epical narrative, almost a minor, though a very minor Ramayana.”

Thus Savitri prophesies the reign of truth on earth and opens up a new world of consciousness for mankind.
NOTES AND REFERENCES

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