CHAPTER - II

SAVITRI
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Sri Aurobindo adopts the legend of Savitri from the Vanaparva of the Mahabharata covering seven cantos. It deals with the thirteen years of exile which Pandava brothers and their wife, Princess Draupadi spend in the Kamayaka forest. Among many relatives, friends and sages who visit and console them in the forest is Rishi Markandeya. Yudhisthir, the eldest of the Pandava brothers asks Rishi Markandeya whether there has been any woman as chaste and faithful as Draupadi who having faithfully followed her husband has endured so much misery. Rishi Markandeya then relates the story of Savitri, the chaste wife and the power of chastity (Pativrata Mahatyam). Savitri is a legendary character who from times immemorial has been adored as a virtuous wife devoted to her husband, a pativrata. Savitri along with other famous heroines in Indian literature (Sita in the Ramayana, Kannaki in the epic Shillappadikaram and Shakuntala in the play Abhijnana Shakuntalam) takes her place as an ideal woman devoted to her husband like 'a shadow to the substance'. Savitri, the central character, derived from traditional sources, inspires succeeding generations.

The king of Madra, Aswapathy, is pious, virtuous, high - souled, a good giver, the protector of people but he is childless. He performs austerities for eighteen years invoking Goddess Savitri for the boon of a child. The Goddess appears before him out of sacrificial fire and promises him a splendorous daughter. Savitri is born and grows into a beautiful and incandescent woman. Aswapathy finds it difficult to get her married because no Prince came forward to ask for her hand as they are frightened of her personality which is supernatural and brilliant. Aswapathy feels painful at this and he asks her to go round the country to choose her own husband. Savitri meets Satyavan in a forest and chooses him as her life's partner though his father, Dyumatsena has been exiled from his kingdom and living in a hermitage. Savitri returns to the palace and finds her father seated with the heavenly sage Narad. She pays her respects to them and discloses her choice of Satyavan. Narad Muni feels shocked to hear the choice of
Satyavan because the handsome, virtuous, self-controlled, modest and generous man, Satyavan has but one more year to live. Savitri refuses to choose another groom, marries Satyavan and lives with him in a forest hermitage leading a simple and pure life. Towards the end of the stipulated year she performs a ‘Trirattra Vrata’ (Penance for three nights) to strengthen her spirit before she encounters death.

On the fateful morning Satyavan gets ready to go to the forest in order to bring fuel for havan. Savitri too follows her husband into the forest. After reaching the forest Satyavan falls asleep complaining of headache. When Satyavan’s life is taken away by Yama, the God of Death, Savitri follows him and engages him in a dialogue. She pleases him with her sweet words and virtues and yearns a series of boons from the death and wins back Satyavan.

When they reach the hermitage they find Yama’s first boon has already brought out the restoration of Dyumatsena’s eyesight. The next morning when the hermits were talking to Dyumatsena about Savitri, some people come to hermitage with the news that his minister has slain the usurper, his troops have dispersed and the people want their beloved king in their midst. This is Yama’s second boon fulfilling itself. The king is crowned and Satyavan becomes his heir. The other boons are also fulfilled in due course of time: Aswapathy becomes the father of a hundred sons, and Savitri and Satyavan are also blessed alike. Vyasa’s Savitri combines love and power, and her aspiration saves two royal houses, Madra and Shalwa. In the Mahabharata, Rishi Markandeya concludes that he who listens to the story of Savitri carefully will suffer no pain and prosper in his life.

Sri Aurobindo’s epic Savitri is not just a factual narration of an old legend; it is also a network of symbols. The legend of Savitri has been transformed by the alchemy of the great Rishi’s genius into a symbol of Life Divine and imparting a cosmic significance. Symbolically, the poem Savitri has an affinity with the Vedas and the Upanishads which depict the struggle between the forces of Light and Darkness, and affirm the victory of Truth over Falsehood. It is a Metaphysical Poem which traces the evolution of the spirit...
from the Inconscient, Annamayakosha to the superconscient Divine, Vijnanmayakosha.


The First Part (Book I to III) of the poem begins in medias res describing the dawn of the day on which Satyavan is to die. The Second Book is mainly devoted to an exposition of Aswapathy's Spiritual Quest cast in the form of retrospective narration. In the Mahabharata, King Aswapathy performs sacrifices till he is promised a daughter, but in the epic Savitri he is no more childless king, he is rather, the aspiring soul in his search for the truth of himself, of the world and of God. His Yoga involves both decent into Night and ascent through carefully mapped out stages to the world soul till he gains supreme knowledge. His 'sacrifices' symbolise the trials and tribulations of the evolving soul of humanity and his gains are the gains of the human race during its long struggle for the realisation of truth. The Book III describes the successful end of Aswapathy's long spiritual Journey. In the legend it is said that Savitri is the gift of Goddess Savitri but in the Aurobindonian Version, king Aswapathy not content with his personal salvation and yearning to secure the Divine descent on to the earth prays to the Divine Mother who responds and promises that 'one shall descend and break the iron law and change Nature's doom to the lone spirit's power.' Thus reassured, Aswapathy returns to the earth.
The Second Part (Book IV to VIII) of the poem narrates the story of Savitri’s birth and upbringing, her search for her life-mate, her insistence on marrying Satyavan in spite of sage Narad’s warning that the youth is doomed to die within a year, and her brief but happy married life till the fateful day of Satyavan’s death. The legend does not describe the growth of Savitri but the Aurobindonian epic narrates it in a Wordsworthian mode. She grows imbibing the forces of nature. She struggles to uplift ignorant people to divine status; but they themselves do not want to change. She becomes frustrated and becomes one with the phenomena of nature. The legend just mentions the meeting of Savitri and Satyavan but the Aurobindonian epic mentions the meeting of Savitri and Satyavan for two reasons in the Book of Love: First, it gives the poet an opportunity to sing the glory of love. Second, it gives the poet a chance to highlight the virtues of Satyavan. In the legendary story, the Queen of Aswapathy is merely a name but in the Sixth Book of the epic, she is a forceful character who raises all those questions of life which are usually asked by agnostics to prove the non-existence of God to sage Narad. The Book VII describes Savitri’s Yoga for fortifying herself for her coming encounter with Death. Her quest is for total self-realisation, which can give her the power to defy Death. Quite as arduous as that of her father, this quest, also recounted in equally carefully marked out stages, is allegorically described in terms of a long and difficult Journey. At the end of Part two, that is, in the Book VIII we are again back to the fateful day on which the action of the epic begins.

The Third part (Book IX to XII) of the poem describes the struggle between Savitri and Death, who siezes the dead Satyavan’s soul, as predicted. In the long debates between the two, Death, the ‘dark – browed sophist’ employs various strategies including casuistry, intimidation and blandishments, but Savitri refuses to accept defeat. In the Mahabharata, it is found that Savitri appeals to Death to release the soul of Satyavan on the moral grounds and Death obliges her because he is pleased with her virtues. But in the poem Savitri’s claim that she herself is part of Divine Truth, defies the law of death and defeats him with the strength of her divinity in the Book X. In the legend, it is said that Savitri and Satyavan return to earth when
Yama releases the soul of Satyavan from his noose. But in the Aurobindonian epic she along with Satyavan rises to the realm of the Everlasting Day where a celestial voice asks her four times to accept individual bliss in the higher world, since there is no hope that the whole of mankind can achieve what she has done. But Savitri asks for His peace, Oneness, Energy and Joy for earthly creatures. The Supreme Power now reassures that her choice is right and says that they represent God’s dual power – Savitri the ‘Force’ and Satyavan ‘the soul operating on earth to divinise it. In the Concluding Book, Savitri and Satyavan return to ‘the many voiced human world’ in the evening, while night ‘in her bosom nursed a greater dawn.’ It is noteworthy that the actual action of the epic takes place on a single day, as in James Joyce’s Ulysses, all the rest being cast in the from of retrospective narration.

Sri Aurobindo’s Savitri is thus a major epic but not a perfect poem. It is however, an audacious attempt to pour God’s wine, which is perpetually new – into the age – old epic bottle, transforming the receptacle itself in the process. With all its limitations it remains a landmark in Indian English Poetry.