CHAPTER –II

THEME OF SAVITRI AND OTHER POEMS

Sri Aurobindo is a versatile genius. He didn’t write Savitri like other poems. First, he underwent spiritual experiences and then he wrote this epic, Savitri. Savitri is the story mainly of Satyavan and Savitri but another character who is linked with the progress of Savitri is Aswapati. As is the case with his name he can be regarded “Master of Mind” because symbolically Aswapati stands for manas, human mind that is the highest sense in being. He failed in his journey towards Godhead. However, he got a boon from Mother Goddess that he would have a kanya (female issue) who would be devarupini. Sri Aurobindo also wrote this poem in the dark night. As he remarked in the very beginning entitled as The symbol down:

It was the hour before the Gods awake
Across the path of the divine Event
The huge foreboding mind of Night, alone
In her unlit temple of eternity,
Lay stretched immobile upon silence marge.1
Sri Aurobindo nurtured entirely on European literature for the first twenty years of his life and wrote verses in Greek, Latin and English even in his high school and under-graduate days. These poems were described by him as “offspring of the diving Hellenic muse; Poor maimed children born of six disastrous years”.

However when he came to India and took a job in Baroda, there was a profound change in his horizons. The entire cultural heritage of India with its multi foliate richness springing from deep spiritual roots astonished him.

He would continue to write poetry in English but the themes could be Indian. He knew that this was no easy task, but he dared to do the same:

“To take with a reverent hand the old (Indian) myths and cleans them of soiling accretions, till they shine with some of the antique strength, simplicity and solemn depth of beautiful meaning, is an ambition which Hindu poets of today may and do worthily cherish. To accomplish a similar duty in a foreign tongue is a more perilous endeavour”.²

The change in subject matter would mean a tremendous change for along with the theme, the imagery, the Nature background, the
philosophical perspectives, all should change. The Occident and the Orient, after all revolve on two different axes. Hence such a sudden and total change in one's poetic world is not possible. It is thus pleasant to watch the mingling of Western and Indian mythology in a poem like "Who" in which Jupiter figures in one stanza and Brahma in the next. The Hellenic glory would continue to cast a spell on Sri Aurobindo for decades to come—as might be inferred from the unfinished epic Ilios, the five-act play Perseus the Deliverer, and the experiments, with classical metres but the definite conversion to Indian culture is indicated by his essays on Bankim Chandra that appeared in Indu Prakash his poems on Micheal Madhusudan and Bankim, and his long narrative poem, Urvasie, (1896) and Love and Death (1899).

The heroes of Indian myths and legends held a special attraction for Sri Aurobindo ever since his return to Indian in 1893 and with his gradual involvement with the secret revolutionary movement in India. The epic, mythic and legendary heroines appeared to him as various emanations of the Mother, Mother India, invoked by Rishi Bankim in that mantra of the religion of patriotism "Bande Matram", as Urvasie, exuding such unearthly charm; as Priyamvada, a dream of love; as Uloupie, all self-giving;
as Damayanti, steadfast and capable; as Chitrangada, brave and self-possessed; and as Savitri, sustained by the mind of Light. He thought about them, or started translations where they figured, or began new poems on them, but circumstances forced him to leave many of them unfinished. However, Urvasie and Love and Death remain two of the finest narrative poems in Indo-Anglian Poetry.

The legend of Savitri came close to Sri Aurobindo’s heart. It remained with him throughout his poetic career spanning more than five decades. He was to return to the legend from time to time and set out his philosophy of the life divine, realise his aesthetic of the overhead planes on consciousness and his hopes for the future turn for English poetry. Savitri the finished epic published in its entirety in 1954, as to become the crest-jewel of his poetic corpus. Indeed, such is its steadily widening readership that the epic is now considered the crest jewel of Indian poetry in English.

I.A. Richards once said: “They very greatness of a poem can stupefy the reader.” This could be the tragedy of the small clique of detractors who go to extent of describing Savitri as “unwinding like an interminable sari...... one vast onion of a poem.” Sri Aurobindo did foresee such benighted minds and he wrote in 1947:
“Savitri is the record of seeing, of an experience which is not of the common kind and is often very far from what the general human mind sees and experiences. You must not expect appreciation or understanding from the general public or even from many at the first touch’ as I have pointed out, there must be a new extension of consciousness and aesthetic to appreciate a new kind of mystic poetry”.4

In this epic testament of the great seer Sri Aurobindo, we have the original upakhyana of Vyasa as the nucleus, But transformed in terms of the modern consciousness. Not only do we have sublime poetry here, but a Magna Charta as well for man’s evolutionary leap forwards in the planes of light. There are here passages of mystic illuminations compacted with visionary intimations. There is a spiritual quality in the verse movement as though we are being linked through it to a greater reality which pours in us the needed strength to face a life afflicted with “death, desire and incapacity’. The figure of Savitri is a mystic symbol and redeeming power that emboldens us to participate in our own everyday drama of crisis and resolution and safely come through the ordeal.
Sri Aurobindo discovered a magnificent treasure house of religious and secular legend when he began reading the epics of Valimiki and Vyasa in their originals in the 1980s. In the *Mahabharata*, the Savitri story is told in the course of seven cantos (291 to 297 in the Vana Parva) by Rishi Markandeya to the exiled king Yudhistira. Aswapathy the Madra king, undergoes austerities for eighteen years. The Goddess Savitri appears at last in her resplendent form and vouchsafes the boon of a daughter of great beauty, (kanya tejaswini).

In due course, a daughter is born and is named Savitri. She grows up to be a maiden goddess like (deva rupini) and he tells her; “Seek and choose a husband for yourself.” During her journey she meet Satyavan, the son of the Shalwa King Dyumatsena. Now exiled and blind. Rishi Narad tells Aswapathy that Satyavan has but one year of earthly life left. Savitri, however, is firm and marries Satyavan. When hardly four days are to go before the prophesied end of Satyavan’s life, Savitri still carrying in her sole bosom the burden of this fate undertakes a tri-rattra vow. When Satyavan dies in the forest on the fateful day, Savitri follows Yama the god of death and engages him in debate. Yama is pleased by her sweet and truthful speech and grants her several boons. Finally he
restores Sayavan’s life, blesses her, and disappears. Savitri and Satyan return to their parents. Concluding his narrative Rishi Markendeya says: ‘Even thus did Savitri redeem from peril and raise to high fortune herself, her father and mother, her father-in-law, as also the whole race of her husband (bhartuh kulum)’.

For Sri Aurobindo, who at the turn of the century was concerned with the theme of deliverance (at the national level, a Perseus or a Baji Prabhau; at the spiritual level, a Manu or Kuthumi), this aspect of the Savitri legend held a special significance. He must have found the upakhyana ‘The gem of the whole poem’ of Vyasa, and the elemental simplicity of the narration must have pleased him greatly. Winternitz has also remarked.

\textbf{In the whole of the Mahabharata the idea prevails that Yama, the god of death in one with Darma, The personification of Law. But nowhere is the identification of the king of the realm of death with the lord of law and justice expressed so beautifully as in the most magnificent of all brahmanical poems which the epic has preserved, the wonderful poem of faithful Savitri.}^5

Sir Aurobindo, hitherto used to the Hellenic models, found a like simplicity and beauty in the clear architeconics of the Savitri
upakhyana. The years of ‘silent yoga’ and the coming of the Mother to Pondicherry in 1914 brought him a insight into the nature of the New Consciousness, often referred to as the Supramental. He was presently to write *The Life Divine, The Synthesis of Yoga, Essays on the Gita* and other treatises. Before all this activity, he wrote (or rewrote) *Savitri* as a narrative poem in two books. Each of two Books runs to about 1000 lines, Book I leads up to Satyavan’s death in the forest; and the second Book covers the dialectic between Savitri and Death, her victory, and her return with Satyavan to the earth. A latter recension, taking shape perhaps in the early twenties, seems to have subtitled ‘A Tale and a Vision’. The first section was called ‘Earth’ with four Books (Quest, Love, Fate, Death) and the second was called ‘Beyond’, again with four Books (Night, Twilight, Days, Epilogue).

On 24 November 1926, Sri Aurobindo experienced the descent of a new power of consciousness, the Overmind in the physical, which should prepare the ground for the ultimate descent of the Supermind. Sri Aurobindo now completely withdrew into seclusion so as to be able to concentrate on his Yoga. He also took up the revision of *Savitri* in the light of his latest yogic realizations. For 24 years the work of revision and expansion went on, and at
the time of his passing on 5 December 1950, the epic was all but complete. Subtitled ‘A legend and a Symbol’, Savitri is now a modern English epic in 12 Books of 49 cantos, spread over nearly 24,000 lines.

The essential story as found in Vyasa’s upakhayana is retained in the earlier version as well as the epic. But the siddhi of 1926 has brought about a qualitative difference as well. The detailed account of Aswapathy’s yoga in the epic is absent in the earlier version. Aswapathy’s yoga which is really Sri Aurobindo’s life-long askesis takes up almost half the epic.

In the earlier version, following Vyasa’s upakhayana, it is Aswapathy who asks Savitri to choose again when Narad unveils Satyavan’s fate. But in the epic, Aswapathy’s queen is introduced as a participant, and it is she who urges Savitri to “choose once again and leave this fated head ... A choice less rare may call a happier fate. Again, Savitri’s yoga of preparation to battle with Death, which is spread over the seven contos of The Book of Yoga is a new addition, probably based on the spiritual experiences and realizations of the Mother of Aurobindo Ashram. The section ‘Beyond’ of the earlier version has become the extended dialectical struggle between Light and Darkness, Love and Death, and the
transformation of Death into New Life and darkened earth into a New Heaven and New Earth is spread out in the three Books: Eternal Night, Double Twilight and Everlasting Day.

Sri Aurobindo’s epic opens on the crucial day that is to witness the central action of the epic, the great struggle at once personal and cosmic. Savitri wakes up in her forest hermitage at dawn and ponders over the fateful ‘issue’ to be faced. In her sublime solitariness and self-possession she appears a victress, a world-saviour:

**At once ... the stillness and the word,**

**A continent of self-diffusion peace,**

**An ocean of untrembling virgin fire;**

**The strength, the silence of the gods were hers.**

But Savitri-who is she, why is she here, how has the issue been joined? Sri Aurobindo takes us back to the days of King Aswapathy’s yearning for a child. His aspiration was really the ‘**the result of the world’s desire**’, for he is humanity’s advance scout destined to prepare the way for the coming of the Saviour.

Aswapathy’s Yoga falls into three stages, and the first stage is the subject-matter of Book I Cantos 3, 4 and 5. As individual man, he goes beyond Reason and Mind, and sees the Soul. The spaces of
the limitless soul bring him an apparently endless extension of experience. The ‘secret knowledge received from the great Rishis help him to achieve transcendence, and thus he gains the vision to see and the wings to reach the Spirit’s peaks of beckoning felicity. He now resolves to perform further explorations for the benefit of the race so that his own achieved felicity may become a universal possibility for the still unredeemed earth:

A voyager upon uncharted routes
Fronting the viewless danger of the unknown
Adventuring across enormous realms
He broke into another Space and Time.7

The fifteen cantos of the Book of the Traveller of the Worlds describe in vivid particularity Aswapathy’s spiritual journey. He descends to the worlds below mapped out in psychic terms the worlds of gross matter, subtle matter, little life (insect, animal, early man) and greater life (the heroic age) which achieves Power yet invites or permits corruption

To have power, to be master, was sole virtue and good
It claimed the whole world for Evil’s living room,
Its party’s grim totalitarian region
The cruel destiny of breathing things
All on one plan was shaped and standardized

Under a dark dictatorship’s breathless weight.\textsuperscript{8}

The next step below is hell: the all too familiar ‘World of Falsehood, the Mother of Evil, and the sons of Darkness’. In this deep hole, Aswapathy achieves a feat of forged identity through sheer will-power and recognizes the ‘Eternal’s shadowy veil’ in the Night. This realization brings him a spasm of joy

Division ceased to be, for God was there.

The soul lit the conscious body with its ray

Matter and spirit mingled were and one.\textsuperscript{9}

Aswapathy now ascends on the wings of joy to the world of the Gandharvas, and of the Little Mind and the Greater Mind; to the paradisal Heavens of the Ideal; to the Centre of Silence within, where he gains an insight into the Purusha-Prakriti origin of the cosmos; and behind the eternal twain, ‘the sole omnipotent Goddess ever-veiled’, whose mask is the making of the world and whose footfalls are the rages of the ages.

In the Book of the Divine Mother, Aswapathy worshipfully invokes her, and when she appears, he speaks to her of his aspirations for transforming life on earth into the life divine and the
Divine Mother gives her wide consenting Voice to expectant Aswapathy:

**O strong forerunner, I have heard thy cry**

**One shall descend and break the iron Law**

**Change Nature’s doom by the lone spirit’s power.**

Books Four and Five give in rich detail Savitri’s growth into girlhood, her quest, and her choice of Satyavan. Then comes the crucial Book of Fate, a tense psychological drama where the Queen is just human, Aswapathy is the enlightened father and king, Narad the divine seer and Savitri is the protagonist glowing with the Mind of Light. In that order the four present the ascending planes of consciousness, from the mental to the Supramental. Savitri’s is the decisive action, as she rejects and defies adamantine fate itself:

**I am stronger than death and greater than my fate**

**My love shall outlast the world, doom falls from me**

**Helpless against my immortality**

**Fate’s law may change, but not my spirit’s will.**

The Rishi too intervenes to strengthen her will and assure the royal couple that all will be well.

**Leave the world’s fate and her to God’s sole guard,**
Even if he seems to leave her to her lone strength,
Even though all falters and falls and sees an end,
And the heart fails and only are death and night
God-given her strength can battle against doom’
Even on a brink where Death alone seems close
And no human strength can hinder will,
Intrude not twist her spirit and its force

But leave her to her mighty self and Fate.¹²

The Book of Yoga is about Savitri’s inner preparation to challenge and change the decree of Fate regarding Satyavan. Though Fate seems unalterable, there can be exceptions, and it is for Savitri to achieve the breakthrough to a new dispensation. She begins an inner search for her soul’s identity with a series of insights. This world, its trembling uncertainties, the evolutionary spiral, and humanity now anxiously scanning the horizons of Next Future: but where is the leader? The realization comes to her that the mighty Mother has made her Savitri.

The centre of a wide-drawn scheme …

To mould humanity into God’s own shape

And lead this great blind struggling world to light

Or a new world discover or create.¹³
The sorrow and darkness threatening her life with Satyavan being symptomatic of the present human destiny, she would track them to their source, and master them. In the spiritual and psychological realms with her, she comes across several possibilities- the triple soul-forces, for instance- but it is the total power of the soul that is the need of the hour. She gains this by achieving a great calm, the ‘Superconscient’s high retreat’. And is now ready for the great struggle identifying herself with the cosmos itself:

She was the single self of all these selves,

She was in them and they were all in her,

This first was an immense identity

In which her own identity was lost:

What seemed herself was an image of the whole.14

Of the three projected cantos of Book VIII, only canto 3 was completed. Here Savitri and Satyavan go to the forest, and the latter wields his axe against a tree. Soon ‘the great Woodsman hewed at him and his labour ceased’. Savitri takes Satyavan on her lap and presently his head falls limp:

She knew that visible Death was standing there

And Satyavan had passed from her embrace.15
In the Book of Eternal Night, Savitri and Death face each other unflinchingly. Death speaks in terms of worldly wisdom but she firmly holds on to love. The ‘luminous Satyavan’ moves forward, as if irresistibly pushed; behind him, Death; and Savitri last, her mortal pace equal with the God’s; thus intent and worldless she follows Satyavan’s steps ‘into the perilous silences beyond’.

O Death, who reasonest, I reason not,

Reason that scans and breaks, but cannot build

Or builds in vain because she doubts her work

I am, I love, I see, I act, I well.\textsuperscript{16}

In the four cantos of the Book of the Double Twilight, where there is a consistently high level of poetic inspiration, the dialectical issue between Death and Savitri is joined once again, thesis is countered by antithesis, the soap-bubble of casuistry is pricked to nothingness, false lures are firmly rejected, challenges are triumphantly accepted. But Death always has the edge, and challenges her: “But where is thy strength to conquer Time and Death?” Immediately Savitri’s inner light explodes in a glorious blaze:

A mighty transformation came to her.

47
A halo of the indwelling Deity,
The Immortal’s lustre that had lit her face
And tented its radiance in her body’s house,
Overflowing made the air a luminous sea.
In a flaming moment of apocalypse
The incarnation thrust aside its veil.\textsuperscript{17}

As she commands Death: ‘Release the soul of the world called Satyavan’, Death finds himself suddenly helpless. His associates Night, Hell and the Inconscient desert him:

\textbf{His body was eaten by light, his spirit devoured}

\textbf{At last he know defeat inevitable ...}

\textbf{Afar he fled.}\textsuperscript{18}

With the withdrawal of the Shadow, twilight gives place to day. But the cosmic debate is not over, and the poetic projection of its synthesis involving a changed Yama, and a Savitri nearer to the human consciousness, form the subject of the Book of Everlasting Day. From these paradisal regions comes an insinuating temptation. Now that Savitri and Satyavan had achieved entry into this world, why not leave earth to its fate and themselves remain Above? But Savitri firmly rejects this promise of personal salvation:

\textbf{I climb not to thy everlasting Day.}
Even as I have shunned thy eternal Night ...

Earth is the chosen place of mightiest souls;
Earth is the heroic spirit’s battlefield,
The forge where the Arch-mason shapes his works.¹⁹

But is a general emancipation and transformation of earth possible? Not merely ascent is difficult; relapse and descent are far easier and quicker; and no wonder the human mass is content to lay waste their lives. But since Savitri will not be persuaded that the case is hopeless, the Supreme is pleased indeed:

Descend to life with him thy heart desires,

O Satyavan, O luminous Savitri.

I sent you forth of old beneath the stars,
A dual power of God in an ignorant world,
In a hedged creation shut from limitless self,
Bringing down god to the insentient glow,
Lifting earth-beings to immortality.²⁰

In the Epilogue, Savitri and Satyavan return to Earth, to their parents, and to the chosen task of divinising earth life. And the epic concludes in this atmosphere of expectancy.

Drawn by white manes upon a high-roofed car
In flares of the unsteady torches went
With linked hands Satyavan and Savitri ...

Then while they skirted yet the southward verge,
Lost in the halo of her musing brows
Night, splendid with the moon dreaming in heaven
In silver, peace, possessed her luminous reign,
She brooded through her stillness on a thought
Deep-guarded by her mystic folds of light
And in her bosom nursed a greater dawn.\(^{21}\)

The epic has been significantly sub-titled ‘a legend and a symbol’. Although it is about 35 times as long as the upakhyana in Sanskrit, and is separated by two or three millennia of historic time, the main line of the human story remains unaltered. However, massive psychological exploration and profound spiritual intimations are grafted on the original tale in symbolist terms. The key to Savitri’s symbolism has been given by Sri Aurobindo himself.

**Satyavan is the soul carrying the divine truth of being within itself but descended into the grip of death and ignorance; Savitri is the Divine Word, daughter of the Sun, goddess of the supreme Truth who comes down and is born to save; Aswapathy, the Lord of the Horse, her human father, is the Lord of Tapasya the concentrated**
energy of spiritual endeavour that helps us to rise from
the mortal to the immortal planes; Dyumatsena, Lord of
the Shinning Hosts, father of Styavan is the Divine Mind
here fallen blind, losing its celestial kingdom of vision,
and through that loss its kingdom of glory.”22

Seen from this angle, the theme too becomes one continuous
spiral of symbol action. Of the thematic transformations effected by
Sri Aurobindo, the first pertains to Aswapathy’s austerities,
eighteen years austerities for birth of a child. The course of this
long saga of askesis, briefly referred to by Vyasa in less than ten
lines, is described stage by stage as Aswapathy’s yoga. As a result,
we have ‘a self-contained epic within the larger epic frame of
Savitri, a poetic encyclopaedia of occult knowledge and experience.
Humanity’s experiences through the millennia, the triumphs and
tragedies, the aspirations and realizations, are brought within the
scope of Aswapathy’s interior landscape. The sun-heights of
knowledge and achievement are as real as hell-dark cynicism and
self-indulgence.

Impure, sadistic, with grimacing mouths,
Grey foul inventions gruesome and macabre
Came televisioned from the gulfs of Night.23
However, the possibilities of brave new world are also there, clearly seen in Aswapathy’s vision:

I saw the omnipotent’s flaming pioneers
Over the Heavenly verge which turns towards life
Come crowding down the amber stairs of birth ...
I saw them cross the twilight of an age.
The sun-eyed children of a marvelous dawn,
The great creators with wide brows of calm,
The massive barrier-breakers of the world
And wrestlers with destiny in her lists of will
The labourers in the quarries of the gods,
The messengers of the Incommuncable,
The architects of immortality.24

It is Aswapathy’s urgent prayer that this inspiring vision of the Future Man should soon become everyday reality that wrests from the Divine Mother the promise of an avatar.

The second thematic transformation relates to Savitri’s tri-rattra vow which in Vyasa consists of fasting, standing day and night, offering libations to the fire and saluting the elders. But such a vow and its fulfillment instinct with tremendous potentialities have to be seen in subjective, psychic and spiritual terms. Fasting
and physical endurance are but the outward signs of a profound inner quests, a prolonged inner struggle, capped by an accession of knowledge and power. Savitri’s exploration of hidden realms of consciousness and her apocalyptic visions have their source of inspiration in Veda and Upanishad, and gain corroboration from Sri Aurobindo and his spiritual collaborator, the Mother’s own yogic strivings and realizations. Intimations of Occidental and Oriental philosophies are gathered in a knot to project ‘the occult theatres of her inner life’ and Savitri’s finding of her soul marks the successful conclusion of the vrata:

As long as the individual does not wake up to his true self which is seraphically free from the taint of limitation and separativity, the pressure of the egoistic personality gives him a false and precarious sense of stability and security. On the other hand, behind the desire-soul or the ego, there is another force, the psychic entity, who is the delegate of the true self. Little by little, this psychic entity, this delegate from the Divine, gains increasing control over body, vital and mind, tempers and transmutes their marred nature, progressively divinises these instruments, till at last the ego withers and
disappears, and the true self-like the Sun emerging out of a cluster of clouds-shines in all its native glory and power of purposive action.\textsuperscript{25}

The last and the most important thematic transformation is seen in the Savitri-Yama (Death) confrontation. In the old legend, Savitri speeches to Yama are a strange and intriguing mixture of naivety and subtlety and even a little ambiguity. Both the protagonists deploy tact and good sense, and Yama, pleased with her ‘true speech’, grants her several boons and finally releases Satyavan himself. Looking beneath the surface, it becomes obvious that Savitri’s sweet and subtle words effect a transformation in Yama himself. The static God of Death is transformed into the dynamic God of Dharma. This would mean that Savitri is more than a woman and wife, and the struggle is not for a single life alone. Her prayer to the Lord anticipates the following climactic lines in the Book of everlasting Day.

\textbf{Thy embrace which rends the living know of pain,}

\textbf{Thy joy, O Lord, in which all creatures breathe,}

\textbf{Thy magic flowing waters of deep love,}

\textbf{Thy sweetness give to me for earth and men.}\textsuperscript{26}
A world’s desire had compelled her mortal birth and Savitri had consented to answer the aspiration of humanity:

For this she had accepted mortal breath:
The wrestle with the Shadow she had come
And must confront the riddle of man’s birth
And life’s brief struggle in dumb Matter’s night,
Whether to bear with ignorance and death
Or hew the ways of Immortality,
To win or lose the godlike game for man,

Was her soul’s issue thrown with Destiny’s dice.27

Seen in these symbolistic terms, Savitri’s struggle, Visvarupa and victory appear perfectly tuned to the epic action of Sri Aurobindo’s masterpiece.

The Aurobindonian world is a completely self-poised, self-explanatory world. It synoptic center is the dialectic of transformation from Mind to Supermind passing the intermediate stages of Higher Mind, Illumined Mind, Intuition and Overmind, which form as ascending series of light, truth, integral comprehension and immortality. Sri Aurobindo devotes several pages in The Life Divine and a whole canto in Savitri entitled ‘The Kingdoms and Godheads of the Greater Mind’ to a vivid description
of these spiritual realms beyond Mind. Overhead poetry, according to Sri Aurobindo, is poetry that has been influenced, whether to a greater or a lesser extent, by the spiritual power of the Overmind or by the other overhead powers like Higher Mind, Illumined Mind, Intuition or Mind of Light. When these powers engage themselves, partly or wholly, in the creation and communication of beauty, overhead aesthetics may be said to be in action. The overhead powers have been described in symbol terms in the poem itself:

\[
\text{Into dim spiritual somnolence they break}
\]

\[
\text{Or shed wonder on our waking self,}
\]

\[
\text{Ideas that haunt as with their radiant tread,}
\]

\[
\text{Dreams that are hints of unborn Reality,}
\]

\[
\text{Strange goddess with deep-pooled magical eyes,}
\]

\[
\text{Strong wind-haired gods carrying harps of hope}
\]

\[
\text{Great moon-hued visions gliding through gold air,}
\]

\[
\text{Aspiration’s sun-dream head and star-carved limbs,}
\]

\[
\text{Emotions making commonly hearts sublime.}^{28}
\]

Sri Aurobindo has also cited in his correspondence with his disciples examples of overhead poetry in world literature and described them as ‘discoveries of an unexpected and absolute phrase’. The overhead flight of poetry is, not unnaturally seldom
sustained over a passage of considerable length. But Sri Aurobindo wished to write an epic that could embody sustained stretches of overhead poetry and even achieve moments of supreme mantric utterance. He also hoped to reproduce in it something of the Valmikian, Upanishadic and Kalidasian verse movement. In other words to evolve a blank verse movement that would strive to combine a Sanskritic clarity and purity with a Vedic manifoldness in meaning:

‘Savitri is an experiment in mystic poetry, spiritual poetry cast into a symbolic figure ... it is really a new attempt and cannot be hampered by old ideas of technique except when they are assimilable’.29

The clarity and the edge of the Sanskrit sloka held a special attraction for Sri Aurobindo. Perhaps it could be assimilated into the English blank verse! And prolonged experiment helped him achieve what he wanted:

‘... blank verse without enjambment (except rarely) – each line a thing by itself and arranged in paragraphs of one, two, three, four, five lines (rarely a longer series), in an attempt to catch something of the Upanishadic and
Kalidasian movement, so far as that is a possibility in English.30

In Savitri we hear the unmistakable ring of this new rhythm.

Thus Rishi Narad in the Book of Fate.

It is finished, the dread mysterious sacrifice,
Offered by God’s martyred body for the world:
Gethsemane and Calvary are his lot,
He carries the cross on which man’s soul is nailed:
His escort is the curses of the crowd:
Insult and jeer are his right’s acknowledgement:
Two thieves slain with him mock his mighty death
He had trod with bleeding brow the Saviour’s way.31

Each line stands by itself and cumulatively the passage moves with a graceful and dignified gait. Monotony however is avoided by not forging too much rigidity within the single line, as Pope had attempted earlier. But perfectly balanced lines too do appear now and then, which surprise us with their rare mastery of the line-structure:

Near to earth’s wideness, intimate with heaven ...
A dense veil was rent, a mighty whisper heard ...
Voices of prophets, scripts of vanishing creeds ...
Near, it retreated: far, it called still ...

To sustain such a high level throughout a vast blank verse epic would not be possible for any intelligence less than the sheerly overmental. And yet within the limits of the generally end-stopped iambic pentameter, purposive variation and modulation, assonance and internal rhyme, bring out subtle effects of rhythm that cannot fail to appeal to the inward ear. Even as the overmind repeatedly poured down inspiration for thematic transformation and rhythmic modulation, the higher power was instrumental in giving shape to some of the most striking similies in English literature. A remarkable example of the overhead poetry where the word is charged with power in terms of creative Ananda leading to spiritual calm is the description of the effect on the yogi of the mantra is the context of Savitri’s response to Aswapathy’s words:

As when the mantra sinks in Yoga’s ear,
Its message enters stirring the blind brain
And keeps in the dim ignorant dells its sound
The hearer understands a form of words
And, musing on the index thought it holds,
He strives to read it with the laboring mind,
But finds bright hints, not the embodied truth:
Them, failing silent in himself to know
He meets the deeper listening of his soul:
The word repeats itself in rhythmic strains:
Thought, vision, feeling, sense, the body’s self
Are seized unalterably and he endures
An ecstasy and an immortal change
An equal greatness in her life was sown.32

Again, the epic similes which compare Aswapathy the pioneer to a solitary star and to a hesitant voyager use metaphorical language with great success. Sri Aurobindo expertly uses modern phraseology to describe how thoughts come tranquilly to Savitri, only to be thrown back at once:

As smoothly glides a ship nearing its port.
Ignorant of embargo and blockage:
Confident of entrance and the visa’s seal,
It came to the silent city of the brain
Towards its accustomed and expectant quay,
But met a barring will, a blow of force
And sank vanishing in the immensity.33

Obviously, an epic containing spiritual immensities and cloaked in metaphorical language most of the time cannot be read
in hurry. This is not light fiction. *Savitri* demands many readings, and only then one gradually feels the enveloping light. This is specially so with the geography of the occult worlds and the Love-Death confrontation in the world of the spirit. *The mystic Muse is more of an inspired Bacchante of the Diconysian wine than an orderly housewife.*’ Sri Aurobindo’s deep study of the Vedas must also be borne in mind as the major inspiration for the main symbols of the epic: Dawn, Night, Day, Twilight Aswapathy, Satyavan and Savitri.

The Protagonist of the epic, Savitri, is a direct descendant of the Vedic Sun, the *Savitri*, Savitri means a ray of truth, a ray of light and also the Gayatri mantra which ‘saves men when recited’, and our heroine is depicted as the Saviour Force. Savitri and Satyavan are the first-born of a new supernal race; they are the Supreme’s dual power-she the force, he the soul-set in the world to refashion human nature and earth nature. The promise is given:

**Even the body shall remember God**

**Nature shall draw back from mortality**

**And Spirit’s fires shall guide the earth’s blind force:**

**Knowledge shall bring into the aspirant Thought**

**A high proximity to Truth and God.**

34
This is revolutionary change indeed, a total victory over the forces of Nescience and Untruth. For making this possible, the powers and personalities of the Vedic Varuna, Mitra, Aryaman and Bhaga are exemplified in her; and it is her adamantine purpose, arduous preparation, and inflexibly vigilant struggle in the dark spaces of Night, the quicksands of Twilight, and the blinding regions of utter Day that help her to ‘bring down into this world of obscurity and falsehood and death and suffering Truth and Light and Live Divine and the immortal’s Ananda.’\textsuperscript{35}

Naturally, Sri Aurobindo’s poetry receives an outpouring of power and glory from the Overhead planes of consciousness when describing the personality of Savitri. The 51 line description of Savitri in the second canto of the opening Book marvellously projects a divine human power who symbolizes a union of beauty and grace, strength and silence:

\textbf{Near to earth’s wideness, intimate with heaven,}

\textbf{Exalted and swift her young large-visioned spirit.}

\textbf{Voyaging through worlds of splendour of calm}

\textbf{Overflew the ways of Thought to unborn things ...}\textsuperscript{36}

Savitri as seen by Aswapathy, by Rishi Narad by Satyavan, by her fellow- Ashramites: she is goddess-like but lovably human as
well in all their attempts at portraiture. And, of course, Savitri as she appears to Death; such is Death’s monumental tamas that he cannot easily measure her personality and powers. For a human clod do dare him to engage him in combat! His wiles and thunder both fail to deter her. At last, some dim recognition dawns upon him. Exasperated he cries out:

Who then art thou hiding in human guise?

They voice carries the sound of infinity,

Knowledge is with thee, Truth speaks through thy words:

The light of things beyond shines in thy eyes.

But where is thy strength to conquer Time and Death.37

Now is revealed the strength as the incarnation thrusts aside its veil of human form:

Eternity looked into the eyes of Death,

And Darkness saw God’s living Reality.38

This apocalyptic vision is, of course, veiled from humankind. It is the human Savitri whom Satyavan sees later, thought he also sense a ‘high change’ and naively questions her. But she assures him:

Still am I she who came to thee mid the murmur

Of sunlit leaves upon this forest verge;

I am the Madran, I am Savitri,

All that I was before, I am to thee still ...39
High praise has been lavished upon Savitri by discerning critics. An American Professor of Philosophy, Raymond Frank Piper, says that ‘Savitri is perhaps the most powerful artistic work in the world for expanding man’s mind towards the Absolute’.\textsuperscript{40} Sri Krishna prem (Ronald Nixon) finds in it the ‘vision and revelation of the actual inner structure of the cosmos and of the pilgrim of life within its sphere.’\textsuperscript{41} The American poet, Jesse Roarke describes Savitri in the course of a personal letter as ‘a masterpiece beyond praise’. The epic has been compared favourably with other great epics in world literature, including A Modern Odyssey by Nikos Kazantzakis.

However, Savitri the epic is the reality. Sri Aurobindo has brought within its ambit the ancient wells of integral knowledge and the mental knowledge of our scientific and technological age. With the aid of his overmental vision and power of articulation he has analysed the problems confronting modern man and shown the way of redemption. The remedy is simply ‘to feel love and oneness’. Savitri incarnates such a universal love, and hence the epic is the revelation of receding Night and the imminent arrival of a greater Dawn.
REFERENCES


7. Ibid., p. 103-4.

8. Ibid., p. 243.


10. Ibid., p. 346.

11. Ibid., p. 432.

12. Ibid., p. 523.

13. Ibid., p. 552.

14. Ibid., p. 632

15. Ibid., p. 640.
16. Ibid., p. 594.

17. Ibid., p. 745.

18. Ibid., p. 749.

19. Ibid., p. 710.

20. Ibid., p. 702.

21. Ibid., p. 813-14

22. Mother India, June 1971, p. 312.


24. Ibid., p. 389.


26. Ibid., p. 783.

27. Ibid., p. 21.


29. Ibid., p. 852.

30. Ibid., p. 821.

31. Ibid., p. 504-5.

32. Ibid., p. 426.

33. Ibid., p. 618.
34. Ibid., p. 794.


36. Ibid., p. 18.

37. Ibid., p. 744.

38. Ibid., p. 747.

39. Ibid., p. 808.

40. The Hungry Eye: An Introduction to Cosmic Art, p. 132.