CHAPTER SIX
SUMMING UP

*Savitri* has attracted the attention of scholars from every walk of life primarily because it deals with almost all kinds of topics. Deshpande writes:

> What is that so pearl-like in *Savitri*? It depends upon one’s approach towards it: there is philosophy in it, there is rich metaphysics, mysticism, occult knowledge, religion, science, literature, cosmogony, history of civilization, history of evolution, everything that one wishes to have. But indeed it is the supreme revelation which brings divinity to our mortality in order to transform it into its own nature that draws us closer to it. (*Perspectives of Savitri Vol. II* li)

Nandakumar is of the opinion that “Patience, receptiveness and humility may be expected to pave the way towards an appreciation of this great epic, this symphonic recordation of a Yogi’s mystic apprehension of the aspirations and struggles of mankind for defeating death and achieving immortality” (*Sri Aurobindo: A Critical Introduction* 95).

*Savitri* is a modern poem though it deals with an ancient story. According to Purani, the reader “will find that the author, at times, not only brings ‘the sperm and gene’ and ‘plasm and gas’ but he also takes images and figures from all over the world and every field of cultural activity to serve his purpose” (*Sri Aurobindo’s Savitri: An Approach and a Study* 107-08). One finds even the Churchillian second world-war-phrase “‘behind his vain labour, sweat and blood and tears’” and “an apt image in the Japanese rolls of painting ‘a kakemono of significant forms’”
Einstein’s theory of relativity and De Sitter’s researches too find an echo in the poem. While dealing with the formation of matter and the world, Sri Aurobindo writes:

An ocean of electrical Energy
Formlessly formed its strange wave-particles
Constructing by their dance this solid scheme,
Its mightiness in the atom shut to rest;
Masses were forged or feigned and visible shapes;
Light flung the photon’s swift revealing spark
And showed, in the minuteness of its flash
Imaged, this cosmos of apparent things.
Thus has been made this real impossible world,
An obvious miracle or convincing show. (155)

Hence, the reader should have at least a nodding acquaintance with the latest advances in almost every branch of human culture to grasp the poem wholly.

Commenting on the subtitle of the poem “A Legend and a Symbol”, Sethna remarks that “it is Legend as well as Symbol, a story with many scenes and levels of development at the same time that it is instinct with a mystical light. That light itself plays over many regions and does not fail to cover most aspects of world-thought” (Sri Aurobindo-The Poet 143-44). For Purani, “the legend is completely transformed by the creative vision of the great Master into a cosmic symbol” (Sri Aurobindo’s Savitri: An Approach and a Study 6).

Pandit considers Sri Aurobindo a rishi and gives a detailed description of the seer’s process of poetic creation:
A Rishi is one who sits deep in communion with the Cosmic Spirit, with the Transcendent. An idea, a truth floats, sails into his being; he lets it sink into his consciousness; he does not interfere, he does not ask himself what it is, what it means. He broods over it in silence and when it has been sufficiently churned, constructed in the heart, hrida tashtam, it moves to the centre of expression, i.e. Vishuddha chakra, and finds its right utterance, the exact word. The word comes to him and he embodies it. That is the mantra. For him a mantra is a means of stabilising the spiritual experience, the mystic revelation that comes to him from on high, and in expressing it he confirms its truth in himself and preserves it for others. Anyone who repeats that mantra can benefit and progress by that truth in the same manner in which the Rishi has done. (5)

“It is noteworthy”, writes Naik, “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 form of retrospective narration” (A History of Indian English Literature 55). He adds that it has surprisingly close affinities to modern theories such as Bergson’s élan vital and creative evolution and Pierre Teilhard Chardin’s vision of a future “when Man graduating into a superior consciousness will grow into more than Man. ‘Savitri’ is thus an exciting and prophetic vision of a glorious future, not a dull recital of a dead past” (55).

Just as Savitri deals with a multitude of themes and topics, The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel also is a store-house of adventures, sights and sounds, magnificent descriptions of the earth, sea and sky and all their wonders. Man's most basic
physical needs and his noblest aspirations exist side by side in Odysseus. Kazantzakis takes his hero far beyond the pagan world that Homer had known. He confronts him with characters like Buddha, Christ, Faust and Don Quixote so that he can converse with them and modify his world-view if needed. He even disagrees with their views which highlight Kazantzakis' belief that each man must undertake his own spiritual odyssey in order to find God, the Absolute Principle.

Kazantzakis is quite familiar with almost all the major philosophies and ideologies of the world. He was initially influenced by Nietzsche. Later he was attracted to Buddhism and his appreciation for Buddha can be found in the following remark: “Of all the people the earth has begotten, Buddha stands resplendently at the summit, an absolutely pure spirit” (Report to Greco 348). But ‘the Cretan’ inside him “refused to let Buddha take full possession” (358) of him and in Berlin he freed himself from Buddha and yielded to the temptations of the flesh and knew that the “world is not a specter” (371).

Later, Kazantzakis was attracted to Marxism because of the influence of Itka, a Jewish woman with whom he had an acquaintance. He writes: “My mind began to tolerate and accept the revolutionary slogans which formerly had seemed so extremely naïve and utopian to me” (391). Then he visited Russia to take part in the tenth anniversary celebration of the glorious Russian revolution. His double, Odysseus, also flirts with these ideologies but is not consumed by them. Bien writes in Nikos Kazantzakis:

Odysseus destroys decadent establishments (the bourgeois West) in the interest of blond barbarians (the Russians). But Odysseus is not a communist, and although he cooperates with figures standing
loosely for Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, and Rosa Luxemburg, he ultimately leaves them and their narrowness behind in order to continue on his metacommunistic quest for a new inwardness. (28)

Albert Schweitzer and St. Francis of Assisi had a great impact on him. During his visits to the holy monasteries of the Greek Christian tradition he was deeply influenced by Christ. The last one to influence him was an elderly mineworker named Alexis Zorba. He writes: “If it had been a question in my lifetime of choosing a spiritual guide, a guru . . . I would have chosen Zorba” (445).

What Kazantzakis wants to convey through his *Odyssey* is that every human being has to charter his/her individual path leading to God, the Absolute Principle. He also likes to stress the point that no ready-made belief or prefabricated methodology can help individuals in this quest. The search is intensely personal and lonely as well although at the beginning there may be fellow travellers just as Odysseus had. But during the many voyages his companions left him and he headed all alone towards the ultimate end. Kazantzakis declares that one has to forsake not only his/her kith and kin but must also free him/herself from doubt, fear and even hope in his/her quest to reach the Absolute.

What Kazantzakis proposes in *The Odyssey* may override traditional religious conventions. Many devout readers may find his epic impious and even pessimistic. Furthermore, there are times when he argues that man ought to help God rather than the other way around. Odysseus realizes that the beast and god have always warred in man as the spirit sought to evolve into light through dark
atavistic roots. He realizes that his ultimate aim is “to free God as far as possible from the beast, toward more and more salvation” (*The Odyssey* 789).

As mentioned earlier, this viewpoint stems from vitalistic mysticism where the age-old and ceaseless push from within is responsible for the progress of the universe. According to Kazantzakis, it is God who struggles through human being’s body to attain liberation. He writes in *The Saviors of God*:

> Someone within me is struggling to lift a great weight, to cast off the mind and flesh by overcoming habit, laziness, necessity.

> Who is he? I prick up my ears. I set up various signs, I sniff the air. I ascend, groping upwards, panting and struggling. The dread and mystical March begins. . . .

> I put my body through its paces like a war horse. . . . I have no other workshop where I may transform darkness into light. (65-67)

Kazantzakis laboured over a period of twelve years to produce a book of singular power and beauty. Friar, a poet and scholar of Greek descent and translator of *The Odyssey*, received from Kazantzakis himself the ultimate praise that the translation was as good as the original. Odysseus stands as a role model for Kazantzakis. Poulakidas in “Kazantzakis’ *Zorba the Greek* and Nietzsche’s *Thus Spake Zarathustra*” observes that “Odysseus acts as a forerunner, as a symbol for Kazantzakis’ major characters, who are created in the image and likeness of Odysseus” (243).
Savitri is an epic that belongs to the Indian mystical tradition. The Odyssey follows the Western vitalistic mystic tradition. The former gives importance to the internal quest whereas the latter stresses the external search.

Both Sri Aurobindo and Kazantzakis have taken their themes from the epics of their own traditions, namely, The Mahabharata and The Odyssey respectively. The former has used the Satyavan-Savitri legend to convey his message but has slightly modified the plot to serve his purpose. The latter has borrowed the theme and protagonist from Homer but has created a new epic although a few characters from Homer’s epic like Helen and Menelaus appear in his poem as well.

Mystical quest characterises the protagonists of both the epics. Aswapati, Savitri and Satyavan follow the traditional methods of Yoga and observe other austerities in their quest; Odysseus takes up action but is later driven to contemplation. This difference in the characters’ orientation is mainly due to the philosophical bearings of the authors. The protagonists of both the epics pass through all the stages of mystical quest, though varying in methods and degrees. They experience the awakening of the self and undertake their journeys purifying themselves and dissolving their egos and gradually transform their consciousness.

Aswapati and Savitri excel in mystical attainment whereas Satyavan and Odysseus lag behind. While Aswapati and Savitri are immersed in mystical experience the other two have to satisfy themselves with only glimpses of the same. Though all these characters pass through experiences like reception of voices and visions, self-realization, formation of universal consciousness and oneness, passage through the dark night of the soul and complete self-surrender
and union with the Absolute, only Aswapati and Savitri are blessed with an abundance of such experiences.

With regard to the mystic way of life, the protagonists of both the epics have many things in common. Resolving contradictions and dualities, gaining endless knowledge and an enhanced vision, overcoming bodily travails and Death, enjoying of ineffable bliss and ecstasy, transcending space and time and the final deification or the life divine are experienced by all of them though varying in degrees.

In the case of mystical expressions through images and symbols, both Sri Aurobindo and Kazantzakis have used light/darkness imagery, imagery of the elements, botanical, zoological, inanimate and cosmic imagery. Images of journeys, architecture and professions and abstract imagery have been used in both the epics. Sri Aurobindo describes the inner worlds traversed by Aswapati, Savitri and Satyavan. Kazantzakis depicts the oceans, lands and continents visited by Odysseus as part of his search.

Both the poets have been influenced by the theory of evolution. They describe in detail the progress of inanimate matter to man and the possible leap of man to God. Sri Aurobindo’s vision of Savitri can be summarized in Pandit’s words in Yoga in Savitri:

This is the course adopted by Nature in its progression from Inconscience to Superconscience, from Matter to Spirit and this also is the way for him who seeks to fulfil man’s mission in life—to arrive at his Godhead. From Matter to Life, from Life to mind, from Mind to Higher Mind, from Higher Mind to Illumined Mind, and
thence to Infinite Mind, Overmind, Supermind, bliss, consciousness and Existence—this is the broad evolutionary landscape spread before man. (140)

Kazantzakis’ vision is articulated in the Prologue to *The Odyssey*: “stones, water, fire, and earth shall be transformed to spirit, / and the mud-winged and heavy soul, freed of its flesh, / shall like a flame serene ascend and fade in sun” (1). This is the ultimate end of every mystic and all their efforts throughout their lives are directed towards this end.

The present thesis titled “A Comparative Study of the Mystical Elements in Sri Aurobindo’s *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol* and Kazantzakis’ *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel*” is divided into six chapters. The first chapter introduces the lives and major works of Sri Aurobindo and Kazantzakis and includes a note on Comparative Literature and a very brief note on Mysticism. It also deals with the survey of literature and the identification of the research gap. The chapter ends with the formulation of the thesis statement.

The focus of the thesis is to highlight and examine the mystical elements present in *Savitri* and *The Odyssey*. In tune with the focus of the thesis, the second chapter devotes itself to a detailed study of mysticism. The chapter analyses the major movements and methods of mysticism and mystical way of life right from the beginning of human history and civilization. It also gives an account of the various trends in mysticism. This chapter also highlights the relationship between mysticism and literature.

The third chapter titled “Mystical Elements in *Savitri*” attempts to find out the mystical elements inherent in this epic. The mystical elements are studied here
under the following headings: Mystical Quest, Mystical Attainment and Mystic Way of life. The mystical images and symbols are also discussed in this chapter. *Savitri* is a mystical poem. It declares that all human beings through their search can attain the divine. Aswapati is the forerunner of the human race who has proved to the mankind that it is possible for a person to aspire for the divine. He has reached higher planes with the help of Yoga and has gained endless knowledge and wisdom. The second part of the discussion concentrates on the expression of the mystical elements through images and symbols. Attempts have also been made to show how the various images occupy a cardinal position in depicting the ineffable mystical states. The chapter also makes it clear that images and symbols play a key role in articulating the mystical vision.

The fourth chapter is an attempt to highlight the mystical elements in *The Odyssey*. It discusses these elements under three headings, namely, Mystical Quest, Mystical Attainment and Mystic Way of life. The second part of the chapter deals with the expression of these mystical elements through images and symbols.

After analyzing the mystical elements in *Savitri* and *The Odyssey* separately, the fifth chapter titled “Convergence and Divergence of the Mystical Elements in *Savitri* and *The Odyssey*” undertakes a comparative study of the two epics under consideration. The objective of this study is to highlight and also examine the handling of the mystical elements by Sri Aurobindo and Kazantzakis who hail from the East and the West respectively. Hence, this chapter focuses on the points of convergence and divergence within the framework of the mystical elements in *Savitri* and *The Odyssey*. The final chapter sums up the major arguments and suggests a few broad areas for further research.
In this thesis, the researcher focuses on the mystical elements in both the epics. The first phase highlights the quest undertaken by those who are attracted to the mystical way of life right from the awakening of the self. The second phase speaks of the mystical state that is attained after a prolonged struggle. The third and final phase throws light on the mystical way of life and its blissful consequences culminating in the union with the Absolute. The protagonists of both the epics pass through all the above-mentioned phases of the mystical quest, though in varying methods and degrees.

Sri Aurobindo and Kazantzakis were contemporaries who had almost the same vision of life. Both of them were trained in the Western educational system and had a notable appreciation for classical writings especially Homer’s works. Sri Aurobindo was also interested in the Greek philosophy and mysticism and Sethna’s remark, “Sri Aurobindo’s stress on a period of Mystics preceding the time of the Philosophers, and his appraisal of a thinker like Heraclitus who is often classed as either a pure mystic or a pure rationalist” (Sri Aurobindo and Greece 55) is worth noting here. Kazantzakis was fond of Heraclitus and he appears many times in The Odyssey to encourage Odysseus.

Umberto Eco in “Borges and My Anxiety of Influence” remarks that “one cannot speak of influence in literature, in philosophy, or even in scientific research, if one does not place an X at the top of the triangle. Shall we call this X culture, the chain of previous influences? . . . let’s call it the universe of the encyclopaedia” (119). After assuming this X at the top of the triangle, Eco explains the relationship between A and B in different ways: “(1) B finds something in the work of A and does not realize that behind it lies X; (2) B finds something in the
work of A and through it goes back to X; (3) B refers to X and only later discovers that X was already in the work of A” (119). According to the present researcher, the third strand in Eco’s argument is relevant and meaningful to this comparative study. Heraclitus, Bergson and Darwin’s theory of Evolution are the ‘X’ (the common sources) that has influenced both the writers and this is evident in Savitri as well as The Odyssey.

Concerning the differences, Kazantzakis is the son of Greece and Aurobindo of India which are considered ancient civilizations in the West and in the East respectively. Unlike Aurobindo, Kazantzakis has written ten novels as well. On the other hand, Aurobindo has written some unique works on yoga such as The Synthesis of Yoga and Letters on Yoga. His Life Divine is a profound and unique work.

As far as Savitri is concerned, Sri Aurobindo did not deviate much from the original story of Satyavan and Savitri found in the Mahabharata but has lent more depth to certain aspects of his spiritual world view. But Kazantzakis’ The Odyssey departs significantly from Homer’s work. He starts from where Homer left off. Hence, The Odyssey is an account of the imaginary journeys of Odysseus until his meeting with Death. Search, external physical action, fight and rebellion have been given a lot of importance in The Odyssey while in Savitri journey to the interior world and inner spiritual action through integral yoga are stressed. The Odyssey is written in exactly the Homeric style with hundreds of characters involved in the action whereas Savitri deals with only six characters. The former is simple and descriptive but the latter is transcendental and meditative.
Savitri and The Odyssey are epics which cannot be exhausted by any number of researches. There are areas waiting to be explored. The present researcher has focused on the mystical elements present in them. A study of the literary style of both the epics can be undertaken. The use of myth and legend in The Odyssey and Savitri is another potential area for further research. Both the epics can be approached from a literary-evolutionary point of view, for both are modernist writers. Another potential area of research is a comparative study of the plays of Sri Aurobindo and Kazantzakis since both have a good number to their credit. Besides, their plays follow a similar line of thought. Kazantzakis’ travelogues in which his struggles and viewpoints are recorded are another potential area of research. A comparative study of Sri Aurobindo’s Life Divine and Kazantzakis’ The Saviors of God is feasible since both contain the authors’ core philosophical ideas which are similar to a large extent.

This thesis may be concluded with Perumpallikunnel’s promising remark concerning the possibilities of the whole world turning mystical. He writes:

Mysticism finds relationships and unity wherever divisions are found. Mysticism finds co-operation wherever competition for the survival of the fittest is the rule. . . . The development of a mystical consciousness among people will increase our collective possibilities to find solutions so that life on earth, guided by the behaviour of humanity, will move towards the betterment and protection of all. (72)