CHAPTER THREE

MYSTICAL ELEMENTS IN SAVITRI

Sri Aurobindo makes a daring attempt to compose a mystical epic poem in the twentieth century where scholars were all agreed upon the fact that it is impossible to write such gigantic works due to the fragmented state of mind of the modern authors. He has been successful in this endeavour and claims that it was done with divine assistance and guidance and the result is the cosmic poem Savitri. Iyengar writes about the reception of this work: “Savitri has been read as poetry, as poetised philosophy, as symbolistic and mystic poetry, as an example of the Overhead inspiration at work over prolonged jets of utterance” (Sri Aurobindo: a biography and a history 690).

A summary of the original legend can be presented as follows: Aswapati, king of Madra, being childless, undergoes severe austerities and at last pleases Goddess Savitri who gives him a boon that she herself will be born to him as a daughter in the human form. She is born to him in due course of time and grows up as an extraordinary girl endowed with wisdom and beauty. But, because of her luminous personality no prince comes forward to marry her and so her father sends her on an expedition to select an apt mate by herself. She returns after two years with the choice of Satyavan, son of Dyumatsena, the blind king of Shalwa, as her groom and informs her father about it.

Narad, who happens to be present on the scene, discourages them that Satyavan is fated to die a year thence. Neglecting the advice of the sage, Savitri marries Satyavan and lives with him happily for one year. On the fatal day, the God of Death approaches Satyavan in the forest and throws his noose around his
neck and walks away with his spirit. Savitri follows him and by virtue of her purity wins back Satyavan from the clutches of Death and also gains a boon for the restoration of the kingdom of Dyumatsena, and the couple return to earth.

The whole of Savitri is mystical in character. It conveys human beings’ transformation into the divine. While replying to one of his critics, Sri Aurobindo, in a letter of 1936 testifies to this fact: “Do not forget that Savitri is an experiment in mystic poetry, spiritual poetry cast into a symbolic figure” (Savitri 754).

Mystical Quest

The awakening of the self is the first stage in the mystical quest. Ordinary people normally never come across such a stage in their lives. Human beings in general possess a feeble mind and Aswapati, the human father of Savitri, remarks that “The little Mind is tied to little things” (Savitri 257). He blames people who are not interested in higher aspirations:

Absorbed in the present act, the fleeting days,
None thought to look beyond the hour’s gains

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It knew itself a creature of the mud;
It asked no larger law, no loftier aim;
It had no inward look, no upward gaze. (145-149)

The average human beings spend their whole life in daily chores and routines and never think of higher realities. On the contrary, there are a few who are dissatisfied with the present life and aspire for a higher life and feel a strong pull from the depths of their beings. This strong urge from within to traverse the
inner realms of their being is the starting point of any mystical quest and is known as the awakening of the self.

Aswapati, the king of Madra, one of the major characters in Savitri, is not an ordinary man; he aspires for higher things in life. He experiences a strong pull in his inner depths to go beyond the limitations of the earth as well as the animal nature of man. So he states: “Our hearts we must inform with heavenly strength, / Surprise the animal with the occult god” (171). The result of this quest is that man will “Quiver, awake, and shudder with ecstasy” (171).

A significant point here is that being a modern man with highly scientific bearings, Sri Aurobindo was able to perceive this special quest against the backdrop of the theory of evolution. According to him, the last phase of evolution is that of “A demigod emerging from an ape” (196). The mystic in him is always aware of the evolutionary ascent to be taken up by the human race:

We must search our nature with spiritual fire:
An insect crawl preludes our glorious flight;
Our human state cradles the future god,
Our mortal frailty an immortal force. (240)

To Aurobindo, remarks Nandakumar, “Man’s primary urge should be to open himself to the higher light of the ‘overhead’ planes of consciousness, to turn to the Divine, to try to achieve a progressive divinization of his nature” (Dante and Sri Aurobindo 28).

An awakened self longs for a departure from the mundane life. So, it undertakes various kinds and levels of journeys and adventures. The mystical pursuit of Aswapati covers a major portion, almost half of the entire poem (Book
One, Canto III - V; Book Two and Book Three, i.e., 326 out of 724 pages). The passion for the Absolute is the principle which urges and leads him all through his inner wanderings and nothing can satisfy him until he reaches the end: “A journey of countless paths without a close. / Nothing he found to satisfy his heart; / A tireless wandering sought and could not cease” (116). He first descends to the lower plane which is known as the Inconscience and from there makes his ascent gradually until he reaches the highest level of Divine Consciousness.

Satyavan, another important character in Savitri, is Savitri’s husband. He represents the human soul which struggles in the darkness of this universe and is always threatened by death. His quest for the Real is only briefly described in this poem. First, he searched “the Mystery with the lantern, Thought” and “It made the original Secrecy more occult; / It could not analyse its cosmic Veil / Or glimpse the Wonder-worker’s hidden hand” (407). Then he approached the “inner seeing Mind” and sought the mystery but “The mystery was not solved but deepened more” (407).

Far from being disappointed, Satyavan further “Strove to find its hints through Beauty and Art” (407) and learned that “Form cannot unveil the indwelling Power” (407). And at last he declared, “I looked upon the world and missed the Self, / And when I found the Self, I lost the world” (407). But with the advent of Savitri, a radical change occurs in him and he witnesses the Divine and reaches the level of a seer:

But now the gold link comes to me with thy feet

And His gold sun has shone on me from thy face.
My mind transfigures to a raptured seer.

A foam-leap travelling from the waves of bliss

Has changed my heart and changed the earth around:

All with thy coming fills. (408)

The next phase in the life of a quester is the purgation of the senses and the self. He/She has to practise extreme self-discipline. Bhagavad-gita teaches: “Those who are interested in self-realization, in terms of mind and sense control; offer the functions of all the senses, as well as the vital force [breath], as oblations into the fire of the controlled mind” (IV, 27). The need for self-discipline has been proclaimed by almost all religions. Jesus advocates, “For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a man” (Mark. 7: 21-23). One has to purge him/herself from all these evil actions.

According to Nolini Kanta Gupta, the journey “is a sacrifice, a passage through pain and suffering, even through frustration and death. The tears that accompany the mortal being in his Calvary of an earthly life serve precisely as a holy unction of purification, give a sweet intensity to all his urges in the progressive march to Resurrection” (Collected Works of Nolini Kanta Gupta Vol. 1: The Coming Race and Other Essays 276). Aswapati and Satyavan throughout their quest try to purge themselves. The Canto “The Kingdoms and Godheads of the Little Mind” depicts a man from the base level trying to purify him.

Disintegration and dissolution of the ego is the most important step in the purification process. Asoka K. Ganguli’s remark is worth noting here: “Eliminate
egoism in all its forms—let the ego-centric outlook disappear in wideness, impersonality, the sense of the cosmic divine, the perception of universal forces” (Sri Aurobindo’s Savitri: an adventure of consciousness 284). Sri Aurobindo describes this experience using the imagery of a landscape. In Savitri concerning the dissolution of the ego of Aswapati, he writes: “The landmarks of the little person fell, / The island ego joined its continent” (25). This imagery makes it clear that individuals are not supposed to be islands but have to be united with God who is the absolute continent.

Aswapati reaches a state where he is able to shed his ego. He is able to break through the shell of egoistic separation which is the primary requirement for attaining mystical experience. The poet depicts Aswapati’s transformation in the following lines:

Then the small bodily ego thins and falls;
No more insisting on its separate self,
Losing the punctilio of its separate birth,
It leaves us one with Nature and with God. (47)

Savitri too tries to reach this state of emptiness. A heavenly voice advises her not to panic about renouncing her ego. Only then can she be united with the Absolute: “Fear not to be nothing that thou mayst be all; / Assent to the emptiness of the Supreme / That all in thee may reach its absolute” (536).

Along with the dissolution of the ego, a mystic has to try to cancel out his/her mind. In mysticism, the rational mind is considered a barrier for bliss and truth. It is also considered a strong barrier which prevents one from attaining any vision of God:
If Mind is all, renounce the hope of bliss;
If Mind is all, renounce the hope of Truth.
For Mind can never touch the body of Truth
And Mind can never see the soul of God. (645-46)

The Divine voice suggests the solution to this problem: “If thou desirest Truth, then still thy mind / For ever, slain by the dumb unseen Light” (646). The stilling of the mind is as important as the shedding of the ego and in most mystic traditions both the ego and the mind are taken as one and the same entity.

Once the limited self is abandoned by the mystic, a gradual transformation takes place in him/her. Aswapati undergoes this metamorphosis while practising Yoga. His spiritual progress, according to Sri Aurobindo, “consisted of two Yogic movements, one a psycho-spiritual transformation and the other a greater spiritual transformation with an ascent to a supreme power” (Savitri 778). The poet highlights the three dimensional nature of Aswapati’s achievement in a letter quoted in Savitri:

Aswapati’s Yoga falls into three parts. First, he is achieving his own spiritual self-fulfilment as the individual and this is described as the Yoga of the King [Book One, Cantos III-V]. Next, he makes the ascent as a typical representative of the race to win the possibility of discovery and possession of all the planes of consciousness and this is described in the Second Book: but this too is as yet only an individual victory. Finally, he aspires no longer for himself but for all, for a universal realisation and new creation. That is described in the Book of the Divine Mother [Book Three]. (778)
Iyengar agrees with the poet concerning the change in Aswapati and writes: “Starting with unease and uncertainty, Aswapathy achieves his soul’s release through a psychic opening and spiritual change” (*Sri Aurobindo: a biography and a history* 668).

Satyavan reveals that he too was once an ordinary man and talks about the conversion that took place in him: “Once were my days like days of other men: / To think and act was all, to enjoy and breathe” (406-07). But then he mentions the advent of a deeper experience: “Yet there came glimpses of a deeper self” (407) and “A blank pure consciousness had replaced the mind” (545).

The unique characteristic of pure consciousness is that it remains indifferent to all stimuli from outside. It does not react to any external situation. Savitri, after attaining this state, realizes that “Nothing within answered an outside touch, / No nerve was stirred and no reaction rose” (545). She witnesses everything but does not get involved in it: “Her consciousness looked on and took no part; / All it upheld, in nothing had a share” (546). It shows the detached mind set of a mystic.

Aswapati is a symbol and his renewal is meant for all human beings. Sri Aurobindo wants to convey through Aswapati that every man is capable of achieving this renewal. Pandit writes, “Savitri shows through the journey of King Aswapathy from state to state, how man evolves, how you and I can evolve beyond our mind, how the consciousness can not only be deepened but enlarged, not only enlarged but heightened” (*Introducing Savitri* 12). Hence, Aswapati’s efforts to obtain true knowledge and Savitri’s endeavours to realize her true self and her final victory over death are of great importance to the entire humanity. Their victories
are not their own personal gains but are the achievements of whole humankind. Nandakumar is of the opinion that “Man’s constant, but generally unavailing, desire to exceed his present condition of half-life, half-truth and half-love is dramatically set forth in Savitri, and the reader himself often becomes a participant in the drama . . .” (Dante and Sri Aurobindo 16).

**Mystical Attainment**

The outcome of any mystical quest is mystical attainment. It is a state of being with the divine. In Savitri, one finds that Aswapati, after a long and tiresome search, is blessed with mystical attainment. Right from the awakening of the self, through spiral ascent, purifying the senses, foregoing the ego or the limited self, a gradual transformation takes place in the mystic. When Aswapati reaches his innermost self, he has the following experiences:

A STILLNESS absolute, incommunicable,

Meets the sheer self-discovery of the soul;

A wall of stillness shuts it from the world

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

Thought falls from us, we cease from joy and grief;

The ego is dead; we are freed from being and care,

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

This too is Truth at the mystic fount of Life. (310-11)

At this level, mystics are endowed with voices and visions from above. Savitri, being a mystic, is capable of receiving visions concerning the origin of the universe: “A dream disclosed to her the cosmic past, / The crypt-seed and the mystic origins, / The shadowy beginnings of world-fate” (477). Kali too speaks to
her concerning the illusion of the world: “I have created all, all I devour; / I am Death and the dark terrible Mother of life, / I am Kali black and naked in the world” (535).

Mystics are capable of entering into a dialogue with divine powers. Aswapati, after reaching that state, asks for clarifications from the Divine Mother:

How long shall our spirits battle with the Night
And bear defeat and the brute yoke of Death,
We who are vessels of a deathless Force
And builders of the godhead of the race? (341)

The Divine Mother answers: “O strong forerunner, I have heard thy cry. / One shall descend and break the iron Law, / Change Nature’s doom by the love spirit’s power” (346).

Aswapati wants this bliss to be enjoyed by all human beings. So he pleads with the Divine Mother: “His single freedom could not satisfy, / Her light, her bliss he asked for earth and men” (315). Just like her human father Aswapati, Savitri too asks for the bliss of God not for her alone but for all humanity: “Thy joy, O Lord, in which all creatures breathe, / Thy magic flowing waters of deep love, / Thy sweetness give to me for earth and men” (697).

Another interesting characteristic of a mystic is his/her feeling of oneness with the universe. While travelling through the world-stair, Aswapati experiences oneness with all that he sees: “Nothing escaped his vast intuitive sight, / Nothing drew near he could not feel as kin: / He was one spirit with that immensity” (96). Savitri too feels oneness with all: “All beings thought and felt and moved in her /
She inhabited the vastness of the world” (556). When asked, she tries to convey the secret of the mystic’s life to a sage:

Awakened to the meaning of my heart
That to feel love and oneness is to live
And this the magic of our golden change,
Is all the truth I know or seek, O Sage. (724)

Each mystic will have to face the dark night of the soul. Normally, it happens just before the complete union with the Absolute. Underhill points out that “the travail of the Dark Night is all directed towards the essential mystic act of utter self-surrender; that fiat voluntas tua which marks the death of selfhood in the interests of a new and deeper life” (Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness 412). In this phase the individual is tempted by various elements. Buddha is tested by Margaro and Jesus is tempted by the devil in the desert.

St. John of the Cross has depicted his experience of passing through the dark night of the soul. He remarks that it is a state of utter confusion and lack of faith in the Absolute and the mystic will have to go through many dreadful moments. Although mystics’ experiences are similar, their expressions of the same are different. Sri Aurobindo has symbolically portrayed this while describing Aswapati’s “Descent into Night” (Book Two, Canto VII) where he comes across the Evil kingdom and its powers:

It was a no man’s land of evil air

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

Truth into falsity grew and death ruled life.
He saw a city of ancient ignorance
Founded upon a soil that knew not light. (206-08)

Sri Aurobindo uses personification to indicate the pathetic state of affairs in the world of Evil. He continues: “There Ego was lord upon his peacock seat / And Falsehood sat by him, his mate and queen” (209). But Aswapati resists all these forces with the power of his Yoga along with divine help received from above. He comes out victorious to make the final leap of mystical attainment which is complete self-surrender and union with the Absolute.

Savitri also goes through this test in her ascent. During her quest, she enters the Eternal Night in a trance. Like Aswapati, she too overcomes the forces of the dark night with her spiritual power. Nandakumar writes: “Savitri faces the horrors of Hell and blandishments of Twilight with her own sovereign impenetrable clam” (Dante and Sri Aurobindo 92). She also comes out of the struggle successfully and attains a complete union with the Absolute.

Satyavan too meets with this situation but he, unlike Aswapati and Savitri, is unable to overcome it. The dark night of the soul literally becomes a very dark night for him and he is conquered by Death. In spite of Savitri’s presence, Death snatches the soul of Satyavan away and Savitri feels it strongly with anguish: “She knew that visible Death was standing there / And Satyavan had passed from her embrace” (566). But Death’s triumph was only temporary, for later Savitri chased Him and brought Satyavan back after defeating Him. Then Satyavan too was united with the Absolute.

Passing through the dark night of the soul, what welcomes the mystic is the perfect union with the Divine. Total self-surrender is the pre-requisite for entering
into this communion. Writing about the importance of self-surrender, Nandakumar, in *Sri Aurobindo: A Critical Introduction* remarks that man “should be prepared totally to surrender to the Divine and facilitate the redemption and transformation. Indeed such absolute self-surrender, *atma-samappana* is the cardinal teaching of the *Gita*” (61). To her, Sri Aurobindo’s life is an example of such total self-surrender.

Aswapati has to submit himself totally to the divine power. It is at the end of his prolonged quest that he meets with the Absolute. Purani portrays this union of Aswapati with the Supreme Creatrix, the power of the omnipotent Divine, where “Truth and Knowledge, Power and Consciousness, divine Delight and Harmony are the constituent elements” (*Sri Aurobindo’s Savitri: An Approach and a Study*) 5).

Just like Aswapati, Savitri too submits and offers her entire self to the Ultimate Being and becomes one with Him. The poet expresses her communion in the following line: “Her self was nothing, God alone was all” (522). According to Sri Aurobindo, writes Nandakumar, “A lasting solution would come when man’s inner being is completely transformed and is utterly in line with the Divine Law” (*Dante and Sri Aurobindo* 28). Only then will man’s soul rest.

**Mystic Way**

The first sign of the mystic way of life is the cessation of the contradictions and dualities in life. The mystic feels the disappearance of good and evil in his/her life to which Aswapati is a witness: “The marriage of evil with good within one breast” (321) is witnessed by him. Narad, the eternal mystic, knows the fate of the demons:
And as he sang the demons wept with joy

Foreseeing the end of their long dreadful task

And return into the One from whom they came. (417)

At this stage, the mystics go beyond the categorization of good and evil and realize that the Ultimate Being is the underlying principle of everything.

Mystics are able to overcome the distinction between the good and the evil because they are able to transcend their narrow minds and unite with the Supermind. Nandakumar writes: “Evil is only the other side of joy. The God of Death is also the Lord of Life. The godhead of Night could become the King of Light, as demonstrated in the Book of Everlasting Day. Our partial, separative mental ignorance thinks in terms of absolute good and bad” (Dante and Sri Aurobindo 115). It is the ignorance of the ordinary mind that thinks in dualities: in terms of good and evil. Once this ignorance is wiped out, all dualities disappear.

Similarly, the age-old quarrel between matter and spirit also will be resolved in the life of a mystic. Neither the ascetical denial of matter nor the pleasure-seekers’ rejection of the spirit will bring about the desired salvation for humankind. Both matter and spirit will have to join hands to attain the Divine. A mystic is one who has taken up this middle path as Buddha preached thousands of years ago. Sri Aurobindo holds a similar opinion when he writes: “The Spirit shall look out through Matter’s gaze / And Matter shall reveal the Spirit’s face” (709).

Once the mystic is ready to follow this path more revelations await him/her. At this juncture, he/she receives another important vision where he/she realizes that both the World and God are the same. Aswapati is able to gain a special vision
of God and the world where he sees God as the Eternal He and the world as the manifestation of the Eternal She, and both are seen as the cause of the universe: “This whole world is only he and she” and “The Two who are one are the secret of all power, / The Two who are one are the might and right in things” (63). Savitri, blessed with this knowledge of the nature of the Absolute, states: “All contraries are aspects of God’s face. / The Many are the innumerable One, / The One carries the multitude in his breast” (656).

Another characteristic trait of a mystic is that he/she is endowed with endless knowledge and an enhanced vision. He/She almost becomes omniscient. Purani is of the opinion that Aswapati, through his tapasyā, has attained “immense knowledge of the possibilities of the human consciousness, its deeper depths and its higher and the highest heights” (Sri Aurobindo’s Savitri: An Approach and a Study 4). When he reaches the ultimate state through his Yoga, his vision undergoes a great change: “There all the truths unite in a single truth . . . / Into a vision that surpasses forms . . . / He neared the still consciousness sustaining all” (32).

After emptying his ego, Aswapati is able to penetrate into the hidden knowledge “caught only by the spirit’s eye”: “When naked of ego and mind it hears the Voice; / It looks through light to ever greater light / And sees Eternity ensphering Life” (272). There for the first time “His being saw itself without its veils” (294) and he reaches “The Kingdoms of the Greater Knowledge” where more revelations await him: “There knowledge called him to her mystic peaks” (299) and “He moved through regions of transcendent Truth” and “He heard the ever unspoken Reality’s voice” (299). Passing through this crucial phase, “He had
reached the top of all that can be known: / His sight surpassed creation’s head and base” and “Almost the Unknowable disclosed its rim” (300). For further growth, he has to renounce whatever he has gained so far: “All he had been and all towards which he grew / Must now be left behind or else transform / Into a self of That which has no name” (307).

Savitri also is endowed with tremendous wisdom as found in the following lines: “High strange revealings impossible to men” (553) and “Her mouth was seized to channel ineffable truths, / Knowledge unthinkable found an utterance” (553). When she returned with the soul of Satyavan after defeating Death, she speaks to the sages in the forest who surrounded her and they were amazed to listen to unfathomable truths from her: “They marvelled at her, for she seemed to know / What they had only glimpsed at times afar” (553).

Possessing foreknowledge, Savitri perceives in Satyavan the primordial man and knows that she belongs to him: “He named himself for me, grew Satyavan. / For we were man and woman from the first, / The twin souls born from one undying fire” (614). She even penetrates into the secret of the creation of the world with her mystic insight: “But Maya is a veil of the Absolute; / A Truth occult has made this mighty world” (600).

Her profound knowledge and wisdom is revealed in her dialogue with Death. She is able to understand Death rightly. So she argues: “O Death, thou speakest truth but truth that slays, / I answer to thee with the Truth that saves” (621). It is the Divine Mother in her who confronts Death and tells him that it was only by Her design that he acts in the world: “I have given thee thy awful shape of
dread / To force the soul of man to struggle for light / On the brevity of his half-
conscious days” (666).

The overcoming of the bodily travails and death is yet another important
element in the mystic way of life. Analysing the theme of Savitri, Iyengar writes:
“And that ‘something’ which ‘happens during the day . . . is the defeat - or rather
the transmutation, transfiguration - of Death. . . . It is the classic theme, the one
fundamental theme, of all great poetry” (Sri Aurobindo: a biography and a history
663). In this poem, comments Iyengar, “the Evil - not its endless manifestations -
the Evil itself is confronted and checkmated, and not so much destroyed as
radically changed in its character: Death the Lord of Darkness becomes the Lord of
Light, and death gives place to Everlasting Life!” (664).

As mentioned earlier, both good and evil become one here. The moment
one gains mystical knowledge, the darkness of Death is dispelled and it gradually
becomes the light of eternal life. Rohit Mehta explains it in detail: “The associates
of Death are Night, Hell and Matter—but all these realizing the predicament in
which Death was placed deserted him. They refused to stand by him in his hour of
great need. Death disappeared . . . was unable to stand the onslaught of the
transformed Savitri” (The Dialogue with Death: Shri Aurobindo’s Savitri, a
Mystical Approach 323).

The enlightened Savitri is aware of her strength: “Let Fate do with me what
she will or can; / I am stronger than death and greater than my fate . . . / Fate’s law
may change, but not my spirit’s will” (432). By the end of the poem, with her
enormous spiritual power she defeats Death and the latter flees.
Satyavan signifies the human soul which is rescued from the clutches of Death. And this symbolizes of humanity’s salvation from death. To Aurobindo, all human beings will be saved from death and become immortal and mystics are those who already enjoy this state and points to the glorious future that awaits humankind.

The mystic experiences bliss and ecstasy. The line “A transfiguration in the mystic depths” (36) denotes that Aswapati is ready for this dramatic change. He becomes blissful gradually: “Rivers poured down of bliss and luminous force, / Visits of beauty, storm-sweeps of delight / Rained from all-powerful Mystery above” (37). He is “Intoxicated with the wine of God, / Immersed in light, perpetually divine” (233). Furthermore, his joys are indescribable: “A giant drop of the Bliss unknowable / Overwhelmed his limbs and round his soul became / A fiery ocean of felicity” (237). Savitri’s life too was “glad, fulfilled like earth’s; / She had found herself, she knew her being’s aim” (532).

Not only the mystic but the whole surrounding as well experiences this blissful joy and even nature partakes of it:

The trees’ rustling voices told it to the winds,

Flowers spoke in ardent hues an unknown joy,

The birds’ carolling became a canticle,

The beasts forgot their strife and lived at ease. (Savitri 532)

Towards the end of her quest, Savitri attains fulfillment: “A light invaded all from her being’s light; / Her heart-beats’ dance communicated bliss” (533). Something similar is experienced by the ascetics living in the woods: “The mild ascetics of the wood received / A sudden greatening of their lonely muse” (532).
Mystics transcend space and time. It is the narrow human intellect that wants to fragment time and space. Gupta is of the opinion that “Millenniums are nothing in the march of the cosmic play. Things are done here in the measures of eternity; it is only the narrowness of the human consciousness that wants to cut up what is eternal and infinite into convenient bits and parcels” (Collected Works of Nolini Kanta Gupta Vol. 1 172-173).

Aswapati’s experience of time and space is very different from that of an average human being:

He abode at rest in indivisible Time.

In his present he held his future and his past,

Felt in the seconds the uncounted years

And saw the hours like dots upon a page.

He plunged his roots into the Infinite,

He based his life upon eternity. (33-34)

He was also able to experience “a rendezvous / For the secret powers of a mystic Timelessness” (326).

Savitri too has transcended these two realities: “She passed beyond Time into eternity, / Slipped out of space and became the Infinite” (555). The poet continues: “She was Time and the dreams of God in Time; / She was Space and the wideness of his days. / From this she rose where Time and Space were not” (557). Infinity becomes her space and eternity her time. Concerning the chronology and geography in Savitri, Nandakumar writes: “A trance: entry into the psychological
universes within man: then our adventure in the conquest of consciousness and the transformation of earth-nature: such is the Timeless-Spaceless chronology-geography of Savitri” (Dante and Sri Aurobindo 70).

The final mystical element to be considered here is the deification of the mystic. Sri Aurobindo stands for the transformation of earthly life into life divine. Aswapati is aware of the divine presence in man: “A mutual debt binds man to the Supreme: / His nature we must put on as he put ours” (67). He is transformed as he “journeys to meet the Incommunicable” (80) and finally embraces Him: “A violent Ecstasy, a Sweetness dire, / Enveloped him with its stupendous limbs” and “His nature shuddered in the Unknown’s grasp” (81). Furthermore, “A mystic Form that could contain the worlds” . . . “Drew him out of his seeking loneliness / Into the magnitudes of God’s embrace” (81).

Just as Aswapati, Savitri also is conscious of the Divinity in her: “Yes, my humanity is a mask of God: / He dwells in me, the mover of my acts, / Turning the great wheel of his cosmic work” (634). She considers herself “the living body of his light” and “the thinking instrument of his power” and his “incarnate Wisdom” and the “unslayable will” (634). Ultimately, she also becomes divine: “A formless liberation came on her” and “She was no more a person in a world, / She had escaped into infinity” (548). This is the final moment of any mystical quest and Sri Aurobindo’s The Life Divine focuses on it. Pandit remarks, “Divine life is progressive divinisation of life. Ultimately all life is turned into a divine life, divine play” (Talks on the Life Divine Vol. II 596).
Expression of Mystical Elements through Images and Symbols

Hitherto the discussion centred on the mystical elements in *Savitri* under three headings, namely, the Mystical Quest, Mystical Attainment and Mystic Way. The rest of the chapter focuses on the expression of mystical elements through images and symbols. In 1933, Sri Aurobindo wrote about *Savitri* in a letter: “It is only an attempt to render into poetry a symbol of things occult and spiritual” (727). Concerning the poem’s technique he writes in 1946: “Rapid transitions from one image to another are a constant feature in *Savitri* as in most mystic poetry. . . . The mystic Muse is more of an inspired Bacchante of the Dionysian wine than an orderly house wife” (*Savitri* 735).

The primary objective of mystic poets is to express faithfully the visions received through both logical and symbolic language. Nandakumar writes, “To express the inexpressible these mystics and visionaries took recourse to symbols and similitudes that created a bridge towards understanding” (*Dante and Sri Aurobindo* 127).

Symbolic language helps mystics and poets alike articulate their visions and intensely felt experiences. *Savitri* is rich in images and symbols. Justifying the abundance and repetition of images and symbols in *Savitri*, Sri Aurobindo writes in a letter of 1946:

In mystic poetry . . . repetition is not objectionable . . . This does not weaken the poem, it gives it a singular power and beauty. 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 mind, a bringing out of inner experience. It is the true more than the new that the poet is after. (Savitri 742)

While dealing with symbolic writings, readers should not become victims to literalism. Iyengar points out that “the reader has to train himself to respond to the dynamics of mystic poetry so that he may be able to leap from the symbol to the truth behind it, keep steady pace with the cataract of images, and feel the thrill of each splash of revelation as it comes” (Indian Writing in English 205).

Dealing with Savitri one has to be aware of the two layers of time and action inherent in it. Iyengar writes: “There is thus ‘double-time’ in Savitri: although in the ‘legend’ the poem comprises the events of a single day in temporal terms, in the ‘symbol’ all time and all eternity are involved in the spiritual action” (Indian Writing in English 192). Concerning the ‘double-action’ he observes that there are two planes operating in the poem: one is the material and the other the spiritual. He elaborates: “On the material plane the poem begins on the day Satyavan is fated to die, and the poem ends with . . . the discomfiture of Yama the Lord of Death, and the return of Satyavan to life” (192). On the spiritual plane, the poem cuts “into the middle of things, the fearful hour in human history when the Asuric creation—shall we say, the Atomic Bomb?—threatens the world and all the great achievements of the race with total annihilation” (192).

Concerning the sub-title of the poem, Nandakumar writes: “And when the epic was published at last with the sub-title ‘a legend and a symbol’, the ‘symbol’
seemed to dominate the ‘legend’. . . . for the ‘legend’ fills the ‘symbol’ with rich substance, and the ‘symbol’ charges the ‘legend’ with ambrosial significance” (Dante and Sri Aurobindo 7).

Passing over to the characters’ symbolism, one has to bear in mind that most of the characters in the poem are symbolic in nature. At the same time it is not prudent to look at them as mere symbols. In reality, it is difficult to set the characters apart from their symbolic entity. Iyengar expresses it beautifully in Sri Aurobindo: a biography and a history:

Death, Love, Truth - Yama, Savitri, Satyavan - the symbols and the legendary characters simultaneously fill the expanse of the epic, and it is not easy, it is not wise, to separate the symbol from the legend. . . . The characters, then, are at once symbol-powers and real human beings. They didn’t figure in the mythic past alone, but are also constituents of the current climate of striving and pressing towards the future. (664-665)

According to Nandakumar, Sri Aurobindo’s epic characters are not “merely concepts, equated with human histories, they are flesh and blood too with mind and soul dimensions. Indeed the symbolism functions in such a way that the characters take an extra life” (Dante and Sri Aurobindo 123).

Aswapati is the human father of Savitri, the incarnation of the Divine Mother. In the original legend, he is the king of Madra who is issueless and enters into a severe penance to please the goddess Gayatri. But in Sri Aurobindo’s hands this character assumes various levels of meanings. Purani writes in Sri Aurobindo’s Savitri: An Approach and a Study: “The life of the childless king Aswapathy
performing tapasyā in order to have a child has been entirely changed by the poet into a symbol of human soul descended on earth from divine heights trying to acquire knowledge of the Self and the world.” (4). He adds: “Aswapathy represents the aspiring human soul down the millennia of evolution in his search for the truth of himself, of the world and of God” (4). Therefore, he can be considered a forerunner of the mystics who always searched for the self, world and God.

Sri Aurobindo’s personal note at the threshold of the poem gives the reader the key to enter the poem:

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. . . . Still this is not an allegory, the characters are not personified qualities, but incarnations or emanations of living and conscious Forces with whom we can enter into concrete touch and they take human bodies in order to help man and show him the way from his mortal to a divine consciousness and immortal life.

Nandakumar brings forth the three dimensions of Aswapati in Savitri: “On the personal plane, Aswapathy is an individual questing for self-knowledge. On a wider plane, he is King of Madra, the leader of his people; on a still wider plane, Aswapathy is the symbol of humanity, its representative, its forerunner towards a
higher status” (*Dante and Sri Aurobindo* 79). The reader has to equip him/herself with this kind of a broad outlook in order to have a right understanding of the poem.

Iyengar calls Aswapati “the pioneer Traveller of the Worlds, the leader and path-finder of the race” (*Indian Writing in English* 196). Gupta remarks that Aswapati “climbs to the summits and brings down upon earth the heavenly riches and the Divine Grace, which fulfils, transmuting all debits into credits” (*Collected Works of Nolini Kanta Gupta Vol. 1* 21). So, he can be hailed as the courageous quester who has paved the spiritual way for the rest of the humankind.

Savitri is the protagonist of the poem. It is she who descends to the earth and rescues Satyavan, the representative of the human soul, from Death. Right from her childhood she shows a mystical lineage in her nature and actions: “Adept of truth, initiate of bliss, / A mystic acolyte trained in Nature’s school, / Her hours were a ritual in a timeless fane” (360).

It is in Savitri’s “flame” that Yama is finally defeated and consumed and transformed into light. Although the fight takes place exclusively between Savitri and Death, the whole universe and humanity are indirectly involved in it. The war between them is fought not solely for Savitri but for the entire humanity. Nandakumar writes: “But in *Savitri* we follow the action with panting hearts, with fear and hope, with despair and joy. We are involved in Savitri’s struggle. She must win, if we are to live. She has to destroy Death, win the Eternal Life, return to the earth, and lead us into the Everlasting Day” (*Dante and Sri Aurobindo* 101).
Critics have tried to compare the actions of Aswapati and Savitri and have demarcated their roles in the epic. Iyengar writes in *Sri Aurobindo: a biography and a history*

It is also necessary to remember that, although Aswapathy’s is superficially an exteriorised Yoga and Savitri’s an interiorised Yoga, the spiritual realities affirmed or experienced by them are the same. . . . Aswapathy is the Forerunner, Savitri is the avatar; and they are both necessary for the manifestation, and the dual act of redemption and new creation. (684-685).

Comparing Aswapati and Savitri Nandakumar writes: “Aswapathy understands the problem, Savitri first prepares herself for her task; and by fighting Death, she ends the ignorance and makes possible the Life Divine” (*Dante and Sri Aurobindo* 79). Iyengar highlights the symbolic relevance of both their efforts. He writes, “And both Aswapathy and Savitri, in their aspiration and transforming spiritual action, strive, not for themselves alone but for all, for a general liberation, a universal realization and a splendorous new creation” (*Indian Writing in English* 200).

In the original legend, Satyavan is the son of Dyumatsena. But in this poem he is considered the representative of the fallen soul which is under the influence of Death. However, he is a mystic and has travelled through such paths. He tells Savitri: “I sat with the forest sages in their trance: / There poured awakening streams of diamond light, / I glimpsed the presence of the One in all” (405). And he recognizes in Savitri the World-Mother and expresses his hope: “My Matter shall evade the Inconscient’s trance. / My body like my spirit shall be free. / It shall
escape from Death and Ignorance” (406). Comparing the symbolism enshrined in the characters of Satyavan and Savitri K. B. Sitaramayya and Swarna Gouri remark: “They play opposite roles, Satyavan’s is to rise and Savitri’s is to raise him, free him from the grip of Ignorance and Death” (*A Dual Power of God* 5).

The author has used a lot of images and symbols from nature. Images from nature are further divided into Light/Darkness Imagery, Imagery of the Elements, Botanical, Zoological, Inanimate and Cosmic Imagery. Naik, writing about the imagery in *Savitri*, cautions the readers:

> . . . those who pigeonhole the imagery of the poem as totally ‘romantic’ strangely ignore the great variety of images in ‘Savitri’, some of which are ‘modern’ in the best vein of poetry in the age of technology: for instance, the universe is an ‘ocean of electrical energy’ and ‘Dark beings’ come ‘televisioned from the gulfs of night’. (56)

Light/Darkness imagery covers a major portion of the poem. The whole epic can be summarized in Nandakumar’s words as “the revelation of receding Night and the imminent arrival of a greater Dawn” (*Sri Aurobindo: A Critical Introduction* 103). The opening lines of the poem talk about darkness: “IT was the hour before the Gods awake”; “The huge foreboding mind of Night, alone”; and “Lay stretched immobile upon Silence’ marge” (1). And in contrast the last two lines of the poem talk about light and dawn: “Deep-guarded by her mystic folds of light, / And in her bosom nursed a greater dawn” (724).

The whole action of the poem takes place under different shades of light. The titles of some of the Cantos and Books testify to this fact: “The Symbol

Light imagery is used to denote many aspects of the poem. Nandakumar remarks, “Light and Bliss are the only two words possible to describe the Paradise envisioned by . . . Sri Aurobindo” (Dante and Sri Aurobindo 44). On the contrary, darkness is used to talk about the land of Evil and personify Death. Analysing the light and darkness imagery in Savitri Iyengar observes in Indian Writing in English:

Even as Satyavan with Savitri’s help lives down the invasion of Night and Twilight and emerges into the clear light of Day, the human soul too (which is the spearhead of the evolutionary advance), led by the Supreme’s gift of Grace, overcomes the limitations of the Ignorance and the obscurities and contradictions of mental life, and achieves the bliss of divine or superconscient life. (193)

Elemental imagery includes images of the five elements, namely, earth, wind, fire, water and air. The following lines which capture God’s reply to Savitri shows the symbolic depiction of the earth:

Earth shall be my work-chamber and my house,

My garden of life to plant a seed divine.
The mind of earth shall be a home of light,
The life of earth a tree growing towards heaven,
The body of earth a tabernacle of God. (699)

During her early years Savitri expresses her aspiration. The poet writes:

“She keeps her will that hopes to divinize clay” (354). “Clay” here indicates the earthly human nature that aspires to become the divine. In another occasion while debating with Death, Savitri declares: “I have transformed my ill-shaped brittle clay / Into the hardness of a statued soul” (588). Here too “brittle clay” stands for the earthly nature of Savitri which has been transformed into something divine.

In the realm of botanical imagery, Sri Aurobindo has made use of the lotus symbol. According to the age-old Yoga system, the Kundalini (life-force) has to leave from the genitals of a person and rise up little by little through the navel, heart, throat and forehead and finally reach the topmost point of the skull. At this juncture a person is considered enlightened. Practising integral Yoga, Savitri has attained this position: “A Force descended trailing endless lights” and “It entered the mystic lotus in her head, / A thousand-petalled home of power and light” (573). The same force then descends and clears all the decisive centres of the human body:

It stirred in the lotus of her throat of song

It glided into the lotus of her heart

It poured into her navel’s lotus depth
Broke into the cave where coiled World-Energy sleeps
And smote the thousand-hooded serpent Force. (665)

The poet uses the lotus symbol to describe the experience of ecstasy: “As if the choric calyx of a flower”; “A lotus of light-petalled ecstasy / Took shape out of the tremulous heart of things” (679).

When the poet wants to highlight Savitri’s realization of the Cosmic Spirit and Consciousness, he uses botanical imagery:

She was a subconscient life of tree and flower,
The outbreak of the honied buds of spring;
She burned in the passion and splendour of the rose,
She was the red heart of the passion-flower,
The dream-white of the lotus in its pool. (557)

In the domain of cosmic imagery, it is the imagery of the sun which dominates over the other elements such as the moon, stars and other heavenly bodies in Savitri. Nandakumar observes: “When the central symbol is reserved for the active aspect of the Sun, the subsidiary symbols are also based upon the nature of the Sun . . . The Sun and its energy Fire—Surya and Agni—recur in the yoga of Aswapathy and Savitri” (Dante and Sri Aurobindo 134).

Mystical visions are expressed with the help of images of quests, wars and destinations. Like Homer’s and Kazantzakis’ Odysseus, Aswapati undertakes a journey which is not an external but internal one: “A voyager upon uncharted routes”; “Adventuring across enormous realms, / He broke into another Space and Time” (91). He is bound to travel through a world-stair. Pandit writes:
“Representing humanity as he [Aswapati] does, he wants to explore what is beyond and, cutting the cord that ties him to the earth, steps beyond the earth-zone” (Introducing Savitri 23). He passes through the Kingdoms of Subtle Matter, Little Life, Greater Life, Little Mind, Greater Mind and Greater Knowledge. In between, he descends into Night and travels through the world of Falsehood.

The journey motif recurs in the poem. Sri Aurobindo portrays Savitri’s inner journeys as follows: “Then journeying forward through the self’s wide hush / She came into a brilliant ordered Space” (495). Savitri then reaches “a quiet country of fixed mind” (498) where men are “anchored on fixed belief” and “stand on faith as on a rock” (499). But Savitri declares: “This ordered knowledge of apparent things. / Here I can stay not, for I seek my soul” (499). In her search, she seeks the help of higher agents:

O happy company of luminous gods,
Reveal, who know, the road that I must tread

To find the birthplace of the occult Fire
And the deep mansion of my secret soul. (501)

Savitri marries Satyavan and lives with him for a year. At the appointed hour Death approaches him in the forest and takes his soul away. Savitri chases Death and yet another journey begins. On the way Death advises her: “Return to thy body’s shell, thy tie to earth” / “Hope not to win back to thee Satyavan” (587). But an adamant Savitri reveals to Death her strength: “Now in the wrestling of the splendid gods / My spirit shall be obstinate and strong / Against the vast refusal of
the world” (588). She argues with Death: “World-spirit, I was thy equal spirit born. / My will too is a law, my strength a god. / I am immortal in my mortality” (589).

The imagery of struggle is a vital part of mystical poetry. The prominent struggle in this poem takes place between Savitri and Death for recovering Satyavan’s soul which represents humanity. Referring to this fatal struggle, Iyengar remarks: “The day has dawned as other days to all except Savitri; only she knows the struggle ahead, the battle that must be fought and won before the following dawn” (Indian Writing in English 193). What makes this unique is that it is a woman who is engaged in a protracted battle and secondly it is not waged with any physical force. Iyengar writes:

Savitri’s is a similar ordeal, though, being the struggle of a woman and a wife with a power like Yama, it is more excruciatingly tense and vivid, and carries us to the supremest heights of Victory,—Victory over Death, and Love the Victor, and Truth the fruit of Victory. . . . In the ensuing trial of strength—a trial in which a variety of mind-forces and soul-forces are engaged—we have some of the features of the Mahabharata war. (201)

Architectural imagery consisting of descriptions of castles, mansions, dwelling places and so on are often found in mystical poems. For instance, in the following lines the author has made good use of architectural imagery:

A whole mysterious world is locked within.
Unknown to himself he lives a hidden king
Behind rich tapestries in great secret rooms

..........................
In the secret adytm of his inmost soul

Beneath the threshold, behind shadowy gates

Or shut in vast cellars of inconscient sleep. (479)

To highlight the protagonist’s inward travel such images are used in plenty:
“As thus she passed in that mysterious place / Through room and room, through
door and rock-hewn door, / She felt herself made one with all she saw” (525). The
author reports that she entered a mystical cave: “Onward she passed seeking the
soul’s mystic cave. / At first she stepped into a night of God” (522).

Symbolic expressions and fire imagery are used to highlight Savitri’s advance:

Then through a tunnel dug in the last rock
She came out where there shone a deathless sun.
A house was there all made of flame and light

And crossing a wall of doorless living fire
There suddenly she met her secret soul. (525-26)

On his part, Aswapati became capable of receiving visions when “He found the
occult cave, the mystic door” and “entered where the Wings of Glory brood / In the
silent space where all is for ever known” (74).

Words denoting mystical architecture and used by Sri Aurobindo have been
explained in Rand Hicks’ A Savitri Dictionary. These expressions include: “In the
secret adytum of his inmost soul” (479) where “adytum” is “the sacred, innermost
part of a temple” (2); “alcove” (466) which is “a recess in a room, or a shaded
secluded retreat in a garden” (3); “nave” (412) which is “the main body of a
church, the aisle of which is flanked on each side by pillars” (42); “tabernacle”
(475) meaning “a moveable tent or hut; used as a temporary place of worship, a
temple; or the temporary home of the soul” (65); and “labyrinth” (103) which is
“an intricate structure containing inter-communicating passages in confusing
number and complexity, from which one cannot find exit without a guide” (36).

Abstract imagery finds an important place in mystical poetry. Sri
Aurobindo has employed it frequently and Savitri is no exception. But in a general
sense, mystics like Sri Aurobindo reject the idea of abstraction altogether. In letter
of 1946 he argues:

To the mystic there is no such thing as abstraction. Everything
which to the intellectual mind is abstract has a concreteness,
substantially which is more real than the sensible form of an object
or of a physical event. To me, for instance, consciousness is the
very stuff of existence and I can feel it everywhere enveloping and
penetrating the stone as much as man or the animal. A movement, a
flow of consciousness is not to me an image but a fact. (Savitri 738)

But the limitations of languages compel even mystics to use abstract images so that
they can talk about their experiences which are largely ineffable. For this purpose
they use personifications, allegories and figures of speech.

Death is one of the main personifications in Savitri. According to the Hindu
belief, the god of death is known as Yama. In the original legend of Satyavan and
Savitri also one finds death personified as god. Sri Aurobindo follows the same
tradition and has pictured Death as a person. Savitri experiences Death’s presence
at the time of Satyavan’s death: “Something stood there, unearthly, sombre, grand, / A limitless denial of all being / That wore the terror and wonder of a shape” (574). Part Three of the epic is dominated with the looming presence of Death and the arguments between Death and Savitri. During a heated debate, she declares: “O Death, who reasonest, I reason not”; “Reason that scans and breaks, but cannot build”; “I am, I love, I see, I act, I will” (594). At the end of the struggle, Death is defeated and runs away:

His body was eaten by light, his spirit devoured.
At last he knew defeat inevitable
And left crumbling the shape that he had worn

After he fled shunning her dread touch
And refuge took in the retreating Night. (667)

Mystic language upholds the experience of love and considers God as the source of all kinds of love. Sri Aurobindo has highlighted this in his epic poem. Savitri speaks to Death about true love: “My love is not a hunger of the heart, / My love is not a craving of the flesh; / It came to me from God, to God returns” (612). Again, she convinces Death about the strength of love:

My will is greater than thy law, O Death;
My love is stronger than the bonds of Fate:
Our love is the heavenly seal of the Supreme.
Love must not cease to live upon the earth;
For 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. (633)

To conclude, *Savitri* is a poem with a mystical bearing. It proclaims that human beings can attain the divine through constant and continuous search. Aswapati is the forerunner of the human race in that he has proved that it is possible for a human being to aspire for the divine. He has reached higher planes with the help of Yoga and has gained endless knowledge and wisdom.

The focus of this chapter was to examine the epic’s mystical dimension under three headings: Mystical Quest, Mystical Attainment and Mystic Way. The discussion also focused on the images and symbols through which these dimensions are expressed in the poem. This chapter has also tried to show how the major characters, namely, Aswapati, Savitri, Satyavan and Death become instruments in the hands of Sri Aurobindo to convey his philosophy and vision of life. Attempts have also been made to show how images occupy a cardinal position in depicting the different stages in one’s mystical quest. The following chapter discusses the mystical elements in Kazantzakis’ *The Odyssey*. 