CHAPTER VI

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It is very much interesting to remember what Raja Rao writes in praise of Woman, in his famous novel, *The Serpent and The Rope*:

Woman is the earth, air, either, sound; woman is the microcosm of the mind, the articulations of space, the knowing in knowledge; the woman is fire; movement clear and rapid as the mountain stream; the woman is that which seeks against that which is sought. To Mitra she is Varuna. To Indra she is Agni. to Rama she is Sita, and to Krishna she is Radha. Woman is the meaning of the word, the breath, touch, act ... Woman is kingdom, solitude, time; woman is growth, the gods, inheritance; the woman is death, for it through woman that one is born; Woman rules, for it is she, the universe ... The world was made for celebration, for coronation, and indeed even when the king is crowned it is the Queen to whom the kingdom comes ... for even when it is a king that rules, she is the justice, the bender of man in compassion, the confusion of kindness, the sorrowing in the anguish of all ..."
The prayers to the Divine Mother for succour primarily begin with the Devi Suktas in *The Vedas*. Among those who have enriched the treasury of prayers are Kalidasa, Vedanta Desika and Adi Sankara. These prayers are all those of a child holding on to the hem of the mother’s garment, full of impregnable faith, a *Mahaviswasā*, receiving comfort and assurance of guardianship by her mere presence. It is a great beauty that the child sees, for to each child, its mother is the most beautiful personality on the earth. Again and again, these prayers to the divine Mother have helped millions of people to call out to the Mother, envision her personality and receive protection from the very thought that she is here, close to us. Touching upon Tantra, Sri Aurobindo speaks of the need for this childlike faith in *Shakti* as Maheswari, Mahakali, Mahalakshmi and Mahasaraswati:

The faith in the divine *Shakti* must be always at the back of our strength and when she becomes manifest, it must be or grow implicit and complete. ... The intimate feeling of her presence all our being to her workings in and around it is the last perfection of faith in the *Shakti*.\(^2\)
Sri Aurobindo in his *The Future Poetry*, remarks that the future ‘epic creator’ will turn away from the vigorous presentation of external action, and will move inward:

The epics of the soul most inwardly seen, as they will be by an intuitive poetry, are his greatest possible subjects, and it is this supreme kind that we shall expect from some profound and mighty voice of the future. His indeed may be the song of greatest flight that will reveal from the highest pinnacle and with the largest field of vision the destiny of the human spirit and the presence and ways and purpose of the Divinity in man and the universe.³

The protagonists of Prof. Iyengar in these three epics are different persons and personalities, and inhabit different spots of our green earth and at different points of time. And yet, on closer examination, they do not really all that different from one another. As the poet quotes a passage from the noted physicist, Edwin Schrodinger’s essay ‘What is real?’, originally written in 1925, though published only in 1961, in his introduction to *Saga of Seven Mothers*:
A hundred years ago, perhaps, another man sat on this spot
... Like you he was begotten of man and born of woman.
He felt pain and brief joy as you do. Was he someone else? Was it not you yourself? ⁴

In this Vedantic sense of eternal oneness and contemporaneity
that these characters are but so many emanations of the same
Parashakti, taking part in the Yoga Maya or Divine Lila that we
perceive as the world of phenomena.

All the protagonists of the epic-trilogy are truly children
exceptional, presently maidens uncommonly beautiful, and finally
worshipful especially as the Mothers of the Race. As swami
Vivekananda affirmed at Pasadena in California on 18th January 1900:

Now the ideal woman in India is the Mother: the Mother
first, and the Mother last. The word 'woman' calls up to
the mind of the Hindu, Motherhood: and God is called
Mother ...

In the West, the woman is wife ... In the Western home
the wife rules. In an Indian home the Mother rules ...
The name has been called holy once and forever, for what name is there which no lust can ever approach, no carnality ever come near, other than the one word 'Mother'? 5

It can be said that while telling these stories, Prof. Iyengar has consciously made no humourless attempts at cold rationalisation or obsessive or intrusive modernisation. As he tells:

The focus is, not on the externals, the *Itihasic* – *Puranic* machinery or scaffolding, but the intrinsic humanity of the principal characters, their heroic humanity that sometimes reaches truly sublime heights, and the throbbing humanity of these old-world characters that makes them our contemporaries, almost the bone of our bones, and the flesh of our flesh.” 6

Naturally, Prof. Iyengar’s epic-trilogy receives an outpouring of power and glory from the Overhead planes of consciousness when he describes the personalities of his protagonists. They are all like goddesses, lovable and unquestionably human. I cannot help but borrow the words of Sri Aurobindo’s description of Savitri:
A deep of compassion, a hushed sanctuary,
Her inward help unbarred a gate in heaven;
Love in her was wider than the universe.
The whole world could take refuge in her single heart...
At once she was the stillness and the word,
A continent of self-diffusing peace,
An ocean of untrembling virgin fire:
The strength, the silence of the gods were hers. 7

Like Savitri, these protagonists of Prof. Iyengar too, are ‘near to earth’s wideness, intimate with heaven.’

Let me explain briefly about these emanations, and diagnose the kinds of challenges they had to face in life, and their varied reactions and responses.

Firstly, of Sita in Sitayana: Twice rejected by her husband Rama, first on suspicion and wounded pride, second on false gossip. Sita proves her chastity first by fire-baptism and at the second time after giving birth to Lava and Kusa, she prefers to return to her mother, Earth.
Like Rama, Sita is an *avatar* too, the supreme *Shakti’s* divine descent to play the role of sufferance sublime.

Next, from Devahuti to Kannaki in *Saga of Seven Mothers*:

Devahuti’s problem is to persuade her husband Kardama Prajapati, to be true to his progenitor role, accept the responsibilities and the joys of the householder, and not lose himself in askesis all the time. Her patience and perseverance help her to win all round, as the mother of nine wonderful daughters and of Kapila, the boy-*avatar*. Thus she plays well her role as Mother.

Sukanya, for no fault of hers really, is trapped into a misalliance with the aged and blinded Chyavana, who proves an inveterate grouser besides. But she is fire-pure and wise, rises above her lord’s irritations and regrets and self-lacerations, summarily and contemptuously rejects the Aswins’ presumptuous advances, and comes safely through it all, and finds fulfillment as wife and mother. She proves herself a wonderful Mentor inspite of the oddities that come her way.

Devayani is a victim of Kacha’s cold calculation and controlled philandering, and his callous rejection of her love in the end; a victim too of her own flashes of anger and pride, and of Sarmishta’s violence of
feeling and action, her willingness to stoop to conquer, and her flair for egoistic assertion: and a victim, above all, to Yayati’s duplicity and inhumanity. But motherhood is a consolation, a means of fulfillment, and leavens the loneliness of this long-distance traveller in a world bereft of the love that redeems everything. Thus, she is indeed a Beacon.

In the Damayanti-Nala star-crossed history, as in the Sukanya-Chyavana story, celestials mingle in human affairs; and dicing is a new engine of evil ready to wreck happy homes and reduce woman as wife and mother to abject helplessness. But Damayanti is a paragon of sufferance, she is both patient and wise, and her shrewd moves and the play of grace help her to recover in the end all she had lost and in the end she stands as Achiever.

Renuka’s life is half-shadowed by a mysterious fatality, and she marries Bhargava Jamadgni, and bears him five sons including Parashurama, Vishnu’s sixth incarnation. But her lord’s insane jealousy and sentence of death as punishment spark a momentary blaze of revelation of the divinity behind her human mask, and Jamadgni sees his error and accepts her with humility and penitence. Soon after, she loses her lord in the sudden epidemic of violence unleashed by the Haihaya
warlords; and Renuka as a Philosopher par excellence is content to wander in the vast spaces of Bharat, intent on a ministry of service to the faceless millions.

As for Draupadi, sucked as she is in the double gulf of pride, envy and hate between Drupada and Drona, and between the Pandava Five and the Kaurava Hundred, hers is a veritable epic of insult and sufferance and defiance. Of course, Krishna helps the Pandavas to win the Kurukshtre war and thus enables her to redeem her strident oath in the Sabha. Though it proves to be a victory without savour, one appreciates the way Draupadi manages to be a successful Victor.

Angelic Kannaki, abandoned by her husband, Kovalan, - as Damayanti by Yayati, - nevertheless accepts him readily when he returns to her, but only to lose him not long after because of the Madurai goldsmith’s perfidy and the Pandyan King’s thoughtless action. The Furies personified she then becomes a blazing fire and flame of vengeance; and the fire consumes what is evil in Madurai. A fortnight after, she is taken to heaven, and she comes to be deified on earth as Pattini Deivam, Goddess of Chastity, while her spiritual daughter, Manimekalai, embarks on her ministry of Love among the afflicted
millions in town and country, and carries everywhere her redemptive and inexhaustible *Amuda Surabhi*.

Finally, Radha in *Krishna Geetam*, prefers to remain in Brindavan after the *Raasa*, however grievous her loss is. Brindavan is her soul’s choice, and she stays there along with Krishna’s Flute bearing true witness to Krishna’s Ministry of love. Thus she proves herself to be the sole Beloved of Krishna. She knows for sure that hers is but a self-resolved passive role, but it is indeed her alchemic transformational descent from the heights sublime of the Transcendent that will encompass Man’s lift to the Mind of Light.

Thus, the epic-trilogy of Prof. Iyengar is drawn to a cosmic scale and in this the trilogy approximates to the ideal prescribed by Aristotle for the epic. *Paradise Lost* of Milton is described as a ‘racial epic’, as it involves the problem of the entire human race. It is not a story in the strict sense of the term; it is what we call a religious myth. Even though the chief characters, Adam and Eve, are human beings, it does not deal with a human event. *Savitri* of Sri Aurobindo is by no means less in grandeur, as Savitri is not a mere female but a symbol, an ambassadress of eternity. *The Ramayana* characterises Rama an embodiment of *dharma* (*Ramo vigrahavaan dharmah*) and describes Sita as a paradigm
of Indian womanhood. Sita therefore acquires the character of the Indian female archetype that represents the consciousness of more than one woman. So are the other protagonists. Hence the trilogy assumes a cosmic dimension as the issues involved are on a cosmic scale and are not confined to one clime or the other, although the basic fabric of this epic-trilogy is the Hindu ethos. The characters however transcend limitations and are modernised in the hands of the poet, who does so, by taking advantage of certain heroic lines in the original texts. The unmistakably bold utterances of the protagonists serve as a pointer in this direction. It is this touch of modernity that makes these traditional characters like that of Sita, Radha and so on to come alive in flesh and blood on the pages of the epic-trilogy.

The epic in Greece and Rome bases itself on heroic martial exploits, with the glory of martial prowess. But heroism even as a western thinker like Carlyle would have it, is not confined merely to physical valour. Carlyle’s Heroes and Hero Worship is a fine example of it. Even in writing Paradise Lost Milton belittles the role of heroic exploits in his epic. The spirit, which is unconquerable, is greater than mere physical prowess. In Book IX of Paradise Lost Milton therefore hints at his theme, namely, the destiny of Man being superior to the mere clash of weapons, in epics like Iliad or Aeneid. It is precisely this
kind of an attitude that the Hindu epics exhibit. All the acts of valour wherever they are, in Hindu epics, are subordinated to the principle of dharma for which they are enacted. So the Hindu ethos fills the Indian epics with glorification of the Divine or Divine qualities. The epic-trilogy of Prof. Iyengar falls in line with these great Indian epics as it projects the ideal womanhood with all its potentialities. All the three epics conform to the Aryan dictum that Gods reside where women are respected:

_Yatra naaryastu poojyante ramante tatra devatah!_  

All epics ancient or modern deal with the trials and tribulations of mankind in their voyage to progress, secular as well as religious. Be it Valmiki’s _Ramayana_, be it Sri Aurobindo’s _Savitri_, or be it Prof. Iyengar’s _Sitayana_ or _Saga of Seven Mothers_ or _Krishna Geetam_, the same holds good. The constant endeavour of poets, down the memory lane, is the betterment of humanity, whatever be the means.

_The Ramayana_ of Valmiki is a treatise on dharma and shows man the road to a life properly lived. Savitri symbolises the triumph of man over the powers of destruction and darkness. Prof. Iyengar’s epics take her to the awakening of womanhood, for betterment of humanity as
woman who symbolizes the primordial Shakti is in reality the one who can move the world towards progress.

All great epics seem to praise the human spirit, which is unconquerable unlike the human frame, which is mortal. It is not enough that we live but it is necessary that we should lead a life governed by a certain code of conduct, irrespective of the times we live in. Even Milton's Paradise Lost is no exception in this regard as Milton upholds forbearance and fortitude better than physical prowess. Suffering purifies the human soul and all the protagonists of these three epics go through this furnace of suffering to come out pure and to illustrate to others how one ought to lead his or her life. They rightly point out that the actions of noble souls are emulated as people at large consider them exemplary to their own code of conduct.

Yadyadaacharati sreyanitarastatta deehate!
Sa yat pramaanam kurute lokastadanuvartate!! ⁹

In Dante's Divine Comedy we find that Beatrice as a symbol is more usefully employed than Beatrice as a legend. The Divine Comedy deals with the conditions of the human soul, particularly after death, and the conditions of man.
Aristotle suggests that an epic should have a certain magnitude and the epic-trilogy of Prof. Iyengar does not lag behind in this respect although the three epics are Hindu epics savouring of Indianess. They are the tracts of Hindu ethos and do not enshrine western values. Iyengar however transcends geographical boundaries by taking humanity as one and treating the issues of humanity as universal. His roots are Hindu, but his argument extends much farther than this. He sings of womanhood by taking the best example that could be presented, namely-Sita, Devahuti, Sukanya, Devayani, Damayanti, Renuka, Draupadi Kannaki and Radha.

The epics in the west as well as in the east deal with semi-divine or divine characters in the human form as avatars to man what the ideal ought to be, as man's vision is likely to be circumscribed by the here and now. Here these protagonists are not of this world at all; they are the denizens of the Heavenly Abode. They choose to come into this world, if only to set an example of perfection to be imitated and emulated by others. Their virtues make them unparalleled and exemplary. They are the crown gems of unexcelled brilliance among women of all climes and of all times.
The descent of the Divine into a human mould – the drama of the Divine accepting the limitations of the terrestrial play – the entanglement of the divine in the love of the devotees – these comprise the eternal theme of *The Bhagavata* and other *puranas*. Likewise the lives of the god-intoxicated saints and singers are the warp and woof of a significant portion of the world's literature.

The old myths often return touched with a new radiance and immediacy of appeal. George Seferis, the Nobel Laureate, has explored ancient Greek Myths in a modern context. T.S.Eliot’s *The Family Reunion* is a fresh rendering of the myth of *The Eumenides* of Aeschylus. The Ulysses myth figures in Joyce’s immense novel, in *The Cantos* of Ezra Pound and in Kazantzakis’s modern epic. And Sri Aurobindo has retold the magnificent Savitri story, which is a very gem, imbedded in *The Mahabharata*, in mighty sweeps of thought and realisation and in *mantric* heaves of spiritual intensity and glow. To read poems like *Savitri*, the epic-trilogy of Prof. Iyengar, it is verily to invade the invisible and share a new vision and a new hope, and indeed to participate in the drama of the Divine in our minds:

This earth is full of the anguish of the gods.

Ever they travail driven by time’s goad,
And strive to work out the eternal will
And shape the life divine in mortal forms.\textsuperscript{10}

As it is said of Sri Aurobindo’s \textit{Savitri}, Prof. Iyengar’s epic-trilogy too contains worlds within worlds and yet each and every line in the trilogy is connected with the rest of the text in a subtle manner. We can turn the pages at random and allow our eyes to rest on a line somewhere in the epics. A little meditation and suddenly we have in our hands the instrument ‘to connect’. Once again as it has rightly been said with regard to the Aurobindonian world-view as projected in his magnum opus, \textit{Savitri}, in Iyengar’s epics too, the centre is everywhere, the circumference nowhere.

Sita, Devahuti, Sukanya, Devayani, Damayanti, Renuka, Draupadi, Kannaki and Radha all symbolise a Rainbow of Arc, an arching movement, an essaying of evolutionary growth in the person, psyche and personality of the feminine half (and by implication, juxtaposition and interaction, of the other masculine half too), and thus of the continuing human adventure pressing hopefully towards the new humanity, the supramental New Woman and New Man prophesied in \textit{Savitri}:
The Mighty Mother shall take birth in Time
And God be born into the human clay
In forms made ready by your human lives…

All then shall change, a magic order come
Overtopping this mechanical universe…

Thus shall the earth open to divinity
And common natures feel the wide uplift,
Illumine common acts with the Spirit’s ray
And meet the deity in common things.”

If it is Sri Aurobindo, who, as in the words of Dr. (Mrs.) Prema Nandakumar, “has laid the foundations of Indian Feminism which is very much the need of the hour today”\(^{12}\), then it is Prof. Iyengar, who, as a great admirer and true follower, has continued the legacy and has carried forward this glorious tradition by successfully portraying the Indian Feminism in his Epic-trilogy.
NOTES


