CHAPTER VI

SAVITRI — AS AN EPIC

I

The Nature of the Epic:

The epic appears to be the oldest literary genre in the history of European literature. It may be defined as a long narrative poem, written in homorhythm or its equivalent, concentrating either on a hero like Achilles or on a civilization like Rome. It seems to deal with heroic actions and characters sustained by tradition and implicated in the life-ways of a people. C.M. Bowra defines the epic poetry thus:

"An epic is by common consent a narrative of some length and deals with events which have a certain grandeur and importance and come from a life of action, especially of violent action such as war. It gives a special pleasure because its events and persons enhance our belief in the worth of human achievement and in the dignity and nobility of man". 1

Though the epic may have the supernatural elements it is primarily concerned with the depiction of men and their actions. Aristotle also says that the epic is an
imitation of a great and complete action which attaches itself to the destiny of mankind. This action must be single and entire with a beginning, a middle and an end. It opens in the middle of things and the rest is fitted into the scheme of action by means of retrospective narration. This principle is seen exemplified both in the oral as well as in the literary epics. Savitri, too, maintains this epic tradition. It begins with the description of the fatal day on which Satyavan is to die. The opening canto thus leads us to the imminent crisis in the life of the central character Savitri and the rest of the poem narrates her birth, growth, marriage and her encounter with death.

The two types of the epic:

The Iliad, The Odyssey, The Aeneid and Paradise Lost are all epic poems, but there is an important distinction to be made. The first two are called 'primary' and the latter 'secondary'. By 'primary' epic is meant that type of poetry which stems directly from the heroic deeds and is composed in order that such deeds may not be forgotten. It narrates the events of a real world, however much glamour may be imparted in the process.
The primary epic, says C.S. Lewis, is oral poetry. By oral poetry he means "poetry that reaches its audience through the medium of recitation". A manuscript in the background would not alter its oral character so long as the manuscript was a prompt copy for the reciter. The question is, were Homer's epics composed for recitation? It is obvious that both of them are too long to be recited as wholes. It, however, seems that the bard was familiar with the practice of serial or selective recitation from the poem which was too long to be recited at a stretch in its entirety. Therefore, we may say that Homer's epics were serially recited by relays of rhapsodists.

The secondary epic may be said to be a poem composed at leisure, fully revised and available for reading and re-reading. In it the element of story, which was of vital importance in the primary epic, is reduced to the level of being only one among many components. Much is imagined and imaginary so that a new world is created. The combination of the poet's vision and his personal style together create something which is not based on reality but has a life of its own. Thus, in Paradise Lost, the site of Paradise with its cedar threes is described and then:
Yet higher than their tops
The verdurous wall of Paradise up sprang;
Which to our general Sire gave prospect large.
Into his nether Empire neighbouring round.
And higher than that wall a circling row
Of goodliest trees load in with fairest fruit,
Blossoms and fruits at once of golden hue;
Appear'd with gay enamelled colours mixed.

This is the newly created world of imagination which we have no right to expect from Homer.

The secondary epic also deals with more abstract themes than the primary epic does. It is true that The Iliad refers to the wrath of Achilles in the abstract and not merely the siege of Troy; but the wrath is clearly depicted in the events, which themselves form a strong narrative base. In The Aeneid and still more, in Paradise Lost, it is the theme that dominates and incidents are introduced simply to execute the intention of the poet.

Thus, both the 'primary' and the 'secondary' epics differ in the theme as well as in the technique. But neither kind is better than the other. To quote C. H. Dowra again, "If the oral epic triumphs through its simplicity and straightforwardness, through the unhesitating sweep of its narrative and a brilliant clarity in its main effects, the written epic appeals by its poetical texture, by its exquisite or apt or impressive choice of words, by the rich significance of phrases and lines and paragraphs."
Both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are bardic poems designed to interest an audience which looked to the bard for entertainment. The bard carried in his head many stories about the heroic past and the audience might ask for any one which they happened to have fancy for or the bard might tell whatever he pleased. Though such stories appeared to be based on facts, they were not strictly historical. The bard described not what happened but, as Aristotle said, the kind of thing that was likely to happen. He was deeply concerned with men, their deeds and their passions.

When the bard was called upon to recite a story he did not play back as it were a tape-recording. He drew on two sources: his knowledge of the story as transmitted by his predecessors and his knowledge of certain poetic formulae which centuries of bardic singing has proved useful and convenient. These formulae were useful because they covered a wide range of heroic activity and convenient because they fitted appropriately into the hexameter line. They might extend to a whole paragraph or a passage may be a skilful pastiche of smaller section of formulaic diction. The bard also had at his disposal different epithets for...
each of his major characters.

Though Homer uses the traditional formulae, their effect on the imagination is profound. It is mainly due to two factors. First, the mere repetition of phrases creates an illusion of genuineness and reality. Secondly, only those characters are introduced whose actions are heroic and credible.

Homer draws the picture of human life at a high intensity of impulse and action. "When we read the Iliad and the Odyssey", says Sri Aurobindo, "we are not really upon this earth, but on the earth lifted into some plane of a greater dynamics of life, and so long we remain there we have a greater vision in a lustrous air and we feel ourselves raised to a semi-divine stature". As a scholar of classical literature Sri Aurobindo himself had a direct access to the Homeric epics. Like Homer, he plans his Savitri on a cosmic plane, links this earth with many occult worlds and raises us to a divine stature.

In their method of narration both The Iliad and The Odyssey presume an audience acquainted with the main outlines of their stories. The poet composes for those listeners who are familiar with the characters and their
histories. On this depends his allusiveness and seeming disregard for much that is common in the story-telling.

Sri Aurobindo, too, sticks to this method of narration and adopts the popular story of Savitri and Satyavan which apparently alludes to the triumph of Love over Death.

Homer's epics abound in repetitions which consist of three classes. First, there are repeated phrases and single lines. Secondly, the groups of lines are repeated with or without any differences. Thirdly, there are passages in which the same or similar event is repeated under different circumstances. All the three types of repetitions are the important features in the epic structure. C.M. Bowra says:

"Each has a function calculated for a listening audience, but the poet has turned this function to other uses. With his recurring lines and epithets he can not only rest the mind, he can prepare an atmosphere. With his recurring passages, he can give one emotional colour here and another there, and by reminiscence of an earlier scene he can implicitly point a contrast. With his recurring themes he puts his material to many uses, and gives an old story new life in new and different forms."

Like the Homeric epics, Savitri is full of repetitions of the same phrases, images, ideas or situations. Sri Aurobindo justifies them thus:

"The repetitions 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... He (the mystic poet) uses 'avvttii', repetition, as one of the powerful means of carrying home what has he thought or seen and fixing it in the mind in an atmosphere of light and beauty. 

Virgil's Aeneid:

Unlike Homeric epics, the Aeneid is an epic of a nation. Virgil is not concerned with individuals and their destinies; he depicts the destiny of a nation. He emphasises not the character of Aeneas, but the foundation of Rome. Aeneas struggles and suffers for Rome and so he stands for what a Roman hero is. He owes something to Homeric precedent in being a great warrior and a devout servant of the Gods. But he has taken on a new personality and becomes the true child of Virgil's imagination.

The Aeneid is 'an artificial epic' in which the dominant motif is the theme. But Virgil does not give up the narrative framework of Homer's epics. He uses a number of devices to express the history of Rome. Some of them are also used by Homer, though in a different manner. In The Iliad, for instance, Achilles's mother, Thetis, procures for him a new set of armour including a shield. Similarly, in The Aeneid, Venus presents a similar shield
to Aeneas. But here the scenes are carefully chosen to give a purview of Roman history. Thus, Virgil adopts Homer's device for his own purpose.

There are mainly two remarkable qualities of Virgil's style. One is the technique of 'enlargement' whereby he makes every incident appear to be grand. The second is the poet's ability to evoke a mood which is often most delicately done. The attentive reader may be surprised by the way in which the local colours echo the emotional key of the poem.

Like Virgil, Sri Aurobindo is an assiduous artist who revisions his poem again and again to make it a perfect work of art. Further, like Virgil, he employs the technique of 'enlargement' to explain in detail the subtle significance of each incident. Justifying the length of his poem, Sri Aurobindo writes:

"One artistic method is to select a limited subject and even on that to say only what is indispensable, what is centrally suggestive and leave the rest for the imagination or understanding of the reader. Another method which I hold to be equally artistic or, if you like, architectural is to give a large and even a vast, a complete interpretation, omitting nothing that is necessary, fundamental to the completeness; that is the method I have chosen in Savitri."

Ponte's The Divine Comedy:

Ponte writes an epic of the human soul and thereby gives a new dimension to epic poetry. He evolves a new
technique of fusing allegory and philosophy in poetry. His

The Divine Comedy is literally a voyage through Hell,
Purgatory and Heaven; but allegorically, it is a search for
the understanding of the order and the nature of universe.

It appears that the characters of The Divine Comedy
have more than one meaning. Dante is an individual soul but
he also represents all mankind. Similarly, Virgil stands
for Reason or Philosophy and Roman empire and Beatrice may
be considered as Revelation or Theology or the Church. The
Divine Comedy is, thus, an allegory which includes the
philosophical, astrological, theological and political
thoughts of the time. But these abstract thoughts are
represented in a simple, lucid and living language. Indeed,
with Dante, even ideas tend to assume a concrete form.

Like The Divine Comedy, Savitri is an epic of the soul
that fuses the philosophy and poetry in a symbolic language.
The mystic travels of Aswapathy and Savitri may be
apparently connected with the journey of Dante. Aswapathy
descends into the realm of Matter and sees the process of
evolution as well as the perversion of human life into the
Night. It reminds us of Dante's descent into Hell in its broader
outline. Dante sees the penitents purging their sins through
prayer and coming to the tree of Knowledge. Aswapathy, too,
apprehends mankind aspiring to get rid of Matter's weight
by pigmy thought, intelligence and reason. Further, like Dante, Aswathy ascends to the heavens of the ideal, glimpses the world-soul and meets The Divine Mother. In the same way, Savitri also traverses the Hell of the Eternal Night, the Purgatory of Double Twilight and the Paradise of Everlasting Day. But here the comparison ends. Having achieved his personal salvation Aswathy questions The Divine Mother and wrests from Her a promise to remove the budge of pain from the earth. We may, however, say that both Sri Aurobindo and Dante, writing in their respective cultural milieu, reveal a total vision of the cosmos.

**The Renaissance epic:**

Camões, Ariosto, Tasso and Spenser are said to be the great epic poets of the Renaissance. Their works are serious, expansive and touched by the colours of romance and chivalry. Above all, they are Christian in their inspiration. Camões's *Os Lusíadas* is the story of his country from its beginning to his own time. The central theme of the poem is Vasco da Gama's discovery of the sea-route to India. Around his voyage the poet weaves the threads of the Portuguese history.

Camões seems to be deeply influenced by the humanism of the Renaissance. He is a humanist in his association of a pagan mythology with a Christian outlook, in his
conflicting feelings about war and empire, in his love of home and his desire for adventure. He equates Portugal both with Christianity and the classical tradition. C.M. Bowra aptly says: "Oe Lusiadas is a true product of that Europe, Christian and Classical, of which Camões was so faithful and so distinguished a son."

Ariosto's Orlando Furioso has the original Ronald as its hero, but almost completely transformed. It has been influenced by the French romances of Chivalry and courtly love. It is organised, like Dante's epic, into Cantos. The poet has revised it carefully so that its style appears to be magnificent. It is, in short, more a romance than an epic and as such it has immensely influenced the style of Spenser.

Tasso's Gerusalemme Liberata is a Christian epic not only in its subject but also in its sentiments. The opening lines suggest its theme:

The sacred armies, and the godly knight
That the great sepulchre of Christ did free.
(Fairfax)

Tasso writes not about a country but about a cause, and his main figure is memorable by what he does for that cause. His crusaders fight for the Cross and when they die for it they are honoured as martyrs. Camões identifies the conception of the Christian warriors with that of the
patriotic Portuguese. But Tasso makes it clear that his soldiers fight for religion.

Spenser's *The Faerie Queen* is a typical product of the Renaissance. As such it combines something of Ariosto's exuberance with the patriotic temper of Tasso. Yet it may be considered as a national poem based on English legend and carrying on the national poetic traditions. It intends to honour the English Queen and her courtiers who played the significant role in shaping the destiny of England. It also describes the world of chivalry 'to fashion a gentleman or noble person in virtuous or gentle discipline'.

On this conception Spenser moulds his plot. Prince Arthur has seen in a vision Guionia, the Faerie Queen and, ravished by her beauty, resolves to seek her out in the fairy land. The adventures that befall him on the way form the main stream of the plot. The poem is divided into twelve books which glorify twelve moral virtues as devised by Aristotle in his *Ethics*.

Spenser's art varies from homeliness to splendour, from the remoteness of romance to the realistic suggestion of common life. His greatness as an artist is seen not in the one sphere or the other, but in the fusion of the two. In this lies the secret of his style which is the expression of
his unique personality. The diction of his epic is the nature product of his peculiar poetic temperament.

Like Spenser, Sri Aurobindo has a synthetic approach to the presentation of life. He links the earthly life with the Life Divine and harmonises the external realities with the inner experience of the soul. Despite this fact, Savitri and The Faerie Queen are two different types of poetry. The former is symbolical, while the latter is allegorical in form. Further, The Faerie Queen brings out the ethical meaning of human life, whereas Savitri unfolds the spiritual significance of human existence. Describing the poetic qualities of Spenser, Sri Aurobindo writes:

"His (Spenser's) was to have been a rich and beautiful romance and at the same time a great interpretation by image and symbol not here of the spiritual but of the ethical meaning of human life. A fairy-tale and an ethical symbol in one is his conception of his artistic task." 10

Milton's Paradise Lost:

Paradise Lost is neither a national epic nor a work of romance and allegory. Like The Divine Comedy, it is the epic of human soul which includes our entire planet in its range. Based on puritan theology it aims to justify the ways of God to men. Thus, Milton fuses theology and poetry in Paradise Lost. To quote C. H. Bowra, "Before him the best literary epic had been predominantly secular;
he made it theological, and the change of approach meant a great change of temper and of atmosphere. 11

In its form, Paradise Lost looks back directly to Homer and Virgil. Originally written in ten books, the material was reorganised into twelve. The action begins with the war in heaven already fought and the rebel angels in Hell, so that the events of the war have to be narrated in the best Homeric manner, as a 'flashback' in Book VI. The poem opens as it should, with an invocation and it abounds in epic conventions. But Milton transforms the familiar features of the traditional epic. In this respect C. M. Bowra writes:

"In Paradise Lost we find all familiar features of the epic such as war, single combats, perilous journey, beautiful gardens, marvellous buildings, visions of the world and of the future, expositions of the structure of the universe and scenes in Heaven and in Hell. Yet all these are so transformed that their significance and their aesthetic appeal are new". 12

Milton has evolved a sublime style to interpret his theme. C. S. Lewis is of opinion that this sublimity is due to three factors:

"As far as Milton is concerned... this grandeur is produced mainly by three things. (1) The use of slightly unfamiliar words and constructions including archaisms. (2) The use of proper names... (3) Continued allusion to all the sources of heightened interest in our sense"
experience (light, darkness, storm, flower, jewels, sexual love and the like), but all overtopped and managed with an air of magnanimous austerity.13

We may trace a similarity between Savitri and Paradise Lost. Like Paradise Lost, Savitri begins with the beginning of the creation, deals with man and his destiny on earth and treats its theme into twelve books. Paradise Lost ends with an entry into a new world where man can redeem his fault by hard effort. The end of Savitri also promises 'a greater dawn', the dawn of the Supermind, which will help man to get his self-perfection. Besides, the styles of both Milton and Sri Aurobindo are criticised for some reasons or the other. Milton is deprecated by the Eliot-Pound group for his Latinism and inflated ritualistic style-lacking intimacy; Sri Aurobindo is criticised by his critics like P. Lal for the incantatory powers of his verse. In spite of this fact, there is a difference between the two. Paradise Lost interprets human life in the light of Christian theology. Savitri explains it as a process of spiritual descent and ascent. Milton thinks that Paradise can be regained by one who attains self-mastery by controlling his thoughts; but Sri Aurobindo emphasises that one has to realise his secret soul to achieve the status of one's lost divinity.
Epic Poetry in India:

The Indian epics seem to have their origin in the hymns of the Vedas, where narrative verse was quite familiar to the bard. Ballad singing and recitation of old sagas, which are said to be the popular features of the Aryan society, also contribute to the growth of epic poetry in India. The Ramayana and The Mahabharata are described as the great epics of India. The former is called the 'adikavya' and the latter an 'Itihasa'. Regarding both of them as 'Itihasas' Sri Aurobindo writes:

"The Itihasa was an ancient historical or legendary tradition turned to creative use as a significant mythos or tale expressive of some spiritual or religious or ethical or ideal meaning and thus formative of the mind of the people. The Mahabharata and The Ramayana are Itihasas of this kind on a large scale and with a massive purposes". 14

Both The Ramayana and The Mahabharata have some common characteristics which lead the scholars to consider them together. For instance, both of them have an enormous length, depict the strife of the gods and the Titans and use the couplet of sixteen syllabed lines. However, they differ in the use of the language. Sri Aurobindo brings out this difference thus:
There is a difference in the temperament of the language. The characteristic diction of The Mahabharata is almost austere and masculine, trusting to force of sense and inspired accuracy, almost ascetic in its simplicity and directness and a frequent fine and happy baroness. It is a speech of strong and rapid poetical intelligence and a great and straightforward vital force, brief and telling in phrase... The diction of The Ramayana is shaped in a more attractive mould, a marvel of sweetness and strength, lucidity and warmth and grace. Its phrase has not only poetic truth and epic force and diction but a constant intimate vibrations of the feeling of the idea, emotion or object; there is an element of fine ideal delicacy in its sustained strength and breath of power. 15

These great Indian epics have deeply influenced the Indian society. They give us a historical account of the period of colonisation in the valleys of Ganges and Jumna. Further, they are the store-house of beautiful episodes from which almost all great Indian writers have adopted some episodes to present their point of view. Sri Aurobindo himself chooses the episode of Savitri and Satyavan to show that Death can be conquered by a human soul.

The later literary epics of Aswaghosha and Kalidasa are called 'Kāvyas' and as such they differ from the Itihasa in two respects. First, they are comparatively short in length and secondly their style is highly artificial. According to Dandin the Kāvyas must have the following
characteristics:

"That the subject should be taken from the traditions, not therefore invented; the hero should be noble and clever; there should be the descriptions of towns, oceans, mountains, the rising and setting of the Sun and the Moon, sport in the park or the sea, drinking, love-feasts, separations, marriages, the production of a son, meeting of councils, embassies, campaigns, battles and the triumph of the hero, though his rival's merit may be exalted." 16

The Great Indian epics and Savitri:—
The Mahabharata:—

The Mahabharata narrates the story of how the branches of the same family, the Kauravas and the Pandavas, fought over disputed patrimony. The original form of the epic is not known. It appears that other stories are interwoven with it. We may cite only a few illustrations to trace this process of interpolation. When the two opposing parties are drawn up for battle, the hero Arjuna faces the prospect of killing his kinsmen. He sits down, dejected and uncertain as to what he should do, and at this point Lord Krishna admonishes him. Out of his admonitions grow the eighteen chapters of The Gita. Or again, the hero Dhiarma is dying; a moralistic discourse is put into his mouth and this discourse grows to hundreds of chapters.

The extant Mahabharata consists of eighteen books which are followed by a final book in three parts called the
Harivamsa. The first book deals with the origins in general and in particular it describes the birth and childhood of the heroes of the Mahabharata. The epic proper begins in the second book. The scene is a gaming hall at the court of the Kauravas. Yudhishthira loses his Kingdom in a game of dice and consequently, he, along with his brothers and wife, has to go into exile to the forest.

The Forest Book, that describes the exile, is full of stories told to relieve the tedium of life in the woods. It includes the famous story of Savitri, the prototype of the faithful wife. The next four books describe the war with the Kauravas. Most of the Kauravas are said to be routed or slain, sometimes through treachery. In the tenth book, it is said that those Kauravas, who somehow survived, mounted a night-attack in which the army of the Pandavas was killed but the five brothers were fortunately saved.

The war seems to be over, but somehow Bhima survives to preach, in next two books, long sermons on ethics and philosophy. The basic story ends in the fourteenth book, wherein Yudhishthira is restored to the empire. The next books narrate a variety of events and the last two books recount the story of the Pandavas giving up their kingdom and ascending to Heaven.
As a conglomerate of bardic stories and legends, The Mahābhārata does not have the inner and formal integrity of a planned epic. Even when these stories cluster around the core of the story of the war, the general structure remains loose. It may reasonably be asked: How could a loose collection of epical cycles attain such a high position? The answer is not far to seek. The Mahābhārata is considered as the founding library of Brahmin – Indian civilisation. It includes history, legend, religion, art, morality and drama. To Sri Aurobindo, it is an epic of the soul on a vast scale:

"The Mahabharata especially is not only the story of the Bharatas, ... but on a vast scale the epic of the soul and ethical mind and social and political ideals and cultural and life of India. It is said popularly of it and with a certain measure of truth that whatever is in India is in The Mahabharata.

Like The Mahābhārata, Savitri is an epic of the soul which elucidates the origin and the ultimate destiny of man on the earth. But unlike The Mahābhārata its structure is well-knit and logically executed. Moreover, it has not the terseness and colloquial qualities of The Mahābhārata. In short, we may say that whereas The Mahābhārata expresses the religious, ethical, social and political thoughts of ancient India, Savitri aims to reveal only the spiritual significance of man's life on the earth."
The Ramayana: —

Valmiki is the First Poet, adikavi, even though his work lacked the refinement and precision of the later literary epic. He excels in leisurely description of natural scenery, the beauties of palaces and the grandeur of the forest. He also delights in poetic elegies and has a poet's sense of a woman's heart.

The Ramayana appears to be a kind of a vast romance; but it is also a popular book whose influence is still very strong in India. It represents the civilisation of Dharma. Ayodhya, the capital of Dasaratha, is a microcosm of the world. King Dasaratha is entrapped in an intrigue from which he can escape only by breaking his word. But such a breach of faith would strike at the root of Dharma itself. By insisting on the fact that Dasaratha should remain true to his words, Rama becomes the very symbol of Dharma.

Valmiki, however, has related Dharma to love and compassion. Almost all forms of love are illustrated in The Ramayana. Rama has the filial piety for his father and Lakshmana is the epitome of all the qualities of a self-effacing brother. Sītā appears to be an illustrious 'pativrata' who adores her husband as lord and shares his fortune as well as misfortune in the course of life. Like Sītā, Savitri is a devoted wife who risked her life to save
her beloved husband whom she worshipped as a god.

Savitri, has, thus, an affinity with *The Ramayana*. It is, Sri Aurobindo says, planned like *The Ramayana* on a smaller scale:

"It has been planned not on the scale of Lycidas or Comus or some brief narrative poem, but of the larger epical narrative, almost a minor, though a very minor *Ramayana*."18

Savitri has the architectural structure of the *Ramayana*. But it does not interpret the tenets of the Dharma. Written in an age of science and technology it attempts to explain the destiny of man on the earth.

IV

Savitri – as an epic of the soul:–

*Savitri* is neither a national epic, nor an epic of romance and chivalry, but an inner epic of the higher consciousness. It illustrates all the principles of epic poetry which are enunciated by Abercrombie. To begin with, Abercrombie considers that the epic poet must have "an ability to see in particular human experience some significant symbolism of man's general destiny".19 This is exactly what Sri Aurobindo has done in *Savitri*, viz., he has universalised the issue of human destiny as involved in the personal experience of Savitri and Satyavan.
Secondly, regarding the theme of the epic, Abercrombie has remarked that it should deal with the authentic material:

"The prime material of the epic poet, then, must be real and not invented... The reality of the central subject is, of course, to be understood broadly. It means that the story must be founded deep in general experience of men."

Sri Aurobindo selects the story of Savitri who is said to have conquered death to save the life of her lord. The conquest of Death is considered to be a probable phenomenon and so Sri Aurobindo has made it the central motif of his epic.

Thirdly, Abercrombie suggests that the epic poet should show the man's purpose in the world:

"It is of man, and of man's purpose in the world that the epic poet has to sing, not of the purpose of gods. The gods must only illustrate man's destiny, and they must be kept within the bounds of beautiful illustration."

This is exactly the guiding principle of Sri Aurobindo's epic. Savitri is said to be the epic of the soul which Sri Aurobindo describes thus:

"The epics of the soul most inwardly seen as they will be an intuitive poetry, are not greatest possible subject and it is this supreme kind that we shall expect from some profound and mighty voice of the future. His indeed 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.\textsuperscript{22}

As an epic of the soul \textit{Savitri} narrates the adventures of the Spirit from the Inconscience to the Super-conscious and prophesies that man is to emerge as the superman after the descent of the Supermind in the terrestrial consciousness. Its action takes place in the soul of man. For instance, Aswapathy travels through the limitless extensions of the psyche and Savitri conquers Death in the sphere of her soul.

The range of \textit{Savitri} is as wide as the cosmos itself. It abridges the gap between Nescience and the Superconscience and explains the hierarchy of occult worlds which comes between the two. The amplitude of \textit{Savitri} is long enough to show that the Life Divine can be established on the earth and the human beings shall be transformed into the gnostic beings in the light of Supramental consciousness.

\textit{Savitri} has the vastness and the comprehensiveness of the \textit{Vedas} and \textit{The Upanishads}. Both the \textit{Vedas} and the \textit{Upanishad} reveal that Brahman is the ultimate Reality and it is He who has manifested the Universe. Therefore, this world is real and a veritable source of Delight. The lay men, however, are unable to enjoy the bliss of the Divine in the world because they are tied to Ignorance. But
Sri Aurobindo is able to realise the Absolute as the substratum of the universe and experience the Ananda of Sachchidananda through the Integral Yoga. So he records his realisations of the Reality in Savitri:

"Savitri is a record of seeing of an experience, which is not of common kind, and it is often very far from what the general mind sees or experiences". 23

Savitri, in short, is an inner epic of the Overmind experiences which unveils the true nature of the earthly existence and unfolds the mystic path that leads us to the realm of the transcendent Divine. It certainly enlarges the horizon of epic poetry by raising it to the summit of unique spiritual perception. Lotika Ghose rightly says:

"In The Iliad we have the highest reach of the Hellenic mind. In The Divine Comedy we have the highest attainment of Christian mystical experience; in Paradise Lost we have the highest elevation of Christian ethical striving. Unlike these, Savitri has the clarity of direct revelation which is the characteristic of the Vedas and the Upanishads. It has therefore the utterness of the speech of the Spiritual and not the glimmering beauty of mystical experience, it is not the sybil who speaks here but the seer". 24

V

The Limitations of Savitri:-

Savitri is deprecated by the modern critics for some of their own reasons. We may discuss its criticism under
four heads. First, it is observed that Savitri has an unnecessarily enormous length. An American critic considers it as one of "the longest and worst epic poems of all time".25 It is a poem twice as long as Paradise Lost and yet it remains incomplete. It gives disproportionate importance to the Yoga of Aswapathy which is mainly responsible for the loose structure of the poem.

Savitri, however, has its own carefully built structure. It opens with The Symbol Dawn which introduces us to Savitri who has determined to defeat Death. To explain that Savitri is an emanation of The Divine Mother, the poet has to describe the Yoga of Aswapathy. The Yoga of Aswapathy is narrated in detail because it prepares the ground for the descent of the Divine Grace to divinise the earthly life. It, also, interprets the mystic process of ascent and descent. Obviously, it requires a long space to trace the process of the ascent of the soul from Matter to the Overmind where it receives the Divine Grace and Calls Her to come down to the physical world. Aswapathy's Yoga is significant because it is responsible for the birth of Savitri.

Secondly, it is charged that Savitri is too much loaded with philosophy. Sri Aurobindo defends that philosophy can be the subject of poetry provided it is a living one. In Savitri, we do not have the intellectual perception, but...
intuitive vision which comes in the domain of all great epics. Commenting on the use of philosophy in Savitri, Sri Aurobindo says:

"The thinking is not intellectual but intuitive or more than intuitive, always expressing a vision, a spiritual contact or a knowledge which has come by entering into the thing itself by identity." 26.

Thirdly, Savitri is assailed for having too much repetitive elaboration. The same features (journey, exposition, forecast) recur and certain words (golden, nude, sun, moon, fire, ocean, Void etc.) tend to occur again and again. In a mystic poem of such a magnitude, repetitions are not objectionable. A mystic poet, Sri Aurobindo says, uses repetition as one of the most powerful means of carrying home what has been thought and seen and fixing it in the mind of the reader. Savitri, a mystic epic, employs repetitions for this purpose.

Finally, to some critics, the language of Savitri is vague, obscure and rhetorical. P. Lal has condemned the verse of Savitri as 'slushy' and advised the contemporary poets to remain aloof from the "weak-spined and purple-adjectived spiritual poetry". 27 But this is only a partial criticism. Sri Aurobindo's use of the language varies according to the nature of the emotion and experience. Even the so-called abstract words are used as concrete
realities in Savitri. Commenting on the use of the abstract words like the Inconscient and Ignorance Sri Aurobindo writes:

"The Inconscient and the Ignorance may be mere empty abstraction and can be dismissed as irrelevant jargon if one has not come into collision with them or plunged into their dark and bottomless reality. But to me, they are realities, concrete powers whose resistance is present everywhere and at all times in its tremendous and boundless mass. 23

Sri Aurobindo also emphasises that his language is not rhetorical:

"I have not anywhere in Savitri written anything for the sake of mere picturesque ness or merely to produce a rhetorical effect; what I am trying to do everywhere in the poem is to express exactly something seen, something felt or experienced; if, for instance, I indulge in the wealth-burdened line or passage, it is not merely for the pleasure of the indulgence, but because there is that burden, or at least what I conceive to be that, in the vision or the experience". 29

Savitri is a mystic epic of the Yogic consciousness which requires a higher perception for its appreciation. A careless reader may fail to grasp the full meaning and enjoy the beauty and charm of the poem. Sri Aurobindo is aware of this fact and so he writes:

"But if I had to write for the general reader I could not have written Savitri at all. It is, in fact, for myself that I have written it and for those who can lend themselves to the subject matter, images, techniques of mystic poetry". 30
Sri Aurobindo proposes to translate what he calls his intuitive perception into the poetic reality. So one may ask: Is he successful in his aim? It seems that he succeeds eminently in rendering his abstract thought into a poetic experience. He uses the concrete images profusely from the contemporary society to objectify his vision. Here a few images are cited to illustrate and substantiate this point.

The poet perceives that in moments of inspiration and intuition, a person may fly up in the realms of the ideals, but shortly he is pulled down by the dark forces of Nescience. He says that like a child who learns to walk, this person cannot go to a long distance:

Only a while at first these heavenly states,
These large wide-poised uprisings could endure.

As a child who learns to walk and walk not long,
Replace the titan will for ever to climb,
On the heart's altar dim the sacred fire.

The archetypal image of the tree is employed to express the origin of the world:

In the immutable nameless Origin
Was seen emerging as from fathomless seas
The trial of the Ideas that made the world,
And, sown in the black earth of Nature's trance,
The seed of the Spirit's blind and huge desire
From which the tree of cosmos was conceived
And spread its magic arms through a dream of space.
Savitri reveals that in the darkness of mind, the voice of the Light, like the tread of a thief in the dark night, will be heard and man shall grow unexpectedly as a divine phenomenon:

When darkness deepens strangling the earth's breast
And man's corporeal mind is the only lamp,
As a thief's in the night shall be the covert tread
Of one who steps unseen into his house. 33

A present our life, which is originally the expression of Bliss, is distorted by the sons of Darkness in the studio of the Inconscient:

Armoured, protected by their lethal masks,
As in a studio of creative Death
The giant sons of Darkness sit and plan
The drama of the earth, their tragic stage. 34

The image of a bullock yoked to a cart is used to bring out the limitation of Reason:

A bullock yoked in the cart of proven fact,
She drags huge Knowledge-bales through Matter's dust
To reach utility's immense bazaar. 35

Savitri's divine appearance is presented in a picturesque language. She is said to be

A golden bridge spanning a fairy flood,
A moon-touched palm tree single by a lake
Companion of the wide and glimmering peace,
A murmer as of leaves in Paradise
Moving when feet of the Immortals pass,
A fiery halo over sleeping hills,
A strange and starry head alone in night. 36
The spiritual marriage of Savitri and Satyavan is said to be celebrated on the cosmic plane and the poet describes this wedding-ceremony with beautiful metaphors:

On the high glowing cupola of the day
Fate tied a knot with morning’s halo threads
While by the ministry of an auspice-hour
Heart-bound before the sun, their marriage fire,
The wedding of the eternal Lord and Spouse
Took place again on earth in human forms.

On the fated day of Satyavan's death Savitri seems to economise every moment of her life like a miser merchant:

And every moment she economised
Like a pale merchant leaned above his store,
The miser of his poor remaining gold.

Death, which is commonly considered as the annihilation of life, is really a ladder to ascend to the realm of Immortality:

Death is a stair, a door, a strumbling stride
The soul must take to cross from birth to birth,
A grey defeat pregnant with victory,
A whip to lash us towards our deathless state.

Savitri addresses Ecstasy as the King-smith and requests Him to weld her soul to the spirit of Satyavan in His smithy of life:

O King-smith, clang on still thy toil begun,
Weld us to one in thy strong smithy of life,
Thy fine-curved jewelled hilt call Savitri,
Thy blade’s exultant smile name Satyavan.
Fashion to beauty, point us through the world.
Break not the lyre before the song is found.
Savitri, likewise, appears to be an Indian epic in the English language. Like the great Indian epics, it has the elements of philosophy and didacticism and yet it expressed genuine poetic experiences in the living language. Thematically, it is related to The Vedas and The Upanishads; but in its form, it has a close affinity with the literary traditions of Western epics. Like The Iliad and The Odyssey, it narrates the popular tale of the past and like Paradise Lost, it opens with the introduction of the crisis in the life of the central character which leads us into the middle of things. As an epic of the soul it reminds us of The Divine Comedy in its structure, ideas, characterisation, images and symbols. In spite of this fact, Savitri is a unique epic of the Overmental consciousness which raises the structure of the traditional epic to the summit of spirituality. It is regarded by Sri Aurobindo as Overhead Poetry and so it should be judged by the Overhead aesthetic.
REFERENCES


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9. *From Virgil To Milton*, p. 138


11. *From Virgil To Milton*, p. 196

12. Ibid., p. 196


15. Ibid., pp. 219 - 220.


20. Ibid., pp. 55.

21. Ibid., pp. 69.


26 *Savitri*, p. 737


28 *Savitri*, pp. 734 - 735.

29 ibid., p. 794.

30 ibid., p. 735.

31 ibid., p. 34

32 ibid., p. 40

33 ibid., p. 55

34 ibid., pp. 226 - 227.

35 ibid., p. 252

36 ibid., p. 358

37 ibid., p. 411

38 ibid., p. 363

39 ibid., pp. 600 - 601.

40 ibid., p. 687.