



RE-INTERPRETATION OF MYTH IN SRI AUROBINDO'S SAVITRI

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ABSTRACT

The present paper explores Sri Aurobindo Roy' approach towards the reinterpretation of Myth in Savitri .Traditionally myth and legendary stories are used as the raw materials for the literary works or as the primary source. Now the question is how the primary source or myth is used in Savitri - what has to be noted is whether the literary work is simple, straight forward narrations of the original myth or recreation and reinterpretation of the original myth. These are the ambiguous questions that are designed to answer in the present paper.

Keywords:- Re-interpretation, Myth, Primitive Ontology Legend, Anthropological

INTRODUCTION

Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri* is philosophically such a very fertile ground that numberless works of criticism and interpretation are being written about it, but not many critics have pointed out the fact that it is the first Indo-English poem to employ the technique of re-interpretation to the myth it is about. It is the aim of this article to study the poem from this point of view.

There can be absolutely no doubt that neglect of the high philosophical and spiritual content of the poem would be counted a crime, and the view point adopted here is very light-hearted and superficial but, nevertheless, this is an aspect of the poem that has rarely been studied. So far as is known to this to this writer only one such study has been made. It is a short article written by Dr. Ratri Roy but it is in Bengali. The present writer is highly indebted to the article named "Savitri Mahakavya Myth" for much of the material used in this one.

Poems on myths have been written in English from Elizabethan times onwards. The best known of them are Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* and of course Shakespeare's two narrative poems *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. Besides them there are many

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others. But what has to be noted is that all these poems are simple, straightforward narrations of the original myth, not re-interpretations. This was done for the first time only in the nineteenth century by Shelley, in *Prometheus unbound*. Not only does he swerve aside from Aeschylus, but in creating Asia and marrying Prometheus to him he re-interprets the original myth. This is true more specially of the last act, which is unique in every way- dramatically as well as philosophically. In this context one must remember one thing. English literature has had counting from Chaucer onwards, six centuries to develop. In contrast, Indo-Anglian literature has had barely two centuries. We can be most justifiably proud of the fact that this kind of poetry, i.e. re-interpretation of myth was written no soon in its development.

Savitri is a poem that everyone knows about and looks upon with awe but actually is read by very few. A few basic facts about the poem should be known. It is twenty-four thousand lines long, which makes it the longest poem in English. It is longer even than Browning's *The Ring and the Book* which is known as the longest by, 3000 lines. It is divided into three parts. Each parts is divided into books and each book, in its turn, is divided into several cantos. All in all there are three parts, twelve books and forty-nine cantos. It was written nearly over fifty years, every line revised and polished again and again. It is an awe-inspiring work, like a great oak. It is not only the first Indian epic written, in English, it is a work that can be counted on a par with the great epics of the world. There are some critics who for some reasons think it to be an incomplete poem, but it is not so. It even has an Epilogue.

Many studies have been made of myths. Malinowski and J.G Frazer have studied them from the anthropological view. Frazer's book *The Golden Bough* is a famous book. Levi-strauss has studied them from the linguistic point of view. It is a very complex subject. A hint of this complexity is given by Robert Graves's comment upon it. He classifies myths into no less than twelve categories but tells us that all these are not "true myths". For example he does not give the status of true myth even to the basic story of Iliad which everyone would take to be such. Instead he calls it "heroic saga". In this manner there are many other valuable observations made by scholars on this subject. One such of recent date is by Mircea Eliade. According to him myths are the attempts of primitive man to understand the mystery of life. The primitive man saw the sun rising and setting regularly and explained the phenomenon to himself and to others by imagining a divine mighty figure driving across the expanse of the blue sky in a golden chariot. Likewise at night he imagined another female figure in a silver chariot. Thus related myths proliferated. Eliade calls it "primitive ontology". Then he says something that is specially important for the present study- though over the centuries Myth has become trivialized and debased, people use the Myth as a return to the beginning of time and re-discover and re-experience of their own nature.



This is exactly what has happened in the case of the myth of Savitri. Here the myth of Savitri. Here the myth has become, if not meaningless, definitely “trivialized and debased” through overuse down the centuries. Ladies all over India perform the rites of the *vrat*, girls are blessed by the elders “Be like Savitri” etc. But it is all ritualistic and trivial, it lacks heart, it lacks seriousness. It remained for Sri Aurobindo to re-invest the story with the glory of the myth, with seriousness. This is re- interpretation. *Savitri* is anything but a simple narration. Far from it indeed. This re- interpretation has to be commented upon and explained by scholars, so complex it is. Let us now look at the poem.

The poem begins, in true epic tradition, *in medias res* on the dawn of the day that Satyavan is to die. The canto is titled *The symbol Dawn*. This is fully appropriate for this is no ordinary dawn. It is an epoch-making dawn for mankind because a new, a glorious future is to be carved out for him on this day. The significance of the dawn is hinted at right from the beginning, it is invested with symbolic depth. It is a dark night, but it is such a darkness as is instinct with the possibility of light—a darkness that does not beguile us. but takes us forward, into dawn, every minute. It is the dawn of a day for which Savitri has prepared herself through rigorous *Sadhana* for many days, actually for a whole year ever since her marriage. She now prepares herself mentally on this dawn, gathering all her spiritual forces. Savitri gathered force on that day when Satyavan must die.

The next canto sketches the character of Savitri. It has to be noted that both the divine and the human aspects of her personality have been pointed out. The author does not stress her divine aspect to the detriment of her humanity. Again and again, here as well as later (specially in the cantos dealing with her childhood and youth) he points out that she is a mortal girl, with immortality within her. For example, here she remembers her past days:

*All that she had once hoped and dreamed and been
flew past her eagle-winged through memory's skies
as in a many-hued flaming inner dawn.
Her life's broad highways and its sweet by-paths
Lay mapped to her sun-clear recording view. (Aurobindo, 11)*

Her deep insight, her very thoughts, point to her divinity as well as to her humanity. After this detailed and intensive picture of her mental landscape there is a long interval before we meet her again— an interval of 330 pages, the second canto of part. IV.

In the 21 cantos before that we get a graphic, awe-inspiring account of the yoga of king Ashwapati, the man who is going to earn the glorious destiny of being the father of Savitri. All the experiences described here are the true, the authentic experiences of the great yogi sri



Aurobindo. Such descriptions are difficult to find in English literature. There is mystical poetry in English, of a high order, like poems of Richard Rolle of Hampole, Christopher Smart, Blake, Francis Thompson but they are all short poems. Even Thompson's *The Hounded of Heaven* is short. Besides, it seems as if these poets had been only occasionally illuminated by spiritual radiance whereas here every minute seems to be bathed in it. Some western mystics had attained to this height too, like St. John of cross, Dame Juliana of Norwich, St. Teresa et al. But they were not poets. St. John of cross wrote poetry, but only short poems. What has to be remembered is that none of it is poetic imagination- it is experience gained through high contemplation or *Sadhana*, experience of which no ordinary man can have any idea.

The account of the king's *tapasya* stretches over 18 cantos (pp.22-347). In order to find a parallel to the experiences depicted here we must turn to own sacred literature, the Upanishads and other mystic literature like the verses of another God- man, Shankaracharya. In modern days there is no parallel. How can there be, since there is only one Sri Aurobindo? The different experiences described can no doubt be recognized in our own religious literature by a Sanskrit scholar. Only a few lines are being given here as, strictly speaking, it is not directly relevant:

*Calm and a part supported all that is:
His spirit's stillness helped the toiling world.
Inspired by silence and the closed eyes sight
his force could work with a new luminous art
on the crude material from which all is made. (Aurobind, 36)*

The king's *Tapasya* is successful in pt III canto 4. He meets the Divine mother and begs for the boon that the goddess may be born as his daughter. The boon is granted:

*A sweet and violent heart of ardent calms
moved by the passions of the gods shall come.
All might and greatness shall join in her;
Beauty shall walk celestial on the earth. (Aurobind, 146)*

Savitri is born at the very beginning of pt ii. The poet stresses again and again the unity of divinity and humanity in her. She is one with other persons as well as with nature. It is rather like Wordsworth though he is far more superficial. Savitri is really and truly in converse and communion with nature:

Nothing was a line or inanimate



Nothing without its meaning or its call. (Aurobindo, 357)

The poet, in exquisite delicate poetry describes her childhood and her girlhood, throughout consciously stressing the fact that through Savitri's human aspect the divine is always peeping through. Her physical and mental beauty is consonant with this feature.

In canto IV she sets out on a journey in quest of her husband. The *Mahabharata* does not record this journey – it is the product of the poet's imagination. The description of flowery woods, of green meadows are in the best Spenserian or Keatsian tradition. The poet shows that his lyre can reverberate to lighter tunes when such is called for:

*...Wind-stirred grasslands winking in the sun
or mid green musings of woods and rough-browed
in the grove's murmurous bee-air humming wild
or past the long lapsing voice of silver floods (Aurobindo, 379)*

Canto II of BK V is about Satyavan. The two of them meet in the next canto and the marriage is agreed upon. The meeting of the two place in a beautiful glade. It is an ideal and idyllic place described in the first canto of BK V. Most appropriately this book is called *The Book of Love* and contains three cantos. The first of these describes the meeting place where Savitri comes first. The whole meeting, described over three cantos, is full of such poetic wealth that it inevitably reminds the reader of *Janak-vatika-prasanga* in Tulsidasa work, which is usually taken as the archetypal example of *Shingara rasa*. The place is described first:

*To a space she came of soft and delicate air.
That seemed a sanctuary of youth of joy,
A highland world of free and green delight
Where spring and summer lay together and storve
In indolent and amicable debate. (Aurobindo, 389)*

The place has not only trees, it has friendly, innocent animals too who further animate the landscape:

*The white crane stood, a vivid motionless streak,
Peacock and parrot jeweled soil and tree,
The dove's soft moan enriched the enamored air
And fire-winged wild-darks swam in silvery pools (Aurobindo, 390)*



Then they meet and at once each knows that he or she is meant of the other. Already Tulsidasa has been referred to. In this *Janak- Vatika- Prasanga* Rama and Sita look at each other from a far and fall in love. This love is permanent, enduring love that is called *nili-raga* by the scholars, it is silent but permanent love. The reader will be irresistibly reminded of this famous scene. It is particularly so in canto III where the two meet:

*Her consciousness grew aware of him alone
And all her separate self was lost in his.
As a starry heaven encircles happy earth
He shut her into himself in a circle of bliss (Aurobindo, 410)*

It has been necessary to dwell on this meeting because the poet has devised it himself, re-interpreting the original myth. It is not there in the *Mahabharata*. This shows that the poet has given not only serious spiritual interpretation but has given it in lighter vein also.

As in *Mahabharata* Narada comes and tells everyone about the brevity Satyavan's span of life. Savitri remains firm. In all this the poet has followed the original. The name of the second canto explains the content: The joy of union, the ordeal of the foreknowledge of death and the heart's grief and pain. The next seven cantos describe Savitri's *Sadhana*. Different versions of the epic give different versions of it. Our poet has re-interpreted it in his own way. He makes Savitri practice rigorous yoga for a whole year, till the day, in fact, when Satyavan is to die, the dawn of which poems the book. She perfects herself spiritually so that she will be able to battle with Dharma Yamraj on the fated day. Part II ends here, with the death of Satyavan.

Part III describes what happens after the death of Satyavan - the conflict between the lord of Death and Savitri, and the latter's triumph. What is not there in this description. K.R.S. Iyengar has described it in a comprehensive sentence:

*We are treated to a Gita, we are over-whelmed
by a vishwarupa, we are made to follow the
vicissitudes of a Kurukshetra, we catch glimpses
of death's other kingdom, the hedonist's Bower
of Bilss, the paradisa splendours of vaikuntha,
the ineffable world of Nirvana. (Iyenger, 201)*

Savitri emerges triumphant from this encounter. She is in communication with the creatrix and is given the choice of Nirvana. But she rejects it. She does not want salvation for her sole self but for the whole world:



In vain thou temptest with solitary bliss two spirits saved out of a suffering crowd I sacrifice not earth to happier worlds.(Aurobindo, 692)

She wants salvation for the whole world and that is what she gets as a boon:

*Nature shall live to manifest secret god,
The spirit shall take up the human play
The earthly life become the life divine.(Iyengar, 692)*

She returns in triumph to ordinary life in an ordinary world. The last three lines of the poem proclaim a higher future through her, for mankind:

*She boarded through her stillness on a thought,
Deep- guarded by her mystic folds of light
And in her bosom nursed a greater dawn. (Aurobindo, 724)*

To start our discussion's last part now, both epics and myths need a well-knit story. The need for this becomes even more clear when we talk the re-interpretation of myths, because this work depends more on the story than on anything else. Let us see how the story of Savitri has been altered for re-interpretation.

The surname *A Legend and a Symbol* tells us that the poet has given the story a symbolic depth. *In the Author's Note* preceding the poem he explains the symbolic meaning of each character. Possessing the soul of divine truth Satyavan descended into the grip of death and ignorance. In other words he has reinterpreted the already existing character in the old story.

The new interpretation is, however, in keeping with tradition, yet it is new. This is seen at its most powerful in the interpretation given to the name of Savitri. He takes the root word Savita which is another name for the sun. The word Savitri is divine; daughter sun is called Savitri who is the goddess of the supreme truth. She comes down and is born to save.

The poet re-interprets every name in this way, superimposing his own meaning which carries the traditional meaning but a step further.

As for the events, each of the one in the original story has been reinterpreted. King Ashwapati was a devotee of Shiva in the original but here he worships the divine creatrix and begs her to come down as a human being.



Savitri's residue to marry Satyavan, Narada's, visit and his message, both exist in the original. Savitri's quest for Satyavan is not there in the epic itself though it is there in many later writers. This and the meeting between the two are a lovely interlude- a gift given to the reader by the poet. It is a wonderful example of *Shringara rasa*, as wonderful as the meeting between Rama and Sita in *Janak-vatika-prasanga*. Most significant of all, the original epic describes only a dialogue with Yama whereas here there is serious conflict. The conflict is entirely spiritual, not that of the emotion or the intellect. He concedes defeat only when Savitri reveals her true self to him, what Iyengar call Vishwarupa.

A huge superstructure has been built on the foundations of the original story. A new spiritual interpretation has been given to the old events and characters. It should also be remember that much of the poem is description of real experience. They are personal experience, yet firmly rooted in our traditional religion. Finally, in this poem we have an epic which is also the first re-interpretation of myth in our Indian English literature.

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