

# Savitri: A Symbolic Myth of the Modern Age

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## ABSTRACT

*Savitri is Sri Aurobindo's masterpiece. We cannot fully understand or appreciate him and his philosophy unless we have an understanding and appreciation of his grand epic, Savitri, which he himself has described as "A Legend and a Symbol". Sri Aurobindo himself brings out its significance for us by transforming into a sublime and beautiful epic in a symbolic way. Naturally, Savitri is the supreme expression of Sri Aurobindo's vision and his message to mankind. The poem Savitri comprises underlying behaviour patterns for a spiritually individuated life. It is a prophetic history of the earth, embodying in itself the fulfilment of man's life on earth. Sri Aurobindo's epic poem, Savitri, is a symbolic myth that responds to a deeply felt need in the contemporary mind. Not only does it represent a world view that is in harmony with the most recent understanding of scientific reality; but, as a symbol, it penetrates to the essential truth of that reality.*

**Keywords:** Savitri, Aurobindo's masterpiece, A Legend and a Symbol, symbolic way

As the basis for his epic *Savitri: a Legend and a Symbol* Sri Aurobindo adopts the legend of Satyavan and Savitri from the *Vanaparva* of the *Mahabharata*. This Parva deals with the thirteen years of exile which Pandava brothers and their wife, Princess Draupadi, spent in the Kamayaka forest. Among many relatives, friends and sages who visit and console them in the

forest is Rishi Markandeya. Yudhishthir, the eldest of the Pandava brothers, asks the sage whether there has been any woman as chaste and faithful as Draupadi who, having faithfully followed her husband, has endured so much misery. Rishi Markandeya then narrates the story of *Savitri*, the chaste wife and the power of chastity. Savitri is a legendary character who from times immemorial has been revered as a virtuous wife devoted to her husband, a *pativrata*.

In the *Mahabharata*," says A. B. Purani, "The legend of *Savitri* is at best a myth, but is not so in Sri Aurobindo. ... Savitri, fighting Satyavan's death, is in Sri Aurobindo's hand an Avatar of the immortal beauty and love plunging into the trials of terrestrial life and seeking to overcome them not only in herself but also in the world she has embraced as her own. That would mean that Savitri is sworn to put an utter end to earth's estrangement from God."<sup>1</sup>

Savitri along with other famous heroines in Indian Literature ( Sita in the *Ramayana*, Kannaki in the epic *Shillappadikaram*, and Shakuntala in the play *Abhijnana Shakuntalam*) takes her place as an ideal woman devoted to her husband like a shadow to the substance. Savitri, the central character, derived from traditional sources, inspires succeeding generations. *Savitri* is not just a factual narration of an old legend from the

**Mahabharata**; it is also a network of symbols. About the epic itself, Purani comments,

“The legend has been kept almost intact in the story-part by the poet. But the legend itself can be interpreted as a symbol and the poet has interpreted it, but in fact has transformed it into a living symbol.”<sup>2</sup>

The legend has been transformed by the alchemy of the great Rishi’s genius into a symbol of Life Divine and imparting a cosmic significance. Symbolically, the poem has an affinity with the **Vedas** and the **Upanishads** which depict the struggle between the forces of Light and Darkness, and affirm the victory of truth over falsehood. It is a metaphysical poem which traces the evolution of the spirit from the Inconscient, *Annamayakosha* to the Superconscient Divine, *Vijnanmayakosha*. It is one of those rare ages in human history which have registered distinct breakthroughs in man’s quest for truth and meaning, which have had far-reaching consequences for all subsequent ages. The mental climate of the epic **Savitri** is saturated with the passion for truth, and similar passion for human happiness and welfare. The modern crisis is thus a spiritual crisis, and modern man is seeking light to lead him out of the encircling gloom. Sri Aurobindo’s **Savitri** is a challenge facing human knowledge and wisdom to convert this twilight into the dawn of a brighter day. **Savitri** contains the message of a Rishi, a Seer, a realised Soul who could see with divine clarity the future of man. According to Sri Aurobindo:

“**Savitri** is the record of seeing, of an experience which is not of common kind and is very far from what the

general human mind sees and experiences.”<sup>3</sup>

By detailing the world within and without man, the epic gives us, ‘understanding eyes’ like the ones given to Dhritarashtra to gaze at Narayana in the **Mahabharata**. Where is there grief, for a man who understands the proper nature of death and life, sorrow and joy? Pain itself becomes a part of the Divine’s force to lead man towards his new life. And so Sri Aurobindo has created the living symbol of Savitri to guide us in this pain-racked world and lead us to the ‘higher life of spirit’. The Madran princess, Savitri who is struggling with death to rescue Satyavan, is also the eternal flame within us struggling to realize truth-consciousness from the grip of ignorance. It reinstates the dignity of disintegrated man and suggests a meaning for him in this meaningless world. According to Sethna:

“Death assumes another significance in Sri Aurobindo. It regains its Vedic and Upanishadic connotations. There Death is the world’s ignorance of its own divine self; the falling asunder of the body and the blowing out of its little day are only the most external aspects of the night that is hidden from us, our own Godhead. But Sri Aurobindo goes beyond the old Indian idea of what God attainment is.”<sup>4</sup>

Briefly, the legend of **Savitri** involves a childless king, Aswapati, propitiating the Mother of the universe for a son. She grants him his boon and the additional boon of a daughter, who is a portion of Herself. As the tale unfolds, his daughter, Savitri, after a long search, finds her mate in Satyavan, the son of a dispossessed

king, Dyumatsena. After one year together, Satyavan dies, as prophesied. Savitri then accompanies the Lord of Death to His realm and persuades him to allow her to return to life with her beloved.

“The Symbol Dawn”, of the first Canto of the first Book in *Savitri* forms the paramount part of the epic because it opens our consciousness to the central theme; but of equal importance are the cosmic voyage of Aswapati, the great boon of the Divine Mother, the word of fate by Narad, the protracted struggle with Death by Savitri and finally the last magnificent book *The Book of the Everlasting Day*. Unless we regarded all these elements as a global whole, our estimate of *Savitri* would surely be one-sided. Taking his cue from Sri Aurobindo himself, who has, in his letters, explained some major symbols in *Savitri*, Purani says:

“The word Savitri is derived from the word ‘Savitru’ which in turn is derived from the root “Su”, to give birth to. The word, ‘Soma’ which indicates ‘an exhilarating drink’, symbolising spiritual ecstasy or delight, is also derived from the same word, ‘Su’. It links therefore to creation. Savitru therefore means the creation. Aswapati, the father of Savitri, is called by the poet, ‘the Lord of life’. The name suggests an affinity to Vedic symbolism. In the Veda, Ashwa, the horse, is the symbol of life-energy or vital-power. Ashwa plus pati, Lord, would mean the “Lord of life.” In the poem King Aswapati is the symbol of the aspiring soul of man as manifested in life on earth.”<sup>5</sup>

As a symbol, the poem revolves around the following archetypal phenomena: King Aswapati represents human aspiration for the realization of a divine life. Savitri is the embodiment of a portion of the universal Mother, whose purpose for incarnation is to enable humankind to fulfil its prayers. She represents the Divine Word, who is born to save. Satyavan represents the soul of which the essence is the divine truth of being. Dyumatsena symbolizes the Divine Mind, which has here fallen blind, losing not only its vision, but its natural right to its heavenly kingdom.

Sri Aurobindo based his symbolic rendition of *Savitri* on his own felt-experience, vision and understanding. The nature of the symbol for him is essentially the same as Jung's understanding. The latter noted that it is a "sensuously perceptible expression of an inner experience," based on the transcendent function involving the reconciliation of opposites.”<sup>6</sup>

As symbol, Sri Aurobindo's rendition penetrates to the truth behind and represented by the story. *Savitri* is, in fact, a great mythic poem and an archetypal expression of what is involved in humankind's potential self-fulfilment. The poem *Savitri* comprises underlying behaviour patterns for a spiritually individuated life. It is a prophetic history of the earth, embodying in itself the fulfilment of man's life on earth. The following lines from the poem are indicative of the scope and beauty of Sri Aurobindo's vision:

“O Sun-Word, Thou shalt raise the earth-  
soul to Light  
And bring down God into the lives of men;

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.”<sup>7</sup>

In a letter to a young man, the eminent psychologist C. G. Jung expressed similar sentiments. In it, he wrote:

“One must be able to suffer God. That is the supreme task for the seeker of ideas. He must be the advocate of the earth, God will take care of himself. My principle is: Deus et homine. God needs man in order to become conscious just as he needs limitation in time and space. Let us therefore be for him limitation in time and space, an earthly tabernacle”<sup>8</sup>.

It is as if Sri Aurobindo depicted a divine fiat and Jung the necessary human response for its fulfilment.

The existentialist psychologist Rollo May wrote a book entitled *The Cry for Myth* where he expressed his conviction of the urgent need for myth in our day. Living myth, according to both him and Campbell, contributes to a sense of individual and communal identity, as well as provides the foundation for a moral order. In addition, they each contended, myth can awaken consciousness to the mystery of being or the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* of the existential nature of the universe. According to him:

“Sri Aurobindo's poem *Savitri* fulfils all these requirements for the new age that is in the process of being born. The poem is, in fact, a dialogue between a highly individuated individual and the archetypal powers of the unconscious, fulfilling in a superlative fashion Jung's appeal for the need, today, for an active dialogue between the conscious and the unconscious. The result is a symbolic myth that speaks directly to what Sri Aurobindo referred to as the "Cosmic Self", that is the individual's innermost being and the "general mind of man”<sup>9</sup>

Aurobindo is a contemporary poet-seer and *Savitri* is a high order mantric poem. The mantra consists of words of power that find their source deep within, while being "framed in the heart". Its purpose is to "create vibrations in the inner consciousness" that encourage the realization of what the mantra symbolizes. *Savitri*, in other words, is not only a visionary poem, but its mantric quality renders it a supreme vehicle for the transformation of consciousness and for a life to be organized around the Self. Perhaps it is not correct to say that there is no coalescing myth or worldview that provides a focus for life today. But, if there is, it is a narrow one organized around materialistic science, technology, consumerism and the profit motive, somewhat modified by humanistic concerns. Moreover, as the industrial age gives way to the information age and the modern mind gives way to post-modernism, a centre less, open-ended relativistic world without reference to any authority is growing, where even this focus is being increasingly subjected to narcissistic

individualism and the will to power. This comes along with the quantification of life, social isolation, mass-mindedness and alienation from the instincts and the power of symbols. Jung's observation that "Everywhere one hears the cry for a *Weltanschauung* that is a meaningful worldview or philosophy of life."<sup>10</sup> It is perhaps more relevant today, at least in North America, than ever.

Increasingly, people find life meaningless and without purpose, while defending themselves in all manner of ways, whether it be through mindless consumerism, obsessive involvement with new technology, or through excessive use of alcohol and drugs, whether legal or illicit. Add to this a popular culture, - movies, music and TV programs, - that appeals to the lowest common denominator, while often celebrating destructive tendencies and shadow qualities, and the situation looks anything but hopeful. People at all times have had a coalescing worldview that gives meaning to existence and focus to all activities of life and social patterns. At least, this is the case in normal times when society is functioning creatively and productively in tune with its ideals. The most recent period in Western consciousness of an integrated worldview dates back to the middle ages, when all life and art was organized around a Christian conception of life, based on a geocentric universe. There was, however, considerable repression which exploded with the Renaissance, the period when there was a creative shift in consciousness towards more a direct concern and involvement with life in this world, along with the exaltation of the human ego. This coincided with a heliocentric conception of the universe and the beginnings

of the development of the scientific mind and positivism or objective reason.

Today, not only has our thinking turned more subjective but science has given us a new view of the reality of the physical universe. Now the sun itself is perceived as but a star amongst billions of stars, and our universe a part of a galaxy of stars and planets, amongst millions of galaxies. Meanwhile, leading physicists have come to regard physical reality to be of a unitary nature.

The chaos of the present post-modern condition is giving birth to a deep-seated yearning for direction and purpose, integrated around a spiritual centre and wholeness. There is a cry for a guiding myth and an integral *Weltanschauung* that is in harmony with the most contemporary view of reality, and that does not repress life but fulfils it in all its multifacetedness. There is, in addition, growing awareness, especially among women, of a need for a re-evaluation of the feminine, which in some quarters is acknowledged as a need for a return of the Goddess. As a mythic poem of the Goddess as heroine, who assimilates death in order to release the soul and truth of being into life, Sri Aurobindo's epic is a remarkable response to all these aspirations, a myth for our time.

Sri Aurobindo's epic poem, *Savitri*, is a symbolic myth that responds to a deeply felt need in the contemporary mind. Not only does it represent a world view that is in harmony with the most recent understanding of scientific reality; but, as a symbol, it penetrates to the essential truth of that reality. It concomitantly describes what is involved in the fulfilment of a spiritually

individuated life. This is the goal of Jung's myth of consciousness for our time. Not only is *Savitri* a vision for individual and collective self-fulfilment, but, as a mantra, it has a directly transformative effect on the inner consciousness. Such a magnificent poem calls for intelligent reflection.

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3. Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol*. Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo Ashram. p.149.
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