

Sri Aurobindo's Savitri as an Avatar: An Analysis

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Abstract:- Savitri, as an avatar, is bent on showing humanity the path to first realize the presence and then to ascend, with the help of that presence, into the realm of the universal divine power. This is the sole purpose of an Avatar according to Sri Aurobindo. To fulfill the purpose of the Avatarhood, Savitri takes a journey into herself in search of her soul. She might have taken the journey in order to save her husband Satyavan, but her journey does not end with reviving Satyavan alone. Her journey is to fulfill her purpose as an Avatar. Savitri is an allegory of Sri Aurobindo's concept of Avatarhood – its nature and purpose. While, on the surface level, Savitri's journey symbolizes her ordeal in bringing back Satyavan's life, the underlying thread of thought concerns human mind's attempt at ascending to godhead.

Keywords; Humanity, Avatarhood, Satyavan, Symbolism, Allegory

1. INTRODUCTION

Sri Aurobindo wanted to write an epic based on the popular legend of Satyavan and Savitri, a part of the epic mahabharatha. Sri Aurobindo saw some great truth in the legend that he wished to project through his epic. The work became his life's work and he took his entire life time to complete the epic. In other words, the epic Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol represents Sri Aurobindo's life journey of spirituality. The work serves as a documentary recording his development in his yogic experience. He also uses the work to expound his philosophy of Integral Yoga and his concept of Avatarhood – its nature and purpose. This paper aims at analysing how Sri Aurobindo portrays the character of Savitri as an Avatar representing his concept of Avatarhood.

Sri Aurobindo, in writing the epic of Savitri, has expanded a local legend into a universal story. He has skilfully given his epic not only a grand style and narrative but also changed a seemingly ordinary domestic story of fidelity into a cosmic tale of uplifting the entire humanity. He has not only exalted the storyline, but he has facelifted the characters as well. Aswapathi becomes a noble representative of humanity from being an ordinary king with ordinary worries. Savitri becomes an Avatar from being a faithful wife. The act of reviving Satyavan becomes a symbolic depiction of rescuing the entire humanity and showing it the path of spiritual ascent. The epic, therefore, becomes a treatise on Sri Aurobindo's philosophy and concept of Avatarhood. "I used Savitri as a means of ascension. I began with it on a certain mental level, each time I could reach a higher level I rewrote from that level. In fact Savitri has not been regarded by me as a poem to be written and finished, but as a field of experimentation to see how far poetry could be written from one's own yogic consciousness and how that could be made creative." (Ghose & Sri Aurobindo 1)

2. SPIRITUAL ADVENTURE

Sri Aurobindo had a clear objective in writing the epic as he wished to universalise his philosophy through the legend. "Sri Aurobindo turns a simple legend of conjugal fidelity into a memorable story of the conquest of death for man, for humanity, by the grace, the divine grace descended on earth [...]. And in the process he describes his own spiritual odyssey and the saga of the Mother's spiritual adventure" (Pandit 3). In exalting the story, Sri Aurobindo has aggrandized ordinary characters into Avatars. Savitri is an Avatar who has descended on earth with the divine consciousness in order to live and show mankind the path to ascend towards godhead.

Savitri is an allegory of Sri Aurobindo's concept of Avatarhood – its nature and purpose. While, on the surface level, Savitri's journey symbolizes her ordeal in bringing back Satyavan's life, the underlying thread of thought concerns human mind's attempt at ascending to godhead. "Even as Satyavan with Savitri's help lives down the invasion of Night and Twilight and emerges into the clear light of Day, the human soul too (which is the spearhead of the evolutionary advance), led by the Supreme's gift of Grace [...] achieves the bliss of divine or superconscious life." (Iyengar 193)

The epic narrates, in the first part, how Aswapathi travels the path of yoga and crosses the different levels of consciousness. He reaches the divine mother, the ultimate universal divine power and enjoys the feeling of being one with godhead. He then wishes the entire mankind to have the same heavenly experience and so, he wishes the divine power to descend into the world in order to spread the bliss on earth by showing mankind the true path of yoga.

3. AVATARHOOD IN SAVITRI

Aswapati's aim is not only to realise the divine but to manifest the perfection of the divine in the world. According to Sri Aurobindo, the purpose of an Avatar is primarily to bring down the divine power and spread it in the world. In keeping to this argument, Aswapati proceeds in his purpose. He brings back the universal divine power which Sri Aurobindo calls the Mother, into the world as Savitri. Thus, Savitri also becomes an avatar. The poem then proceeds to describe how Savitri, as an Avatar, shows the path for humanity in order to realize the presence of the Eternal Avatar in everyone and move towards becoming one with the universal divine. O strong forerunner, I have heard thy cry. One [Savitri] shall descend and break the iron Law, She shall bear Wisdom in her voiceless bosom, And from her eyes the Eternal's bliss shall gaze. (Sri Aurobindo, Savitri 345)

Savitri is the ultimate accomplishment of Aswapati's yoga. She is the avatar – the Avatarhood of the divine mother. She is an incarnation with the limitations of the human body. In the lines of Sri Aurobindo's concept of Avatarhood, Savitri, even though she is in the human form, is not ignorant of her divinity. She is conscious of her divine powers. But, sticking to Sri Aurobindo's concept of Avatarhood, Savitri undertakes the yogic journey towards self-realisation. Through her yoga, she prepares herself for the trial she is about to face in order to show the right path to humanity. Savitri's yoga takes her deep into herself. She is able to remove all the screens that prevent her from realizing the ultimate truth. She examines and rejects all the falsehood that hinders her and deceives her. She doggedly pursues her yogic journey and attains the purpose of her Avatarhood. Through her yoga, she shows mankind how to travel the path towards attaining godhood.

4. DISCUSSION

The Avatarhood of Savitri then begins her life as an ordinary human being. She experiences happiness and sorrow in equal measure like all mortal beings do. She rides over fortune and misfortune and lets the flow of fate carry her away. Yet, she is conscious of her impending trial and she gets ready for the day. Her physical existence allows her to grow and choose the path of her life. She chooses to marry Satyavan in spite of knowing his fate. She is ready to face her avatar's mission. She enjoys her life with Satyavan and at the same time she prepares herself for the day of doom.

She abode with Satyavan in the wild woods: Two lives were locked within an earthly heaven And fate and grief fled from that fiery hour. But soon now failed the summer's ardent breath And throngs of blue-black clouds crept through the sky (Sri Aurobindo, Savitri 468) The importance of these lines that describe Savitri's times with Satyavan is that even though Savitri is an avatar, she lives and experiences all the feelings, ups and downs, happiness and sorrow of an ordinary human being. This is one of the main aspects of the Avatarhood that Sri Aurobindo puts forth in his philosophy. He says that the Avatar wishes to show man that the path of yoga can be travelled and the destiny reach not with the divine presence inherit in an avatar but without it as an ordinary human being. Sri Aurobindo states that this is the reason for an avatar to experience joy and sorrow and suffer like an ordinary human being in course of the avatarhood.

Savitri, as an Avatar, knows the impending doom of her husband's life. She is anxious like any other wife, but she has developed an inner stability and assurance that guides her to do her everyday work with peace and grace. At the same time, she also prays for the fate of Satyavan. Savitri, all alone, suffers the anxiety and the burden of fore-knowledge about the impending death of her husband. She does not reveal the truth to her husband. It should be noted that her sufferings are only superficial. Even during the approach of the hour, she is suffused with an inner peace and calm. She determinedly meditates and goes inside of her in search of her soul. Impassive amidst the movement and the cry, ...

She looked into herself and sought for her soul. (Sri Aurobindo, Savitri 477) Savitri's soul has been already preparing for the moment. The Avatarhood is very clear on the nature and purpose of the mission. Therefore, the Avatarhood obeys the will of the divine power that has sent forth the Avatarhood onto the earth for the purpose of creating a new world that has the presence of the divine power spread all over the land. At this juncture of the epic, Sri Aurobindo, once again, describes who man is, based on his philosophy of Integral Yoga.

5. HUMANISTIC APPROACH

Savitri, as an avatar, is bent on showing humanity the path to first realize the presence and then to ascend, with the help of that presence, into the realm of the universal divine power. This is the sole purpose of an Avatar according to Sri Aurobindo. To fulfill the purpose of the Avatarhood, Savitri takes a journey like Aswapati into herself in search of her soul. She might have taken the journey in order to save her husband Satyavan, but her journey does not end with reviving Satyavan. Her journey is to fulfill her purpose as an Avatar (i.e.): In the one task for which our [Avatars] lives were born, To raise the world to God in deathless Light, To bring God down to the world on earth we came, To change the earthly life to life divine. (Sri Aurobindo, Savitri 692)

The yogic journey undertaken by Savitri allows her realize the nature and presence of the universal divine and aids her to become one with the supreme power. She then realizes the presence of the eternal divine power in every being. Sri Aurobindo projects his philosophy, thus, through the yogic journeys undertaken by both Aswapati and Savitri. Sri Aurobindo expounds his philosophy of Integral Yoga in his epic work. Aswapati and Savitri are allegorical in the sense that Aswapati represents man as he ascends towards the universal divine through yoga and Savitri represents the Avatarhood of the divine power.

Sri Aurobindo wrote Savitri to materialize what he theorized as the concept of an Avatar – its nature and purpose. Nadkarni also highlights the fact that “As a living book, Savitri vibrates with the consciousness of Sri Aurobindo and therefore also of the Mother.” Srinivasa Iyengar declares beyond doubt the reason behind the writing of Savitri in his book Indian Writing in English in which he deals with Sri Aurobindo's Savitri in detail: “Since Aurobindo's Yoga was a "world-transforming Yoga", [...] he chose as the fit symbol hero and heroine of his epic of the evolving soul the immaculate Satyavan and Savitri, names already familiar to us, and charged with untold significance by association with the ancient Hindu scriptures and epics.” (191)

6. CONCLUSION

Sri Aurobindo chose the right story for the right purpose and, with his poetic genius, transformed the story into an epic that has an international appeal. He has universalized both his philosophy through Savitri and the legend of Savitri through his epic which in turn projects him as an internationally revered author who has a global reach.

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