

ISSN: 2395-4132

# THE EXPRESSION

An International Multi-Disciplinary e-Journal

Bi-Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access e-Journal

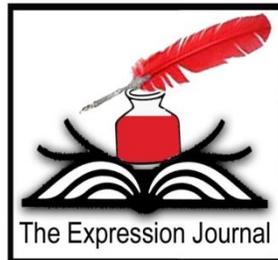


**Vol.2 Issue 1 Feb. 2016**

*Editor-in-Chief : Bijender Singh*

**Email : [editor@expressionjournal.com](mailto:editor@expressionjournal.com)**

**[www.expressionjournal.com](http://www.expressionjournal.com)**



**SPEECH, GENDER AND SUBVERSION: A STUDY OF SRI AUROBINDO'S *SAVITRI***

**Debapriya Goswami**

**Assistant Professor**

**Nirma University**

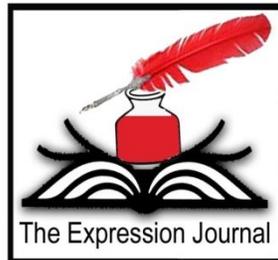
**Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India**

**Abstract**

Whereas epics essentially sing the glory of a hero who is a celebrated, major character of folklore, Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri* is an experiment in language which intends not only to infuse Vedic qualities into English verse or subvert epic conventions, but also to synthesise Sri Aurobindo's socio—political ambitions with his philosophical mentations. The story of Savitri and Satyavan which is narrated in a few lines in the *Mahabharata*, is granted a cosmic symbolism by Sri Aurobindo who takes the incident not merely by its meaning but by its significance. In this article, I claim that *Savitri* proposes a subversive discourse of gender. Sri Aurobindo visualises Savitri as the first female *avatar*, an incarnation of the Divine Mother who sets out to liberate humanity and challenges the disempowering dictums of Nature— not with physical strength or valour like the goddess *Durga* or *Kali* but with her ability to reason and her power of speech which she uses fearlessly. Savitri—the character of *Mahabharata* is transformed by Sri Aurobindo into a voice that speaks not only for her own self, but also on behalf of the entire humankind, to the God of Death. She eventually persuades the God of Death to accord with her Will. The article is also a study of Sri Aurobindo's artful employment of language in order to amplify Savitri from a minor character of the *Mahabharata* into an overarching embodiment of Reason.

**Key-Words**

Sri Aurobindo, Savitri, Speech, Reason, Power, Language.



**SPEECH, GENDER AND SUBVERSION: A STUDY OF SRI AUROBINDO'S *SAVITRI***

**Debapriya Goswami**

**Assistant Professor**

**Nirma University**

**Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India**

**I. INTRODUCTION**

*Savitri* allows Sri Aurobindo to expound his integral idea of eschatology. So far we have seen visionaries and poets who have used the epic genre to deal with issues that resemble an outward journey—an evolution in simulation of the traditional epic which has, since ages and across civilisations, been followed as an archetype by poets to design their literary epics.

The literary epic is certainly the most ambitious of poetic enterprises, making immense demands on a poet's knowledge, invention, and skill to sustain the scope, grandeur, and authority of a poem that tends to encompass the world of its day and a large portion of its learning. (Abrams, M. H. *Glossary of Literary Terms* 97).

However, the literary epic also maintains a close affinity with the traditional epic so far as obeying conventions are concerned. The epic writers tried to explore their creativity within the boundaries defined by the traditional epics. Hence, literary epics would mostly be a creative retelling of popular myths or lores. The *Iliad* deals with the Trojan War, the *Odyssey* narrates the roving of Ulysses, the *Aeneid* pictures the Roman Empire at its pinnacle of imperial glory and the *Paradise Lost* deals with human kind's first act of disobedience and attempts to "justify the ways of God to men" (Imam, Syed Mehdi. *Savitri Unveiled* 11-12) On the other hand, *Savitri* is a work which exudes the immense courage of the poet who dares to break the conventions of the traditional epic in a number of ways without thinking of acceptability or success among readers.

Sri Aurobindo did not much approve of the society's hypocritical treatment of women which might have evolved as a result of Victorian prudery. Sri Aurobindo's concern regarding the position of women can be traced back to a piece which he composed as early as in 1890-92 in England and the same piece, though incomplete, got published posthumously in the volume titled *Early Cultural Writings*. The following is an excerpt from the same which follows the form a dialogue:

...Julian who had taken the lead in blasphemy closed the subject by observing "The popular Gods should be denied but respected."

"Yet you couple women and wine in your banquet—room" said Erinna.

"Ah, my friend, I only observe Nature's ordinances: in social life sex does not exist. Besides conversation requires speech as well as reason."

"You insinuate?"

"Nature gave man reason, speech to woman."The men laughed.

"I will quote you two sentences from my new catechism, Julian" said Helen Woodward. "To what end has man used reason? To make Truth incredible. To what purpose has woman employed speech? To say nothing. (Sri Aurobindo, *Early Cultural Writings* 3).

The passage is an excerpt from "The Sole Motive of Man's Existence" which was written by Sri Aurobindo under the section named "The Harmony of Virtue". All pieces here are dialogues where two or more characters exchange their views on a particular issue; in this occasion it is the debate on the right of women to participate in conversations with men while the latter consume wine at banquets. The argument is necessitated during a casual exchange of thoughts when Erine, one of the invitees to the party, objects to the coexistence of women and wine at the banquet— something which does not coincide with the established codes of the society. However, the host of the party, Julian, is a believer in Nature's ordinances and feels that discrimination on the basis of gender is not natural. Besides, he is in search of quality conversation which requires both speech and reason. In his opinion, men are endowed with reason and women have the potency to apply it in speech. In response to this, Helen Woodward says that neither men nor women have used this power adequately. Men have used reason to manipulate truth; whereas women are so complacent with their position within patriarchy that they have, eventually, let go of their reason and have successfully learnt to say "nothing." The host realises the discomfort created by the inconclusiveness and cynicism of the discussion and hence deftly glides the conversation to a different topic.

The piece reveals an early attempt of Sri Aurobindo to challenge the lopsided gender equations maintained in the society. He was sensitive enough to realise so early in his life that discrimination on the basis of gender is not a "natural" enterprise- a claim that brought about a volte-face with the advent of Feminism in the early twentieth century. After Sri

Aurobindo came back to India, he involved himself in active politics and, at the same time, continued to practise his poetic skills. He had spent the formative years of his life in England and had received education in a completely English ambience. In India, he devoted himself to the Indian Vedic tradition and took a keen interest in Indian traditional epics, especially in the *Mahabharata*. Sri Aurobindo's range of cogitation, be it in Western classics or Indian literary traditions, is panoptic. I shall limit the scope of my article to study Sri Aurobindo's persuasion in formulating a vindicated idea of the feminine and the terminal manifestation of the same in *Savitri* which he accomplishes with a well-crafted experiment in his poetic rhetoric.

In "The Sole Motive of Man's Existence," Sri Aurobindo had proposed that the power of speech is an index of feminine power. However, he had left it unfinished—without an affirmation. G. Nageswara Rao in his essay named "Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri* as a Spiritual Epic" writes: "We do not know when exactly he started writing or conceived the idea of writing *Savitri*. Possibly the seeds were sown as early as 1892 when he wrote as a young student *The Harmony of Virtue*" (Mathur, O. P. *Critical Considerations* 97). In *Savitri*, he confirms the proposition by composing an epic where a female "hero" rescues the life of her husband in a cosmic battle with the Lord of Death—a predicament where heroism lies only in determination, reason and repartee and not in physical strength.

## II SAVITRI: A SYMBOL OF WILL AND REASON

Sri Aurobindo's affinity towards strong female mythological characters is evident in his works like "Urvasie," "Love and Death," "Ahana," "Uloupie," "Chitrangada" and *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol*. The *Mahabharata* is an exhaustive repository of variant characters including women who are remembered for the power which they exercised in their words in the form of repartee, oaths and most significantly—through curse. One such character is Draupadi. Rammanohar Lohia in his *Interval in Politics* states that Draupadi, besides Krishna, was wiser and wittier than all men who existed during her time (Yadav, Kumkum. "Draupadi or Savitri" 111). There are episodes in the *Mahabharata* which reveal her substantial knowledge in politics, justice and religion. At all junctures of her life, she is seen to be a woman who has clarity of thoughts and is capable of taking firm decisions. She is a rebel who, with her speech, unsettles the conscience of all the dignitaries present at the court of Dhritrashtra when Yudhishthira lost the game of dice to the Kauravas. Her fury and morality finds expression in words when she criticises not only the Kauravas for their atrocities, but also her five husbands to have considered her as a property to be bartered in gambling (111). Significantly, Draupadi's words are mostly motivated by wrath, an emotion that is ultimately self-defeating. Neither her courage to speak for her rights nor her dissent against the norms of the society enables her to escape the harsh reality of death that engulfs all alike.

On the other hand, Savitri is the archetypal wife who brings her dead husband

back to life by means of her matrimonial piety thereby conforming to the gender roles assigned within the institution of marriage. She as a character does not belong to the age depicted in the *Mahabharata*. As K. R. S Iyengar states: “It was already ancient at the time of Mahabharata events, for it was one of the stories that Rishi Markandeya narrated to Yudhishtira during the years of his exile to console him and fortify his spirits”(Sri Aurobindo: *A Biography and a History* 653). According to Iyengar, Savitri’s is the only instance where love stands as a shield to death. Most other episodes in the epic are full of strife—“The wages of discord, of egoism, of sin—is death, always death...But Savitri—alone among the apocalyptic heroes and heroines of the *Mahabharata*—relies on the power within, the invincible power of love”(661). It is Savitri’s unflinching confrontation of her crisis and her Will to change her fate that provides strength to her character. Her strength comes from within and is manifested in her speech which is backed by Reason.

### III. SAVITRI’S DIALOGUE WITH DEATH

Sri Aurobindo transforms the Savitri myth from a symbol of the obedient wife to an incarnation of the Divine Mother, a fearless soul who changes her pre-determined fate not through a denial of the situation but by an intelligent use of speech to face it and resolve it for the betterment of all. This section of the article will deal with Sri Aurobindo’s treatment of the myth for bringing out the primordial disceptation between life and death.

The first Canto of Book IX opens with Savitri’s moment of crisis— a moment that had been awaiting her since her marriage to Satyavan a year ago. The following lines by Sri Aurobindo depict her state after her husband dies on the day destined for him:

She measured not her loss with helpless thoughts,  
Nor rent with tears the marble seals of pain:  
She rose not yet to face the dreadful god.  
Over the body she loved her soul leaned out  
In a great stillness without stir or voice,  
As if her mind had died with Satyavan. (*Savitri* 571).

Sri Aurobindo challenges the prevalent association of widowhood with explicit grief and hence does not show her weeping. In so doing, he adheres to Vyasa’s version of the story in the *Mahabharata*, where “the heroine doesn’t flinch at the prospect of Satyavan’s threatened death, nor even in the face of death or the sight of Yama the Lord of Death” (Iyengar 662). Iyengar quotes Sri Aurobindo on his reaction to Romesh Chunder Dutt’s English version of the *Mahabharata* where he shows Savitri weeping at Satyavan’s death: “in the *Mahabharata* there is no trace of it. Even when her heart was being sawed in two, not a single tear appeared in her eye. By making her weep he took away the very strength of which Savitri is built” (662). For Sri Aurobindo, Savitri had the divine knowledge to discern that she had to discover strength in her solitude and had to “incarnate in herself the

will to triumph in a world surrendered to resignation and defeat” (Iyengar 662). Hence weeping in such a situation would mean a submission to fate. She gradually calmed herself, laid Satyavan’s lifeless body aside and “sole now she rose” to meet the dreadful god” (*Savitri* 573). The God of death spoke in “a sad and formidable voice” and asked Savitri to accept the verdict of Nature as all mortals are its slaves. He says:

Thy passionate influence and relax, O slave  
Of Nature, changing tool of changeless Law,  
Who vainly writh’st rebellion to my yoke,  
Thy elemental grasp; weep and forget.  
Entomb thy passion in its living grave.  
Leave now the once—loved spirit’s abandoned robe:  
Pass lonely back to thy vain life on earth. (575).

Savitri did not move. She did not reply to the formidable voice but silently followed the spirit of Satyavan who stood “like one who, sightless, listens for a command” with the God of death in between them (576). She was chided again for accompanying Death as for him her love for Satyavan was transient and hence could not change the verdicts of the eternal gods. She still did not speak but followed in silence. As the journey continued, “A mystery of terror’s boundlessness” surrounded her and she lost the track of time—it seemed like past, present and future had all dissolved and she was gliding into a dark, shadowy mass. For a moment, her heart gave up. She felt that  
In the smothering stress of this stupendous Nought  
Mind could not think, breath could not breathe, the soul  
Could not remember or feel itself; (583).

This phase of hopelessness was momentary as a ray of hope flickered in her mind—“A memory that wished to live again” (585). Watching her follow him still, the God of Death further clarifies the servile state of man in the hands of gods:

Aimless man toils in an uncertain world,  
Lulled by inconstant pauses of his pain,  
Scourged like a beast by the infinite desire,  
Bound to the chariot of the dreadful gods. (587).

He asks her to quit her hope to win back her husband; She should go back home and try to spend the rest of her life with whatever remnants she has of her broken heart. However, he might offer her some gifts to “soothe” her “wounded life” (588). This the first time Savitri replies to him. She says:

I bow not to thee, O huge mask of death,  
Black lie of night to the cowed soul of man,  
Unreal, inescapable end of things,  
Thou grim jest played with the immortal spirit.  
Conscious of immortality I walk.

# The Expression: An International Multi-Disciplinary e-Journal

[www.expressionjournal.com](http://www.expressionjournal.com)

ISSN: 2395-4132

A victor spirit conscious of my force,  
Not as a suppliant to thy gates I came. (588)

She refuses to accept “gifts” as compensation from the God of Death. She demands him to fulfil Satyavan’s desires and hence give him back to her. The God of Death berates her again as she tries to breach the laws of Nature. In reply to this she says: “My will too is a law, my strength a god” (589). Unless Satyavan is granted back life, she will keep following Death; “Wherever thou leadst his soul I shall pursue” (590).

Death retorts sharply:

Forgetting thy bounds of thought, thy mortal role?  
Their orbs were coiled before thy soul was formed.  
I, Death, created them out of my void;  
All things I have built in them and I destroy. (590).

Savitri replies with firm conviction. She questions the authority of this tyrannical god referred to by Death:

Who is this God imagined by thy night,  
Contemptuously creating worlds disdained,  
Who made for vanity the brilliant stars?  
Not he who has reared his temple in my thoughts  
And made his sacred floor my human heart (591).

She claims that her God is her Will and her undying love for Satyavan. The golden wings of love can fan away the void of Death— she says. Finally she claims that her God, who is nothing but her Will and love, shall remake the universe! On listening to this, Death says that Savitri should also know that mortal love, no matter how true it is, will have to cease some day as they all ultimately yield to the power of Death. Savitri replies that she shall gain that knowledge only when she has loved forever. Knowledge is “a vast embrace;” “a calm Transcendent” who “bears the world” (594).

Man’s ultimate fate is not to submit to the will of Death. He was created so that he, with the aide of his mind and heart, could conquer Death. The journey again continues.

The God of Death tries to convince her that if Satyavan would have lived, her love for him would have gradually reduced as the mortal’s love is a craving for the flesh which withers with time. Savitri answers that her love is not merely a craving for the flesh and even if it is so, that too has “a whisper of divinity” (612).

In Book X, Canto III, Sri Aurobindo depicts the debate of Love and Death— a theme that he has been exploring since long. Savitri calls Death a sophist who takes pleasure in the sorrow of the world. When Death says that human beings are imperfect mortals Savitri objects by saying that God has hidden His divinity in man’s imperfection:

His knowledge he disguised as Ignorance,  
His Good he sowed in Evil’s monstrous bed,

Vol. 2 Issue 1 (February 2016)

Editor-in-Chief: Bijender Singh

# The Expression: An International Multi-Disciplinary e-Journal

[www.expressionjournal.com](http://www.expressionjournal.com)

ISSN: 2395-4132

Made error a door by which Truth could enter in,  
His plant of bliss watered with Sorrow's tears. (625).

This means that man has been gradually moving towards the Divine. Death now asks her: how can she claim divinity for man, who is nothing but the semblance of a "two-legged worm?" (634). Savitri replies:

Yes, I am human. Yet shall man by me,  
Since in humanity waits his hour the God,  
Trample thee down to reach the immortal heights,  
Transcending grief and pain and fate and death.  
Yes, my humanity is a mask of God (634).

Death now falters and asks Savitri that how she asks for a confluence of matter and spirit, which is unreasonable:

The Real with the unreal cannot mate.  
He who would turn to God, must leave the world;  
He who would live in the Spirit, must give up life;  
He who has met the Self, renounces self. (635).

Savitri replies:

My heart is wiser than the Reason's thoughts,  
My heart is stronger than thy bonds, O Death.  
It sees and feels the one Heart beat in all,  
It feels the high Transcendent's sunlike hands,  
It sees the cosmic Spirit at its work; (635).

The repartee continued; Death tried to pursue her to get back to earth and find someone else to love. She refuses. Finally, as she spoke to Death, her "mortality disappeared" and her goddess—self was now visible. (656). Death made its last challenge to Savitri and asked her to show him her face if she was the incarnation of the Divine Mother. Then he would let Satyavan go. Savitri quietly looked at him:

A mighty transformation came on her.  
A halo of the indwelling Deity,  
The Immortal's lustre that had lit her face  
And tented its radiance in her body's house (664).

Then, she commanded Death to release Satyavan. Death was unwilling and hence stood against her. However, the inner light of Savitri engulfed his Darkness and he soon disappeared, keeping Satyavan and Savitri alone to each other. Though the epic continues to another two books, Book IX and Book X bring to life the immensely powerful character of Savitri that Sri Aurobindo constructs with his artful use of language. Whereas Vyasa tried to paint the power of a woman's "silent" love, Sri Aurobindo sees immense symbolic potential in the legend where he can bring about a synthesis in reason and speech in a female protagonist and provide it the grandeur and sincerity of an epic.

Vol. 2 Issue 1 (February 2016)

Editor-in-Chief: Bijender Singh

## IV. CONCLUSION

Hence it can be concluded that through *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol* Sri Aurobindo tried to propose an alternative discourse of power. By expounding Savitri—a minor character of *Mahabharata* into the first female *avatar*, he creates hope for the empowerment of women in the contemporary India, whom the society treated with hypocrisy. They were worshipped as deities in temples and at the same time, were asked to show their fidelity by accepting patriarchal norms unquestioningly. Savitri proposes that women do not need to become aggressive in order to become powerful. All they need is a tremendous will-power which shall bring about their emancipation. Savitri's combat with Death through reason and speech could also be an inspiring symbol for the colonised nation so that they too could stop surrendering to the present situation of servitude and try to bring about the transformation within themselves by reasoning out a way to win back; not only their terrestrial freedom from the imperial power but also necessitate a liberation of their minds from colonial subjugation. By challenging the prevalent notions of the feminine, Sri Aurobindo indicates that perhaps it is time to redefine heroism by locating it within an alternative, gender-neutral frame of power dynamics.

## WORKS CITED

- Abrams, M. H. and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2009. Print.
- Imam, Syed Mehdi. *Savitri Unveiled: A Selection*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1980. Print.
- Iyengar, K. R. S. *Sri Aurobindo: A Biography and a History*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education, 2006. Print.
- Purani, A. B. *Sri Aurobindo's Savitri: an Approach and a Study*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, 2002. Print.
- Rao, G. Nageswara. "Sri Aurobindo's Savitri as a Spiritual Epic." *Sri Aurobindo: Critical Considerations*. Ed. O. P. Mathur. Bareilly: Prakash Book Depot, 1997. 96—108. Print.
- Sri Aurobindo. *Early Cultural Writings*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, 2003. Print.
- . *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, 1997. Print.
- Yadav, Kumkum. " Draupadi or Savitri: Lohia's Feminist Reading of Mythology." *Economic and Political Weekly* 45.48(2010): 107—12. JSTOR. Web. 29 Jan. 2016.