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Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri* : a study of the evolution of neo-femininity and 'Colonial Masculinity' in the historical perspective

Abstract

Aurobindo's magnum opus *Savitri* brings into foreground the poetic self which on the one hand interrogates the then-existent norms of patriarchy through the characters of Yama, the personified state of dominant male identity in vogue; and on the other hand heralds the birth of the neo-feminine force in Savitri, free from weakness, grief, pain: a harmonized entity exuding the delight of existence, aiming beyond the existential fever of the body and the mind.

The proposed paper would try to assimilate and interrogate Sri Aurobindo's idea of freedom and feminism and retrace his attempt to promote the vigour of the feminine energy countering thereby the 'Colonial Masculinity' the British colonizers with examples from his magnum opus: *Savitri*.

Keywords: Colonialism, Empowerment, Evolution, Masculinity, Neo-femininity

Introduction

The poet, the seer, the nationalist, the Yogi, myriad adjectives flow and yet the description of Sri Aurobindo remains unqualified. The immenseness of the mission and vision of Sri Aurobindo can be clearly traced in his literary output, and especially his poetical works. A man trained in his youth to shun the orient and embrace the occident in its essence becomes one of the greatest advocate of oriental identity emphasizing the importance of the “inner self” and its limitless possibilities.

Savitri: Empowerment and evolution

Savitri is one of the longest poems in the English language which comprises of 24,000 lines. Raymond Frank Piper, an American scholar, has described it as “perhaps the most powerful artistic work in the world for expanding man’s mind towards the Absolute”. *Savitri* is also the principal character of a legend in the Mahabharata. In Mahabharata, King Aswapathy, who is childless prays fervently to be saved from the crucial yet problematic situation where he dies childless. King Aswapathy's intense prayers are answered with a daughter, *Savitri*. *Savitri* incidentally gets married to Satyavan, who dies within a year of the marriage. *Savitri* follows Satyavan post-death, and earnestly requests with Yama, the god of death, for the return of Satyavan.

Yama grants her one boon after another in order to persuade her to go back to earth and not preposterously attempt to get Satyavan back from the netherworld. In a final assay, he grants her also the boon of getting children, but *Savitri* enquires how she can have children if her husband is no more with her. Thus entrapped in his own web of appeasement trials, Yama returns Satyavan to *Savitri*, and they both return to earth.

Sri Aurobindo has used the legend of *Savitri* and Satyavan as a symbol and developed it into an epic of gigantic proportions. In Sri Aurobindo’s *Savitri*, King Aswapathy does not want a

child: he seeks the diffusion of all human problems which should be achieved in the mortal realm: the earth and not some unknown world of heaven. With this intent, he embarks on an inner exploration. He is ultimately able to impress the Divine Mother, who promises that “One shall descend and break the iron Law, Change Nature’s doom by the lone Spirit’s power.” (Book 3, Canto 4). Savitri is the final result of this boon given to Aswapathy by the Divine Mother.

In Sri Aurobindo’s *Savitri*, the marriage of Savitri and Satyavan symbolizes the invocation of Savitri in the fatal journey of mankind. Satyavan is the physical expression of humanity who is subject to pain, suffering and death. When Death, the embodiment of divine justice and worldly non-existence, does visit him, Savitri seizes the opportunity to embark on her mission of establishing the state of immortality in the mortal world. The release of Satyavan from the god of death symbolizes the completion of her mission.

In Books 9, 10 and 11, there are 125 pages that recreates in flowing cadence of poetry the intense philosophical debate between the God of Death and Savitri. The masterly exchange of opinion is a presentation of the imperfections of the world on one hand, and the vision of a perfect world on the other. The God of Death much like the prototypical establishment with its hierarchal empowered structure uses all possible arguments to convince Savitri that she does not need Satyavan. He opines about the fragility of love and how the noble emotion of love has been misused by humanity thus leading to the logical state that life on earth has come to be and will carry on to be. His cynicism seems absolutely justified in view of the historical reality of the world. Savitri, the envoy who is destined to reshape the future of mankind does not accept the present reality but postulates a new form of life that will change earthly existence forever. The God of Death offers eternal bliss in heaven in exchange of withdrawing from the adamancy of bringing eternal bliss in the mortal realm. The narrow bounds of private paradise is not what Savitri envisages for; rather it is the worldly

emancipation from the pains of life and the pangs of death is the definitive finality that she aims at: “Imperfect is the joy not shared by all”, says she (Book 11, Canto 1). The God of Death, although much transformed by now and sympathetic to Savitri’s mission, finds in her mission an internal contradiction – how can earth be earth if it becomes heavenly? He advises her to wait, and to let Time and natural evolution remove the imperfections of man.

Savitri, destiny’s child, wants to hasten the process of evolution. She wants humanity either to manifest divinity, or give way to a superhuman creature capable of manifesting divinity on earth. This proposition is beyond the powers of the God of Death, and hence he just vanishes. Thus was death conquered by Savitri.

The conquest of death is symbolic of the disappearance of pain, suffering, and associated problems of humanity. The Divine applauds Savitri for having reached the goal of her birth as envisaged by King Aswapathy. “Having secured from the Divine the promise that life on earth will become the Life Divine, Savitri and Satyavan return to earth and reunite with the earth-bound humanity.”(Dr. Mangesh Nadkarni)

“The entire effort of Sri Aurobindo’s yoga and spirituality is to bring fulfilment to mankind as a whole and that too here on earth”, says Dr. Nadkarni. Savitri is a clarion call to all who wants to achieve the revolutionary transfiguration of life on earth, as without the spiritual upliftment of mankind in its majority the goal of “Life Divine” in the mortal domain is impossible.

Savitri is an inspired work with definite Upanishadic sense in the fact that its principal theme is search for knowledge ('vidya'), that liberates humanity from ignorance ('avidya'), and that their main stylistic device is the conversation between the human and divine characters.

Evolution thus becomes the watchword of Aurobindo. The awakening of the self or raising the life and existence to a higher level of consciousness which can also be observed as a spiritual form of women empowerment is one of the parallel themes observed in Savitri. Further, the integral transformation of Savitri and her inner intuitive development has a much wider connotation to mankind at large. Aurobindo recognizes woman as the symbol of *shakti*, the creative power and in this context Savitri is one of the highest tribute to women in general and stand tall as illustrious examples of Women Empowerment in times of extreme patriarchal domination. In effect, Aurobindo seeks to achieve a realization of human unity, universal peace and happiness, based on a spiritual foundation, which ensure the orderly progress and fulfillment of human destiny.

Savitri is concerned with the consciousness of man and how it, like all other living things, grows according to its own nature. The epic offers to mankind the spectacle of a rebirth of life in spiritual terms. Savitri extends her level of empowerment by her experiences of life and eventually acquires self knowledge and self-transcendence. She educates herself in the self and in otherness by seeing herself, and finally the whole transcendental beings. The action of Savitri is internal and manifesting an uplifting of thought, feeling and sense. The inner mind is the focal point of Savitri which also bears witness to self expansion and the conscious subjectivity of the modern feminine mind. They meditate on the truth of life and the truth of the spirit respectively.

The principles of Women Empowerment as Strong Individuality, Equality and nondiscrimination, and the Desire for Evolution and Empowerment are all found in *Savitri*: Savitri's empowered choice of Satyavan go on to exhibit her feminine right, will power and confidence. Savitri exhibits growth in consciousness. She realizes their 'self' and embody in themselves the qualities of female psyche and unusual female achievement. She rejects the two negations - the ascetic's denial of life and the sensualist's denial of the spirit. Her

concern is with the welfare of humanity in general. She sees salvation in depersonalization as Savitri dedicates herself to the cause of uplifting mankind. Both, therefore, stand as milestones in the history of women's free thinking: She exemplifies a life that is a synthesis of tradition and modernity. She is a seeker of truth and knowledge. She successfully actualizes her potential by manifesting her real self through self-upliftment. Savitri defeats death by raising herself to a higher plane of consciousness. She embodies the magic of *Shakti* (power) and the power of *Prakriti* (nature). She symbolize the evolution of the human love and human soul towards the Ultimate Reality.

Savitri, the feminine identity, through her debate with the dominant masculine God of Death (Yama) subverts the traditional identities of knowledge, reason and hegemony. Her victory in getting back Satyavan, through argumentative victory over the God of Death, is an effort to establish the superiority of female colloquy over male colloquy. The prime object of these female-centered works lies in seeing the subversion of the male-dominated society, valuing the female-self, recognizing the gender-difference and thereby discerning what may be seen as an Indian mode of feminism.

Colonial Masculinity

In a similar context if we are to describe the relation of the figures of the 'manly Englishman' and the 'effeminate Bengali' in the context of colonial India, various aspects come into being: the emergence of the 'New Woman'; the rise of the working class as well as the middle-class; the legacy of colonialist identity for the last thousand years; and the anti-feminist backlash of the 1880s and 1890s with the slow rise of neo-brahminism/ neo-hinduism. Thus, the intersection and inherent contradiction of the relationship between the imperial hegemonic structure with nation, gender, class, sexual identity created the sense of "Colonial Masculinity" in India. The contemporary account of the 'effeminate Bengali babu'

in *The Times* in London demonstrates a surprising idea of the Bengali working class: 'the old East India Company did not develop the Bengali babu - the old East India Company left the Bengali as it found him - a cringing subservient eye servant, to be made use of as circumstances or occasion required. The Crown took the Babu in hand and developed the babu into his present state of loquacity and disloyalty '.

The political hierarchy of colonial masculinity was organized in the following manner (descending) : senior British administrative and military officials of the establishment, and elite non-officials, who are not part of the colonial administration, occupied positions at the helm whereas the other groups of English as well as European people along with a section of the Anglo-Indian class that made up colonial society supposedly shared some of the fruits, though not all, of the 'manly Englishman'. In this colonial ordering of masculinity, the politically self-conscious Indian intellectuals had a unique place: they represented an 'unnatural' or 'perverted' form of masculinity. Hence this group of Indians, the most typical representatives of which at the time were middle-class Bengali Hindus, became the quintessential referents for that 'repulsive' category designated as 'effeminate babus'.

The figures of the 'manly Englishman' and the 'effeminate Bengali babu' were produced and shaped by the shifts in the political economy of colonialism in the late nineteenth century. The colonial cliché of the 'effeminate Bengali babu' was thus tied to the entirety of political, economic, and administrative arena that proved to be an inherent part of the strategies of colonial rule in the late nineteenth century. The fact that, the colonial domination over India was an economic need of the Crown underpinned the relation between the 'coloniser' and the 'colonised'.

In the early nineteenth century the colonial administration, drawing upon British Evangelical and Utilitarian thought, had embarked on a conscious programme of restructuring the existing colonial administration. This development was marked by the

victory of the Anglicist over the Orientalist school of colonial administration. The Anglicist school favoured rule through supposedly indigenous or traditional means, but, the Great Revolt of 1857 eroded much of the early nineteenth-century confidence in the Anglicist programme. The expression of Indian discontent in 1857 was seen as a warning against the radical changing of the existent and accepted, thus traditional Indian society. The suppression of the rebellion and the transfer of India from the East India Company to the British Crown in 1858 ushered in a new era of caution: the colonial administrators henceforth sought allies in the traditional landholding classes and conformist religious leaders who were seen as the prime factors behind the rebellion of 1857. There was a return to the traditional Indian forms of rule through codification of indigenous laws in the second half of the nineteenth century. The colonial administration was faced with the daunting task of accommodating a growing number of Western-educated Indians within the existing colonial administrative and political structures as these groups began demanding exclusive privileges of the British colonial elite. This in a way was impossible without threatening the exclusive rights and privileges to which generations of colonial officials and non-officials in India had thoroughly enjoyed. The new attitude towards the 'educated' Indians was reflected in the colonial 'discourse' that characterised them as 'artificial' and 'unnatural' : 'effeminate babus'. In a way this paved the way for the 'white mutiny' against the Ilbert Bill in 1883. According to Mrinalini Sinha, " the British or Anglo-Indian opposition to the Ilbert Bill rearticulated the broader shifts in colonial economic, political, and administrative imperatives in the politics of colonial masculinity: it substituted for a straightforward defence of racial exclusivity a supposedly more 'natural' gender hierarchy between 'manly' and 'unmanly' men." 'Manhood' in colonial society was based on a particular relationship to property; which was gradually eroded for the Bengali middle class in the second half of the nineteenth century due to the rise of the exclusively European agency trading business models and a gradual loss in income

from land revenue owing to rise in population, land fragmentation and lack of agricultural improvements.

Conclusion

Keeping in context the status of British administration and thus the official retrograde view about the Indians and the acute sense of femininity while categorizing the dominant male class of Indian society as “effeminate” as well as the conservative view of the female class among the indigenous population, the grandness and the novelty of the creative genius of Sri Aurobindo in *Savitri* comes into the fore with vigour rarely observed in the literary output of the age.

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