

Savitri's Tryst with Death

Dr. Surekha Verma

JVM Mehta College, Airoli Navi Mumbai, University of Mumbai

Abstract:

This paper proposes to discuss the mythical tale of Savitri and Satyavan put on a magnanimous scale via symbols by the poet Sri Aurobindo in his magnum opus 'Savitri'. Quintessentially, it is the folk tale of a wife so devoted that she gets back her husband from the clutches of death. However, the poet transforms this folk-lore into a saga of spiritual warfare where the light of divinity transcends the phenomena of death which has the element of time and karma under its fold. Covertly Sri Aurobindo's Savitri transcends the cycle of birth, life and death during her tryst with the latter.

Keywords: karma time death spirituality symbolic

Sri Aurobindo as a symbolist and poet in his magnum opus "Savitri" has indeed portrayed the legendary folk tale of Satyavan and Savitri on a mega canvas extending its scope and view to a near cosmic proportion. While the original tale is about a devoted wife who brings back her husband from the clutches of "death" itself Sri Aurobindo catapults and elevates the story to a dimension grand and magnanimous.

The symbolist approach bequeaths and glorifies it into that of a quintessential archetype saga of karma and spirituality which is indeed fascinating. The transformation of the original tale into a classical, spiritual poetry is akin to a caterpillar metamorphosing into a beautiful butterfly leading to an enchanted mystic transmutation.

As per the tale long time back there lived King Aswapathy who was childless and barren. In order to be blessed by one he performs a rigorous 'tapasya', a penance-cum meditation. Sure enough this bears fruit and he is blessed with a beautiful daughter who he lovingly names 'Savitri', etymologically meaning the sun's rays or simply light. Savitri is a princess born to King Aswapathy after lots of penance and sacrifices. Hence she is a daughter much coveted; an apple of her parent's eye. As days turn into years Savitri grows and moves like a flower finally emerging as a beautiful, eligible maiden. As she grows older, her parents now get concerned to find her a groom for matrimony as is customary in India. This concern propels her parents into a grand groom search for their daughter who they consider one in a million. However, not one bachelor seemed to match her luminosity, her brilliance and even her strength.

Hence her father resigns and consents that Savitri search and find one for herself who she deems fit to be her consort. She roamed and scouted the forests and various pilgrim spots looking for her future husband. After a few days she returned to her parents announcing the good news that she had finally found her match in Satyavan, the son of a king who had lost his eyesight and consequently his kingdom and was presently residing in forest. Coincidentally, sage Narada, known for his clairvoyance and prophecy happened to be visiting King Aswapathy the same time. Sage Narada prophesized that Satyavan, his daughter's choice had only one more year left of his short, mortal life on earth. Hence having married the groom of her choice Savitri would be doomed to a life widowed after one year. She would be destined

to a life colourless, bland, dull and even tormentous as was the case with most widows. Savitri, however remained resolute and relentless about her choice. Graced with power, strength and brilliance she was unperturbed and untethered by the prophecy doomed and dark. Satyavan alone would be her life partner. Once she had made up her mind there was no going back.

Beholding her undaunted demeanour there was no other option for her father but to relent. He married his daughter off to Satyavan to deal with her destiny as she willed.

As a dutiful wife and daughter-in-law Savitri shorn herself off all the ornate peripheries and splendour that she enjoyed as a princess and donned clothes of barks and leaves, that of a forest dweller. She was the epitome of service, humility, duty and the light of spirit. Though apparently playing the role of a contented , dutiful daughter-in-law and wife, yet was she plagued by the ominous prophecy of Narada at the back of her mind.

After a year of Savitri's reckoning as a care-taker to her husband and in-laws at last arrived the doom's day. That day while Satyavan set out in the forest with an axe to procure the required woods Savitri too accompanied him after much of pleading and cajoling. As Satyavan lifted his axe a strange weakness came upon him and he lied down. As Savitri sat by his side nursing, suddenly she felt his body go cold. His breathing ceased. She beheld his spirit taken away from the body by the God of death 'Yama' of a rather fierce , ruthless and an unpleasant disposition with a noose in his hand. Determined to overcome and rather defeat death in the face she followed 'Yama', the Hindu God of death, who was taking her husband away. Death the inevitable and the insufferable told Savitri to return back since there's none in the world born to defy the all-powerful and all-pervading death. There follows a dialogue between the both at the end of which the indisputable phenomena called 'Death' consents defeat and Savitri reclaims her husband on the earth plane.

This simple tale of a wife devoted having the strength to reclaim back her husband from the clutches of death has it's canvas far extended and an extra dimension and a much elicited depth .

The story transcends the folk lore venturing into an omniscient realm of karma to which human beings yet remain bound . Rather the shadows of karma and death is dispelled to usher in the new dawn of spirituality. First of all it can be contended that the spiritual essence or rather the message alongside the symbolism is encapsulated in the name of main characters.

Aswapathy , which etymologically would mean master and not a slave of senses performs a penance ,an austere 'tapas' and meditates to give birth or usher in the light within the being. Aswapathy's physical barrenness is in reality a spiritual barrenness-a gnawing emptiness which a seeker experiences sometime within. Through sacrifices, penance, deep meditation and other spiritual practices he is blessed by the kindling of flame within.

The boon bequeathed to Aswapathy to appease his barren soul by the mother divine has been beautifully described by sri Aurobindo.....

O strong forerunner, I have heard thy cry.

One shall descend and break the iron Law,

Change nature's doom by the lone spirit's power;

Beauty shall walk celestial on earth,

Delight shall sleep in the cloud-net of her hair

A music of griefless things shall weave her charm'

The harps of the Perfect shall attune her voice,

Strength shall be with her like a conqueror's sword

And from her eyes the Eternal's bliss shall gaze.
A seed shall be sown in death's tremendous hour,
A branch of heaven transplant to human soil,
Nature shall overleap her mortal step,
Fate shall be changed by an unchanging will.¹

Savitri's fate was sealed. She was destined to affect the much coveted change and transformation that the earth yearned for which hitherto had lain parched waiting for this beautiful blossoming upon itself. The entire 'Prakriti' was now weary witnessing humanity that trod aimlessly and blindly upon the face of earth. For this purpose all needed the powerful veritable goddess 'Durga' walking the earthly terrain. The birth of the flame called 'Savitri' put to rest all necessary speculations from all and sundry in the realm of Prakriti.

Savitri which means sun's rays yearns to find her truth, her very own 'Satyavan', which if decoded means the vehicle of truth. The light by itself cannot help hasten evolution upon mankind. She searches her truth to shed itself in bounty upon the same. She is destined to shed light on her truth. In our world of duality or opposites, truth cannot exist without illusion nor does the light without darkness. Hence Satyavan and Savitri are inseparable partners for the formidable task of throwing a light on the truth upon humanity stuck at large under the wheel of karma- the whirlpool effect. Karma however can only play out under the influence of time and space. Once the element of time is introduced, the entire creation is subject to transience-or something that is temporary. Time has to have a beginning and an ending. Hence the phenomena of birth and death shrouds the consciousness of all living beings, nay even those of galaxies, milky ways, the planets, satellites and the entire cosmos from the one absolute. The gap between the birth and death is a play-field of karma with the time ticking. Entire humanity lies enmeshed bogged and bound down having lost the memory and awareness of its pristine, heavenly and divine state of existence.

Birth, Karma and death are but 3-fold process and different chapters of the book of life. 'Yama', or the lord of death is the final act of play. The soul at a certain point realizes the futility of having experienced all three again and again and yearns to transcend the different roles and costumes of various characters that it donned through multifarious life times or chapters. It finally wants to be one with the author; the divine source whence it came.

The trick is to transcend the present karmic drama that has played out for the sentient beings since endless reincarnations. One who transcends the constraints of time and space, easily gets off the 'kaalchakra' or wheel of 'karma'. After all kaal-ckara (the wheel of time) which operates and has been going around ad-infinitum operates on the duality of life and death both yoked-in on the everlasting, never-ending drama or 'karma' or 'lila'(play of life).

It's not surprising that in Indian languages there's a single common word, 'kaal' connoting both 'death' and 'time' which though may not be obvious apparently goes very deep. Where's death if there's no time? With the passing of each breath there's an inevitable dying of each moment and life.

Savitri, the sun's ray throws light on the above phenomena since all fall under the purview of tedious, tiresome karma. The fate of purblind humanity is closed and sealed amidst the grind of joy and sorrow again and again. Upon her consort Satyavan's death, Savitri, undaunted follows 'Yama', carrying her husband. In this process her tryst with death is in fact symbolic of throwing light on the futility of forever frivolous karmic life-style that humanity has been contending with since time immemorial.

¹ Mehta Rohit "The Dialogue with Death" Motilal Banarasidas Publishers, Delhi p 150

The shadowed or shrouded truth tarries along through the dark alleys, gallows, the dark-way limping and convoluted. There's always been a tussle between this and that; the dualities and conflicting urges afflicting one and inflicting all and sundry . The dark creates the shadow of delusion, the mirage of illusion. The poet beautifully describes this pathetic state of being in the following lines.....

Man's house of life holds not the gods alone
There are occult Shadows there are tenebrous Powers
Inhabitants of life's ominous neither rooms;
Man harbours dangerous forces in his house,
The dreadful powers held down within the depths
Become his masters or his ministers,
Grey forces like a thin miasma creep,
Stealing through chinks in his closed mansion's doors,
Discolouring the walls of upper mind
In which he lives his fair and specious life
And leave behind a stench of sin and death. ²

The saga and light of Savitri is much needed even if it is a myth as a much needed respite to the soul which wayward and weary plods it's way amidst the tortuous sun scorched karmic, rough terrain filled with sweat and odour, heat and dust ready to collapse any moment with exhaustion.

Throwing a challenge to 'Death' to reclaim Satyavan was no small feat which raises a rather unusual outcry from 'Yama' which is in no mood to loosen its vicious grip out of ego and does not want humanity to rise above the 3-fold process. Upon witnessing Savitri treading the not so trodden terrain it chides
" O mortal turn back to thy transient kind

Aspire not to accompany death.....
Impermanent creatures, sorrowful foam of time"³

In the face of threat and storm, Savitri still persists. The forbidden territory that she treads upon are not meant for frail, lesser mortal beings as us. Death then threatens her to return lest she arouse the fury and wrath of the laws to which each sentient beings are subject.

However,

"The woman first affronted the abyss
Daring to journey through the eternal night
Armoured with light she advanced her foot to plunge
Into the dread and hue less vacancy." ⁴

Death, resolute tries convincing Savitri through injecting thoughts and feelings about it's own supremacy- the superior role as a respite to the frail, sentient beings; the earthlings.

Man has no other help but only death;
He comes to me at his end for rest and peace.⁵

² Mehta Rohit " The Dialogue with Death" Motilal Banarasidas Publishers, Delhi p 215

³ Mehta Rohit " The Dialogue with Death" Motilal Banarasidas Publishers, Delhi p 215

⁴ Sri Aurobindo " Savitri, A Legend and a Symbol" Sri Aurobindo Pondicherry 1973 P 582

⁵ Sri Aurobindo " Savitri, A Legend and a Symbol" Sri Aurobindo Pondicherry 1973 P 593

How the illusion yet eludes with its cunning and very convincing logic to keep one tied onto the throes of life and death, back and forth life after life weaving stories and yet another story either full of fire and fury or the comfortable and coveted but never the silent and serene. This short sightedness granted to humans today is its undoing. The human psyche keeps on trudging amidst profane pleasantries deprived of the destination destined thrown off the track towards destination deceived.

Savitri , who's been through the terrain of light and dark amidst her meditation was not to be daunted so easily. She'd been through the textured passages of the divine and the deceived. She had known and experienced all. Plunging through the fire of 'tapasya' she'd retrieved the real diamond of the eternal love from the burnt coal. Unequivocally resolute she claims,

" I bow not to thee o huge mask of death.

Black lie night to the cowed soul of man, conscious of immortality I walk"

Yet other allurements is thrown off like a spanner by the entity called Death...

" The Real with the unreal cannot mate

He who would turn to god must leave the world.....

" I will give thee all thy soul desires." ⁶

Beholding the sheer ignorance of Death or the consciousness which believes the momentary as real , Savitri beseeches,

".....not for my heart's sweet poignancy

Nor for my body's bliss alone

I have claimed from thee the living Satyavan,

But for his work and mine, our sacred change." ⁷

" Thy gifts resist

Earth cannot flower if lonely I return". ⁸

Besides, Savitri knows that the imperfect, unawakened Earth was destined to be awakened by the twin souls Savitri (the light) and Satyavan(the truth). Twin souls conjoined together forming the light of truth were fated to awaken the humanity still asleep under the mire of illusion, the smoke of delusion. This was their mission and for this they had incarnated. To traverse the light and shadow pathways that death trudded through was the experience that they had to undergo in order to awaken themselves metaphorically. Though the earth lay beaten, meshed between the light and dark yet it was by no means shunned by God. Rather the divine beheld a stupendous opportunity in the earthly realm to awaken the unawakened, to ascend from the gross to the subtle, to metamorphose the vilified dual consciousness, the whine and the win; the scruple and the sin; the dazzle and the dim ; the glitter and the grim.

Savitri knows that the initial or preliminary surges of creation was felt in the elemental void quivering and pulsating. She knows that

" Easy were the heavens were to build for god

And Earth was his difficult matter,

⁶ Sri Aurobindo " Savitri, A Legend and a Symbol" Sri Aurobindo Pondicherry 1973 P 635

⁷ Sri Aurobindo " Savitri, A Legend and a Symbol" Sri Aurobindo Pondicherry 1973 P 633

⁸ Sri Aurobindo " Savitri, A Legend and a Symbol" Sri Aurobindo Pondicherry 1973 P 637

Earth the glory.”⁹

In this scenario , Death challenges Savitri for the last time ,

“ Show me the body of the living truth.....

That I too may obey and worship her

Then I will give thee back thy Satyavan.”¹⁰

To this Savitri neither replied nor argued but rose to her true stature donning her divine form, that of the veritable Durga.

“ A mighty transformation came of her

A halo of the indwelling deity

.....
In a flaming moment of apocalypse

The incarnation thrust aside it’s veil”.¹¹

“A little figure in infinity

Yet stood and seemed the eternal’s very house.” (12)¹²

Hence hailing the power of light Savitri cries

“ Relieve the radiant god from thy black mask

Release the soul of the world called satyavan.”¹³

At last utterly giving in to despair he evokes the forces of the dark but they fell shuddering in front of the light. The darkness, the illusion, the shadow in the face of that which is alive was no more.

Yama or Death entity ceased to exist as

“His body was eaten by light his spirit devoured

At last he knew defeat inevitable.”¹⁴

Yama finally fled abandoning his usual demeanour and the fearful avatar. The frightening cloak donned by him was ripped off and the entity called ‘Death’ vanished into the void whence it came.

At last Savitri, companioned by Satyavan overcoming the shadowy regions of twilight enter the realm of everlasting day. Total annihilation of death may be a physical non- phenomena but the vicious tyranny imposed on the soul, the consciousness certainly gives way to a will which is free and aligned to the divine. The unfathomed, inexpressible chantings break forth into the realm of spirit

“ Beyond what tongue can utter or mind dream.....”¹⁵

“ There time dwelt eternity as one

Immense felicity joined rapt repose.”¹⁶

The realm where Satyavan’s parents resumed their sight and got back their rightful kingdom to rule. With the right rulers to guide the purblind humanity awakened no longer to be tormented by the dark and the

⁹Sri Aurobindo “ Savitri, A Legend and a Symbol” Sri Aurobindo Pondicherry 1973 P 653

¹⁰ Sri Aurobindo “ Savitri, A Legend and a Symbol” Sri Aurobindo Pondicherry 1973 P 654

¹¹ Sri Aurobindo “ Savitri, A Legend and a Symbol” Sri Aurobindo Pondicherry 1973 P 664

¹² Sri Aurobindo “ Savitri, A Legend and a Symbol” Sri Aurobindo Pondicherry 1973 P 664

¹³Sri Aurobindo “ Savitri, A Legend and a Symbol” Sri Aurobindo Pondicherry 1973 P 666

¹⁴ Sri Aurobindo “ Savitri, A Legend and a Symbol” Sri Aurobindo Pondicherry 1973 P 667

¹⁵ Sri Aurobindo “ Savitri, A Legend and a Symbol” Sri Aurobindo Pondicherry 1973 P 677

¹⁶ Sri Aurobindo “ Savitri, A Legend and a Symbol” Sri Aurobindo Pondicherry 1973 P 678

dreary or the monstrous shadow of illusion or the caged frightful delusion under the crushed constraint of the impermanence or the phenomena called time or kaal; verily the 'Death'.

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