

A Comparative Study of ‘Sitayana’ and ‘Savitri’

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Savitri is Sri Aurobindo’s most powerful poetic work. Running into about 24,000 lines, it is the most voluminous epic work in English. It is also Sri Aurobindo’s spiritual testament—his whole philosophy presented through the legend of Savitri and Satyavana. It was written in the course of more than four decades and flowed steadily out of the author’s ever-growing yogic consciousness.

Above all, **Savitri** is a spiritual epic par excellence. The feasibility of a purely spiritual epic—a song of soul—is soundly asserted by Sri Aurobindo himself in **The Future Poetry** :

... The epic, a great poetic story of man or world or the gods, need not necessarily be a vigorous presentation of external action: the divinely appointed creation of Rome, the struggle of the principles of good and evil as presented in the great Indian poems.¹

And **Savitri** is truly a powerful presentation of man’s inner worlds which are no less vast, no less captivating than the outer ones.

That Dr. Iyengar was profoundly affected by Sri Aurobindo’s poetic magnum opus is obvious to all who have read his works, particularly his monumental **Indian Writing in English** and his two epics—**Sitayana** and **Satisaptakam**. Remarkably, Dr. Iyengar devotes three full chapters to Sri Aurobindo’s literary achievement which together make up 63 pages of **Indian Writing in English** out of which the chapter on **Savitri** claims 19. **Savitri** is mystic poetry where symbolism is ever perceptible. But Dr. Iyengar’s enthusiasm for the poem can cope with even this hurdle for which he cites the example of Dante’s epic:

... **Savitri** and the **Divine Comedy** are significant poetry, not mere philosophy or theology dressed up in poetical fripperies²

To tackle the problem of mystical poetry which is profoundly symbolic, he advises the reader “to train himself to respond to the dynamics of mystic poetry so that he may be able to leap from the symbol to the truth behind it, keep steady pace with the cataract of images, and feel the thrill of each splash of revelation as it comes.”³ Dr. Iyengar concludes his discussion of **Savitri** with the ecstatic words of Professor Raymond Frank Piper: “**Savitri** is perhaps the most powerful artistic work in the world for expanding man’s mind towards the Absolute.”⁴ All this shows Dr. Iyengar’s extreme reverence for Sri Aurobindo and his exalted opinion of **Savitri**.

So, no serious study of **Sitayana** can be feasible without reference to Sri Aurobindo’s **Savitri**. In the first place, both concentrate on the female glory, their heroines being two of the most revered and renowned women of the Indian mythology who helped shape the ageless psyche of the most ancient culture of the world. But, even more than that, the relation between the two authors is close and intimate. The relation in India between the Guru and the Disciple has been the most sacrosanct that one may think of : the two entities finally become one. In this case, Sri Aurobindo along with the Mother happens to be Dr. Iyengar’s spiritual mentor. Significantly, Dr. Iyengar has written the detailed biographies of the twain : **Sri Aurobindo : A Biography and a History** and **On the Mother : The Chronicle of a Manifestation and Ministry**

The tremendous influence that Sri Aurobindo exerted on Dr. Iyengar becomes easily evident when one reads **Sitayana** alongside of **Savitri**. For the resemblances between the two epics are quite obvious. As **Sitayana** opens, we find Janaka deeply concerned about the plight of mankind which by his own effort he wishes to redeem.

The kind of concern for the plight of mankind as shown by Janaka is shown by King Ashwapati also.

Sri Aurobindo devotes more than twenty cantos to describe King Aswapati’s Yoga which leads to the Descent of the Grace Divine as Savitri. Dr. Iyengar, on the other hand, wisely precludes the details of VidehaJanaka’s yoga which has been amply described in the Upanishads and the Epics. Both the kings feel that man must change or perish. They also pray for the Descent of the Divine Grace and both succeed in their great endeavour.

The philosophical moorings of Dr. Iyengar also come from Sri Aurobindo. Like Sri Aurobindo, he too rejects the concept of the world as maya and lila.

Both Savitri and Sita have incarnated to redeem the Earth and her unhappy denizens. Their thoughts soar to the ultimate heights, but remain linked to the Earth whose life they have come down to transform. So, both of them are ever in tune with the Earth. Savitri too is as conscious of the beauty and wisdom of the Great Mother as Sita, the Earth-born.

Sita, child of the Earth, carries her breath, her ample spirit which makes her identification with the Great Mother utterly tangible. The earth-life is miserable—chaotic, inharmonious; and it must be transformed, elevated. So, the Divine has descended through both to redeem earth-life; both have been missioned to divinize it.

They are resplendent beings, children of light: an unearthly halo encircles both which ordinary individuals must not only admire, but also withdraw from in awe.

Both Sita and Savitri have undying love for their chosen heroes—Rama and Satyavana, and none other can take their place. That is why when Narada foretells Satyavana's death in a year, Savitri reacts with the full force of her heart and soul:

Once my heart chose and chooses not again.⁵

Sita similarly has decided to make an end of her life in case Rama fails to string Shiva's Bow.

I had made a quick resolve:

that should you by some mischance fail to string
the resistant Shiva's Bow,
or some other archer achieve the feat
and then stake his claim to me:

... ..
I would terminate my life!⁶

After marriage, the two stories have for a while different movements. For, while Sita comes to live with Rama in the grand palaces of Ayodhya, Savitri goes to live in the forest-hut of her husband. But Sita's stay at Ayodhya is rather short, destined as she is for forest-life. When Rama is preparing to go into banishment, we find Sita pleading passionately with him to permit her to follow him and finally she accompanies him.

Both Sita and Savitri enjoy forest-life and completely forget their regal upbringing. They find everything rapturous in the woods. But they enjoy forest-life not only because of its quietude and beauty but because of the presence of their heroes.

But Savitri's heart is ever heavy because of the foreknowledge of her husband's imminent final exit from the earthly stage. And she prepares herself for the great confrontation with Death. Sita, on other hand, is quite happy for thirteen years in the company of her husband amidst the opulence of nature. But her abduction by Ravana during the last year of her exile initiates a page of pure pain in her life's book. But she faces Ravana as boldly as Savitri faces the God of Death. Both Savitri and Sita triumph over Death and Ravana through love. Savitri wins back her husband and her ordeal is over once and for all. But Sita has to go into her second exile to spend twelve years in Valmiki's Ashrama. In Canto 73 of 'Sitayana' entitled 'In the Soul's Mystic Cave', we find her preparing for her 'Vindication and Withdrawal' which recalls Savitri's preparation for her fateful confrontation against Death.

Both Savitri and Sita want to redeem earth-life for ever so that no Ravana could raise his myriad-headed form again to harass and hurt mankind. After Savitri triumphs over Death, "the radiant God" controlling all creation tells her to abandon the earth to lead a blissful life in heaven with her Satyavan:

Renounce the tie that joins thee to earth-kind,
Cast off thy sympathy with mortal hearts.⁷

But Savitri refuses to discard earth-life for the heavenly bliss. For the earth, too, has its own glory:

Earth is the chosen place of mightiest souls;
Earth is the heroic spirit's battlefield,
The forge where the Arch-mason shapes his works.⁸

Savitri makes a vigorous plea for the total transformation of earth-life:

If man lives bound by his humanity,
If he is tied ever to his pain,
Let a greater being then arise from man,
The superhuman with the Eternal mate

And the Immortal shine through earthly forms.⁹

Sita too feels the pain of earth-life and wants its complete transformation. Only then could the dark chapter teeming with evil forces be closed once and for all:

The world of evil, the sons of Darkness,
aren't to be merely put down,
but by a new power of alchemy
need to be wholly transformed.¹⁰

Thus, **Sitayana** closely follows **Savitri** in its philosophical moorings as well as characterisation of the heroine. Sri Aurobindo's philosophy is focused primarily on earth, and here was Sita, Daughter of the Earth, whose life of suffering actually mirrored all the traumas of female existence. The saga of Sita came handy to Dr. Iyengar who had already imbibed the philosophy and poetry of Sri Aurobindo. Happily, he presents the great saga in a convincing manner, no doubt with the support of the earth-centric Aurobindonean philosophy. So, as we have seen, the impact of Aurobindo's poetry and philosophy on **Sitayana** is powerful and profound.

Still **Sitayana** is no carbon-copy of **Savitri**. No doubt **Sitayana** cannot vaunt the splendid mantric quality of the lines of **Savitri** which ever ring with the music of the Beyond. Still **Sitayana** succeeds as an epic because of its fine delineation of the heroine as well as its sober style that remains ever plain, but sure and vivid. In fact, Dr. Iyengar's Sita is no less human than divine, and, in her case, the battle against the dark forces is more poignant and less sure than that in **Savitri** which closes on a resoundingly victorious note:

A power leaned down, a happiness found its home.
Over wide earth brooded the infinite bliss.¹¹

To conclude, **Sitayana** has decidedly been inspired by **Savitri**. The thematic resemblances between the two epics are obvious, Love is the central theme of both of them—love triumphing amidst ordeals of the worst sort. Characterisation of the two heroines follows parallel lines. Both of them are incarnations who have come down in response to the prayerful entreaties of two magnanimous souls. Both have the same mission—transformation of earthly life into a blissful one. Both the heroines have not only a charm that is unearthly, but also an inner strength that is just superhuman. Still, as we have seen, **Sitayana** is a graceful epic with a charm of its own, in many ways different from **Savitri** or any other book—a significant contribution to the corpus of Indo-Anglian writing.

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