

Another Savitri: A Critical Study of Mani Ratnam's Roja

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Abstract: In the epic poem of Mahabharata, the story of Satyavan-Savitri was narrated to present the concept of "pativrata Nari". The women who had the power of chastity and were devoted to their husbands were considered the ideal women in the Indian epic tradition. The character of Savitri was not only an ideal "pativrata" but also the savior who brought her dead husband back to life. The paper will investigate the legend associated with the character of Savitri which has been recreated several times in literary and cinematic history. It will also explore the parallels between the two women's lives and the similar approaches they take inspired by their devotion to their husbands

Keywords: Devotion, ideal wife, nationalism, pativarta nari.

1. Introduction

The idea of "pativrata Nari", a woman who is dedicated to her husband with the power of chastity has been associated with the mythical character of Savitri. In the story-telling tradition of India, the legend of Savitri has an important part in the lives of married Indian women. The mythical story has been retold many times in literature as well as in cinematic history. In this paper, we are going to explain the narrative of another Savitri who struggled for her husband's freedom in contemporary times. crucial to understand the character of Savitri and the legend associated with it. The critically acclaimed film Roja (released in 1992) directed by Mani Ratnam recreated the mythical story of Savitri-Satyavan. The notion which demands devotion and loyalty from women makes the character of Roja very believable. She, like Savitri, expresses the same idea of "pativrata dharma". However, the problems of the contemporary world in the film overshadowed the essence of the myth that was in the story. But before this exploration, it is crucial to understand the character of Savitri and the legend associated with it.

The narrative of Savitri-Satyawan was first mentioned in the Book of Forest (Vana Parva) which is a part of the epic Mahabharata. The tale of Savitri was narrated by Rishi Markendeya when the eldest Pandava, Yudhishter questioned whether there has ever been a woman who had the dedication and love for her husband equivalent to that of Draupadi's. Yama then narrates the tale of Savitri and Satyavan to Yudhishter. Savitri was the gift from the Sun God Savitr to Asvapati, the

king of Madra Kingdom, and Malvi, his wife. She was a child born out of her parents' dedication and devotion, and she practiced the same. The story of Savitri was told as an example to Yudhishter, and then retold a number of times to married women all over India. She has become a recurring trope in literary and cinematic texts. There are a number of films that are based on the story of Satyavan and Savitri: Dadasaheb Phalke's Satyavan and Savitri, Franz Osten's Savitri, and so on. Films like Doctor Savithri (1955) and Roja (1992) are Tamil-language adaptations of the myth. An album was released in 1995 inspired by Savitri's story by the Husband-Wife New Age Group 2002.

Although there also exists a foil to Savitri's trope: many characters in the myths portray the mirror image of Savitri, where they suffer for their husbands, or sometimes because of them. In their devotion, they accept this suffering and live through it. The most significant example of this would be Draupadi, who faced exile, contempt, and humiliation because of her husband. In a similar manner, Sita faced expulsion from her kingdom and went through Agni Pariksha in an attempt to restore Rama's honor in the epic Ramayana. In (Ancient Tamil) Sangam literature, Cillapatikaram's protagonist Kannaki was still devoted to her husband who left her for a courtesan named Madhavi.

However, the concept of a "pativrata Nari" is always linked with Savitri. In the tale, it was always emphasized that the qualities that Savitri had were unique. She was not just a devoted wife, someone gullible and naive, but an intelligent woman who argued with reason. She was an independent savior who brought her husband back from death. The significant part which should be noted here is that unlike the other mythical women characters like Sita who were saved by Ram or Draupadi and Kannaki who suffered in their situations, she didn't seek help from the outside but with her intellect managed to fulfill the journey to convince Yama. In the contemporary world, the idea of "pativrata Nari" can be traced in various films and literature. In the cinematic world, several adaptations have been created to present the ethos of this legend. Roja is one such film that adapted this mythical story and juxtaposed it with the issue of militancy in Jammu and Kashmir. Released in 1992,

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Roja was one of the most critically acclaimed films created in the regional Tamil film industry.

Being a modern-world equivalent of Savitri, Roja's devotion is deemed one of the reasons for her husband's emancipation. It is her incessant efforts and dedication that ultimately unites Rishi and Roja. She is depicted as a character synonymous with Savitri, an ideal wife whose life revolves around her marriage. In marrying Rishi, she sacrifices her own dreams of studying further, an idea that has been mentioned in the film but once. The famous song, "Chinna Chinna Asai" (Choti Si Aasha), which won the National Film Award for Best Lyrics reveals Roja's desire to do something in her life, which seems irrelevant if we look at the story closely.

Roja's individuality takes a hit after the marriage and during it since she believed she was betraying her sister Shenbagam by marrying her fiancé. Even so, her internal conflicts about her sister go unnoticed as she quietly accepts this marriage. She refutes Rishi's attempts at sexual intercourse for the same reason but gives in as soon as the truth about her sister's refusal of Rishi comes out to her. Her bodily autonomy has now been surrendered to her husband since her role is clear: she has become a wife. She never even mentions what once was her dream to her husband. Her character doesn't see much development or growth through the course of the film: she remains the 'ideal wife', and is celebrated for it.

Roja's trajectory deviates though from that of Savitri in some ways. In the epic, Savitri chooses her own husband. Despite being warned that he's doomed to live only a year, she stands by her choice and decides to protect him from Death when the time comes. Roja, however, marries out of family honor. She is expected to abide by societal rules and does so despite her inner conflicts. Her devotion for her husband is uncompromised as she nonetheless fights for Rishi.

Even though Roja is the titular character, her character lacks any depth. It is only a trope, that of an exuberant girl turned into a devoted wife, responsible for the happiness of both her family and her husband's. Where Savitri is well-read, determined, and solely responsible for her husband's salvation, Roja depicts Rishi's attempts to be more meaningful in his fight for freedom. It is his association with the militant Liaqat's sister that helps Rishi escape. Where Roja's pleas to the Indian officials fail initially, Rishi's words leave a mark on Liaqat's conscience. As much as Roja's intervention is significant in arranging the exchange for Rishi's release, Rishi's endeavors make sure that a convicted terrorist does not escape because of him.

In the myth, Savitri is the only one who defends Satyavan against Yama, and does so through her intellect and cleverness. Her quick wit and determination help restore her father-in-law's eyesight and kingdom as well. She is the sole "hero" of the text, with her own agency that enables her to make things right for everyone. However, the crux of the film lies in Rishi's nationalistic fervor, exemplified by his putting out the fire of the burning Indian flag and his refusal to become a pawn for the release of a national terrorist.

It is also important to note that it is only Savitri's wifely virtue and devotion that are highlighted in Savitri's story. We only see her through a patriarchal lens and her intellectual

capability, which is proficient enough to impress Yama, is often overlooked. It is only her dedication that makes it through in characters like that of Roja. Roja embodies Savitri's willingness to follow her husband into the realms of death if need be but lacks her initiative and knowledge. Roja can only fit into the image of Savitri by being a village girl, unaware of modernity and politics, and untouched by the outside world. Like Savitri, her entire life is dedicated to her husband and his well-being. She doesn't understand war or militancy. Her suffering is personal. Her role does not allow her to delve into the problems of the situation, only to grieve for her husband. In contrast to her husband who is a well-educated urbanite, Roja is a simplistic village girl without any agency. She is shown to be religious and obedient, and an ideal wife-in-the-making who agrees to follow the path set out for her by her family.

The recreation of the legend of Savitri also brought back the propaganda which demanded the creation of a "Hindu Nation". If we consider the background, it becomes evident that the former Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi was murdered in 1991 by Tamil militants of Srilanka. The patriotic emotions of the audience were at their peak so a film like Roja provided the ideal picture where the character like Roja managed to find her husband who was kidnapped by Kashmiri militants.

Partha Chatterjee in his work, *The Nationalist Resolution of the Women*, talked about the position of gender in the ideal Indian society, where the women serve as spiritual bodies who are suitable for the inner circle aka "bhitari". On the other side, men deal with the material purposes aka problems of "bahar". Mani Ratnam created the characters of Rishi and Roja who serve this idea partially. An ordinary Tamil man, Rishi who is well educated and follows the modern rules, marries a traditional woman Roja from a small village in Tamil Nadu. This idealistic image of an ordinary couple provided the audience with a familiar picture. The creation of familiar characters and their struggle in the problems of the contemporary world was the main reason why Roja succeeded.

2. Conclusion

In conclusion, Roja, an adaptation of Savitri's legend of a "pativrata nari", elucidates the themes of wifely devotion and juxtaposes it with the issue of terrorism which was prevalent in the 90s. The film gained its popularity through its emphasis on nationalistic ideals and became relatable to the audience because of its familiarity with the myth. The tale of Savitri-Satyavan shows a woman taking it upon herself to save her husband, which is in contrast with women's stories in most of the myths. Roja did, however, diminish Savitri's original agency and intellect to fit into the prevalent gender roles in Indian society.

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