

TORU DUTT'S "SAVITRI": A KEY TO CHARACTER BUILDING

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Abstract

“Savitri” by Toru Dutt is a great poem as it offers various aspects of life which help a man in his character building. Savitri is gifted with every grace. She possesses all the necessary traits which are necessary for character building. The character of Savitri is the need of hour in the present day scenario of moral deterioration. She has proved herself as an icon of love, devotion and duty. She possesses human traits like honesty, patience, courage, determination and confidence which are the cementing force in character building. Truly, Toru Dutt’s “Savitri” is a key that opens the secret of character building. If a human being follows what is in “Savitri”, he will learn how to live peacefully and happily.

Keywords

Character, Illumination, Virtue, Detachment, Duty, Devotion

The right must be our guiding star;

Duty our watchword, come what may. (*Ancient Ballads* 12)

....

Adieu! Let duty be thy guiding star,

As ever. To thyself be true! (*Ancient Ballads* 30)

A man should perform his duty and follow what is right. The height of the character building is the stage of illumination. The stage of illumination comes when a man is true to his 'Self.' Toru Dutt, in the ballad "Savitri", presents the ideal character of Savitri. Her character offers all the human traits which are essential for the character building.

Character, according to Word Web, is "the inherent complex of attributes that determines a person's moral and ethical actions and reactions." Cambridge Dictionary defines character as "the particular combination of qualities in a person or place that makes them different from others." Character differs from personality (a set of personal qualities) as it demonstrates what a person is from within or inside. Personality is what a person seems to be from outside or what he is to the world. The combination of both character and personality results in real identity of the person i.e. who he is in reality. In simple words, a character is "a set of morals and beliefs" which offers a key to an individual for opening a secret how he can behave with himself and also with others. It is a learned behavior that helps him in forming mental and moral characteristics. The way a man reacts depends on his character. It is character that defines and governs a man's behavior pattern, thinking process and control over feelings. A character may be good or bad. It depends on the belief system. It depends whether a man's belief system is based on the truth or the superstitions. A man's character comes out only when he reacts.

It is really surprising that a man peeps into others' characters. He makes assessment and judges their characters with his own parameters. The problem begins when he forgets to peep into his own 'Self.' He thinks of outside and never of inside. He is always interested in the outward journey without considering the inward journey. He never peeps into his heart where the secret of illumination lies. The best way to judge others is to judge oneself first. The

secret is “Know thyself.” This secret leads to the path of illumination. This secret comes when he thinks of character building. The moment he decides his journey of character building, he gets illumination from within. Literature plays its part in character building by providing the parameters of various moral and ethical traits which are recognized by the society as universal.

The art of living can be best learned from literature which is a treasure house of experiences of the great minds. The great minds have given their vision of life. He is a wise man who learns from others’ experiences. Literature is replete with the didactic lessons which offer a vision of life. He can make his life worth living if he follows the moral lessons given by the great men.

“Savitri” by Toru Dutt is a great poem as it offers various aspects of life which help a man in his character building. Before going into the details of character building, it is essential to have a cursory glance over the story. “Savitri” is in five parts. It is the first ballad in *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*. It narrates the story of Savitri, the daughter of Aswapathi. Savitri meets Satyavan, the son of Dyoumatsen, the former king of Salva. She falls in love with him. This is the love at first sight. She shares this love with her mother. Then the mother shares it with the king. The king takes the advice of Narad Muni about the choice of his daughter. Narad asks Savitri to make another choice because Satyavan will die in a year. But, she is adamant and so does not change her decision. She says that if she is fated to be a widow, she will be widow. Finally, she is married to Satyavan. She remains troubled as she remembers the fatal truth of Narad but does not share it with anyone. As the fatal day comes, Satyavan goes to the jungle to collect fruits and flowers. Savitri takes the permission of her in-laws and also goes with her husband. As Satyavan cuts the branches, he feels a headache. He comes down. Savitri takes him in her lap and supports him. The messengers come to take his life but fail to touch him because of the presence of Savitri. Yama comes, reveals his identity, takes the soul of Satyavan and goes away from there. Savitri begins to follow Yama, the Lord of Death. Yama asks her to return and do the funeral rites but she denies. She reveals her determination of going after the soul of Satyavan. Again he asks her to return and then Savitri begins to discuss about life and death. This discussion wins the heart of Yama

who finally offers her boons. He returns the life of Satyavan. Love conquers over Death. Yama, the Lord of Death returns the soul of Satyavan. She takes the soul and comes to the place where the body of Satyavan is lying. She puts the soul upon Satyavan's heart. He wakes up. Thus, she gets success in bringing her husband back from the kingdom of Yama. Toru Dutt has taken this content from the legend which is in *Mahabharata* for her poem "Savitri" though she has made a few changes.

Savitri is gifted with every grace. She possesses all the necessary traits which are necessary for character building. A human being can become anything what he likes but he fails to be a human. What a man needs today is the human feelings which he lacks. The character of Savitri is the need of hour in the present day scenario of moral deterioration. Her character is the instance for every human being who can make his life worth living by following the virtuous qualities of her character. Savitri is an ideal for all human beings if they want to make their life peaceful and successful. A man is a human being but he needs to be "being human."

It is a well-known saying that a man is known by the company he keeps. Company becomes important in the assessment of anyone's character. Company is the index of the judgement of a character. Savitri knows this fact. She always wants to live in the company of the good. It is the company of the good people that becomes a blessing in disguise. The good company becomes the foundation stone of character building. If the company of a man is good, he will certainly have the traces of goodness in him. If the company is bad, no one can save him from being wicked. The company leaves its impression on the person. Savitri knows this truth. She requests Yama to let her live in his company. She does not want to return. The company of the good becomes the greatest pleasure on his earth. If a man talks or converses in such company, he will never feel boring or tired. Rather such company will become a blessing. That's why she requests Yama to let her live in the company of the good.

Of all the pleasures given on earth
The company of the good is best
For weariness has never birth

In such a commerce sweet and blest;

Oh let me, let me ever dwell

Amidst the good, where'er it be. (*Ancient Ballads* 36)

“As you sow, so shall you reap” is a well-known proverb. It is true. A man gets in return what he does for others. What a man does for another man never becomes fruitless. It returns to him sooner or later. A good deed never goes unrewarded. A man gets what he gives. The deeds that a man performs go, and return in time with multiplication. Hence, it is better to do good deed for others otherwise a man falls in the pit that he digs for others. Do good and get good. If you do bad, you will get bad in return. Do favour to others, get favours in return. This is the mantra that Savitri knows well. Toru Dutt makes Savitri say about the truth of favour and good acts.

The favours man accords to men

Are never fruitless, from them rise

A thousand acts beyond our ken

That float like incense to the skies;

For benefits can ne'er efface

They multiply and widely spread

And honour follows on their trace. (*Ancient Ballads* 37)

A man is what he thinks. His thoughts motivate him to perform deeds. Deeds, whether good or bad determine joys or sorrows or pleasure or pain in life. The seeds of sin or virtue sprout in time and appear as punishment or reward accordingly. The theory of the Gita as propounded by Krishna appears in Toru Dutt's “Savitri” when Savitri talks of detachment and the value of righteousness, dutifulness and virtue in life. No one can evade from the consequences of his doings. She knows that her husband will have to bear the consequences of his deeds as she will have to bear of hers. She declares:

He for his deeds shall get his due

As I for mine: thus hear each soul

Is its own friend if it pursue
The right, and run straight for the soul. (*Ancient Ballads 32*)

And each shall suffer as he acts
And thinks,—his own sad burden bear!
No friends can help,—his sins are facts
That nothing can annul or square,
And he must bear their consequence. (*Ancient Ballads 32*)

Detachment and the value of righteousness, dutifulness and virtue in life are the bricks that prepare the ground for character building. Toru Dutt's 'Savitri' offers the theory of detachment. Attachment gives birth to selfishness, which is the root cause of pain and suffering. No one gets what one longs for. She knows the truth that what appears real is not real. It is or may be delusion. This world seems to be full of illusions. These illusions appeal to the senses like bubbles but disappear as soon as they appear.

I know that in this transient world
All is delusion—nothing true
I know its shows are mists unfurled
To please and vanish to renew
Its bubble joys, be magic bound
In Maya's network frail and fair. (*Ancient Ballads 31*)

Savitri is not attached to the things. She remains detached and is not affected if things are not in the order of her likings. No one lives in perfect bliss. One who has taken birth must suffer. A human being becomes human only when he is tried by the fire of circumstances.

I know in such a world as this
No one can gain his heart's desire,
Or pass the years in perfect bliss;
Like gold we must be tried by fire. (*Ancient Ballads 32*)

The moment one takes birth becomes a human being. But, being human is determined by action and deeds. The journey from a human being to being human needs traits like honesty, patience, devotion, courage, determination and confidence. The character of Savitri reflects all these traits which prove to be the cementing force in character building. Savitri is never after longings and belongings. It happens that a man gets what he does not expect and fails to get what he expects. He wishes to realise all his desires but fails to do so. Finally, he has to bear the result of his doing. If he wishes to be at ease, he will have to follow the theory of detachment. The feeling of selflessness comes out of detachment.

A man is his own friend and his own enemy. It is his mind that becomes friend or enemy. The mind becomes friend when the man conquers it. If he fails to conquer his mind, it will become his enemy. The need is to control the mind. This is also the teaching of the *Bhagwad-Gita*. What a man needs is to pursue the right path. If he follows the right path with his mind, he achieves the goal. Power of goodness comes only when a man controls his mind and thinks of others' welfare. Savitri knows these mantras well and follows them in her life. She keeps control over her mind. Her mind proves to be a friend for her. It is her mind that makes her victorious over the power of Yama, the Lord of Death. She is quite confident that the power of goodness and the following of the right are responsible for determining success and peaceful life.

thus here each soul

Is its own friend if it pursue

The right, and run straight for the goal. (*Ancient Ballads 32*)

....

The power of goodness is so great

We pray to feel its influence

For ever on us. (*Ancient Ballads 34*)

When a man dies, he goes alone. Nothing material goes with him. What goes with him are his *karmas*. The records of his virtues and duties remain with him. Savitri knows this. She

leads a higher life. She recommends virtues and duties. Virtues and right duties are to be followed for leading a higher life. Indeed, virtue should be the main aim. A man should make duty his friend. Virtue and duty build the character of a man and help in making him ideal.

Virtue should be the aim and end
Of every life all else is vain
Duty should be its dearest friend
If higher life if would attain. (*Ancient Ballads* 33)

Love, patience and kindness are the bricks that make the building of the character. Savitri possesses these virtues—love, patience and kindness in her character. She gets victory over Yama through these virtues. Situations are the opportunities which test a human being and help him in his journey towards being human. A man does not enjoy life when he faces adverse circumstances. He calls his life dull, boring and painful. He curses life without going into its depth. Pleasure lies there where he sees pain and suffering. Adverse circumstances seem to be like Yama while the truth is otherwise. He fails to peep into the true nature of circumstances, which are boons in disguise. He will be benefitted out of these circumstances only if they are tackled with patience, kindness, mercy and love. Anger or wrath is not the solution. Wrath only worsens the situation and makes circumstances against all the odds. Here Savitri gives a clue how to win Yama or adverse circumstances.

Men call thee Yama—conqueror,
Because it is against their will
They follow thee,—and they abhor
The truth which thou wouldst aye instill.
If they thy nature knew aright,
O god, all others gods above!
And that thou conquerest in the fight
By patience, kindness, mercy, love,
And not be devastating wrath. (*Ancient Ballads* 35)

Life offers boon after boon to him who is sincere and guileless. Savitri is sincere and guileless. Yama praises her for her sincerity and faithfulness. He asks her to demand another boon.

Because thy talk is heart-sincere,
Without hypocrisy or guile;
Demand another boon, my dear. (*Ancient Ballads* 35)

Truly, Toru Dutt's "Savitri" is a key that opens the secret of character building. If a human being follows what is in "Savitri", he will learn how to live peacefully and happily. What counts in life is to be blissful. "Savitri" is to be studied and followed if a man really wishes to be human. Art of living is best reflected in the character of Savitri who has become a model for character building. Savitri has proved herself as an icon of love, devotion and duty. Toru Dutt offers only one key when she makes parents say to the bride: "Be thou like her (Savitri), in heart and head" (*Ancient Ballads* 81).

Work Cited:

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Bio

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