The Making of a Modern Spiritual Classic:
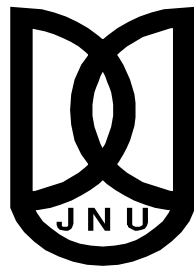
Studying Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol*

Dissertation submitted to

Jawaharlal Nehru University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Philosophy

by

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2016

Date: 25 July 2016

DECLARATION BY THE CANDIDATE

This dissertation titled **"The Making of a Modern Spiritual Classic: Studying Sri Aurobindo's** *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol"* submitted by me for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of any University or Institution.
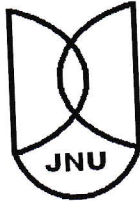
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This may be placed before the examiners for evaluation for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy.

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For my mother, who made it happen.

Acknowledgements

During the process of completing this dissertation, I received help through various sources, but the most empowering and effective of them was Prof. Makarand R. Paranjape, whose persistent support and motivation ensured that I finish what had got initiated through me. I wish to take this opportunity, to express, not merely as a ritual, but from the heart, my gratitude to him.

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Introduction

The desire of the 'modern mind[1]' to trace and historicize the origin of that force "the manifestation of which we call religion" usually results in two explanatory models (Vivekananda 12). One is the spirit theory of religion that posits ancestor worship to be the most primordial of religious practices, and the other that foregrounds nature worship over other rituals (Vivekananda 13). And both these theories, however distanced they may seem to be, when studied closely, reveal a common substratum – a spiritual base; and it is this spiritual element that one wishes to argue as the germinal force of religion.

The word spirit itself has two primary senses: the souls of psyches or the dead and the corporeal aspects of human nature.

Whether man sought after the spirits of the dead and worshipped them or anthropomorphized the stupendous workings of nature to cope with it, one thing is certain: he tried to transcend the limitations of the senses. This struggle of man to move beyond the sensory (world), a psychological tussle of his to understand the pre-phenomenal through the phenomenal, is postulated in this research as the basis of religion.[2] This has been done with a dual motive: first to highlight the subsidence of ancient forms of mysticism, notably of those from the Vedic and the Upanishadic tradition, vis-à-vis the advent of modernity and the consequent downfall of religion, and secondly, to ponder into the possibilities of reincarnation/rejuvenation of these mystical traditions in light of the absence of religion as a coherent system to support them.

Thus, this research, essentially, proposes that (if 'religion' indeed is about mysticism and is a call for a metaphysical quest into the unknown, then) the same modern mind that wants to know the history of religion must look for ways and signs through which this original mystical/metaphysical element concealed and contained in religion may seek to express itself, and with this, comes up with its fundamental problematic, which asks whether or not a 'text' regenerating the mystical/metaphysical element of 'religion' is at all possible in the modern-secular space? And finally, as a response to this problem, hypothesizes the idea of a Modern Spiritual Classic as a genre of literary writings serving the function of mysticism in the modern world.

Divided into three separate chapters and a conclusion, this dissertation opens up with an enquiry into the nature and meaning(s) of Modern Spiritual Classics, and concludes by stating their relevance in today's world.

The first chapter is titled 'What is a Modern Spiritual Classic?', and begins by distinguishing an MSC[3] from Self-Help, and then expounds, in the latter half, the idea of an MSC as a sacred text written in (or translated into) English with three major characteristic: modernism, mysticism, and reception. Throughout the first chapter, whether explicit or not, the contention that an MSC is an extraordinary genre of writing, for it functions as a vent for the repressed spiritual element in religion, is maintained and argued. Although the substantiation process of this contention involves a number of steps, the most crucial amongst all, is the first one; which makes a case for the existence of an MSC by comparing, and thereby separating it from a 20th century mass cultural phenomenon called Self-Help. This method of conceptualizing an MSC negatively is premised upon the observation that MSCs and Self-Help texts are ostensibly quite similar to one another.

In the forthcoming chapters, the approach becomes more textual than conceptual and concentrates on Sri Aurobindo's (1872-1950) *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol* (1940) to study it in the light of the concept discussed in the opening chapter.

To summarize: the object of this research is twofold. At one level, it wishes to introduce and explicate the idea of a Modern Spiritual Classic to argue the conditional possibility of the presence of the spiritual in the modern world, and secondly, wishes to study the making of Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol* (of the ways in which an ancient myth in Sanskrit narrated in the Mahabharata got transformed into a Modern Spiritual Classic in English) to establish it as an MSC. Given the immensity of the task, one wants to acknowledge the existence of a big gap between what this research calls for from the researcher/scholar and the capabilities/sincerity one possesses. Nonetheless, one wishes to work with whatever one has and leave the rest to the process.

Speaking of the process, the dissertation, as mentioned earlier as well, is divided into three chapters and a conclusion …Let's now have a brief look at the construction of these three chapters:

1. What is a Modern Spiritual Classic?

   This chapter concerns itself with the meaning of a Modern Spiritual Classic. It being the most important one in the dissertation, takes up most of the space and is divided into three sub-chapters, first of which tries to prove that an MSC is *not* a Self-Help text, and by doing this aims to dissociate the words Self-Help and Spirituality from one another so as to demolish the notion that anything appealing to the masses and dealing with an apparently spiritual subject can be called a spiritual classic.

   To actualize this task, it follows a comparative approach wherein it unearths the defining features of a self-help text and compares them one by one with the features of an MSC to show how the two are fundamentally different. This approach takes self-help to be one cohesive cultural movement and assumes that various self-help texts and authors with their respective idiosyncrasies do have an underlying commonality to them.

   The second sub-chapter establishes an MSC positively by focusing on its definition[4] and by decompressing it to engender and discuss the idea of a 'Guru'. The argument that runs central to this section is that the presence of a realized mystic/Guru, either in the form of an author or as a recollected experience in the close past by a close disciple, is an imperative for a writing to be called an MSC. This section also disintegrates the term 'Modern Spiritual Classic' into 'modern', 'spiritual', and 'classic' to have a brief look at what each of them means with respect to the whole term. Finally, it ends by listing some major MSCs of the 20th century as examples.

   The third sub-chapter looks at *Autobiogrpahy of a Yogi* (1946) by Paramhansa Yogananda to exhibit the case of an MSC as a form of re-search.

2. The Making of *Savitri*.

   This chapter concerns itself with the 'making' of Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol*. Its prime focus is to study the journey of Savitri-Satyavan myth from it occupying a relatively small yet relevant portion[5] in one of the major epics of ancient India called Mahabharata to it becoming the primary subject of Sri Aurobindo's approximately 24,000 lines long epic poem. Beginning from a structural analysis of a few

Vedic myths and by unpacking their symbolism, it goes on to discuss the distinctiveness of Savitri-Satyavan myth to propose that English as a modern language played a crucial role in the re-ception and re-cognition of Savitri the legend into *Savitri* the symbol. This argument is further substantiated by looking at the Vedic symbolism implicit in the opening lines of the epic poem.

3. *Savitri* as a Modern Spiritual Classic.

This chapter concerns itself with making a case for *Savitri* as a Modern Spiritual Classic. Its purpose is to exhibit how *Savitri* is a 'Modern'-'Spiritual'-'Classic' by exploring it in the light of its Modernism, Mysticism, and Reception.

Now, to reiterate the objective of this dissertation so that we may move to the first chapter, it can be said that it simply wishes to create awareness about a concept (Modern Spiritual Classic) which it argues has received little attention so far and has also been conflated with something totally different from it.

What is a Modern Spiritual Classic?

NOT SELF-HELP!

A Modern Spiritual Classic, to begin with, is *not* a Self-Help book. Apart from its intention, structure, and style, it bears fundamental differences from any writing of the self-help genre.

As stated by Micki McGee, a contemporary American sociologist and cultural critic, in her book *Self-Help, Inc. Makeover Culture in American Life* (2005), the percentage of self-help books published between 1972 and 2000 increased drastically from 1.1 to 2.4 percent of the total number of books in print (200). Another American journalist and author Kathryn Schulz mentioned in her article "The Self in Self-Help: We have no idea what a self is. So how can we fix it?" published in 2013 that self-help industry in 2013 was worth 11 billion dollar (1). Now, considering these data and the implied growth in Self-Help publishing in the last century and also taking into account the emergence of (what one wishes to argue as) Modern Spiritual Classics around the same time, it becomes crucial in order to arrive at a proper definition of an MSC to dissociate these two genres of writing (or at another level, modalities of addressing the 'self') from one another at the very outset.

Essentially speaking, a Self-help book is all about *improving* the self without ever enquiring into it, whereas an MSC, in general, is premised upon a philosophical exposition of the 'self' and places very little value upon its improvement. In other words, its motive is not self-improvement, rather it is 'self-dissolution'. But, popular culture has it that on googling terms such as 'Modern Spiritual Classics' and 'Spiritual Books', the results list books like *The Hot Belly Diet* (2014) by Suhas G. Kshrisagar and *Eat, Pray, Love* (2006) by Elizabeth Gilbert (which clearly are writings of the Self-Help genre) and *I Am That* (1973) by Nisargadatta Maharaj (which clearly is *not* a self-help book) next to one another; and similarly, a book like *The Secret* by Rhonda Byrne and *I Am That* can be found in the same 'Spirituality' section of a bookshop. And such a conflation of two distinct forms of writing does have repercussions. It not only puts various authors and writings parallel to one another, sidelining any and all qualitative (intellectual or Yogic) differences between their subject positions[6], but also, leads to the *creation of a commonsense* that *equates spirituality with self-help phenomena*.

Now the question is: how does one react to this? Does one disregard this by convincing oneself that this is how popular culture functions – by democratizing value and situating the high and the low at par - or does one receive this as a symptom of a larger politics? This research, for the sake of its argumentation, has chosen the latter. It perceives the aforementioned case as a symptom of a larger politics. As someone having read both *The Secret* and *I Am That*, one is aware of the huge qualitative difference between the two, and hence, wishes to clearly manifest the point that writings that are fundamentally and qualitatively of a different kind ought not to be mentioned in one breath, that there are certain texts that have a scriptural quality to them and we as modern readers need to not just re-cognize them as that, but also appreciate them as that without any will to appropriate them. Hence, this part of the chapter is devoted to the argument that Self-Help and Spirituality are not one; in other words, an MSC is not a Self-Help text.

Self-help industry, historically speaking, took off only as late as the latter half of 20th century and since then has become one of the most 'promising' responses to some basic concerns of postmodern subjectivity like - happiness, success, meaning, depression, relationships, motivation, sex life, emotional wellbeing, identity crisis, anxiety, money, social recognition, prestige, health, etc. Over the last few decades and with the emergence of social media and internet, it has branched out from print publication to various other forms like YouTube lectures, seminars, support groups, etc. Although, with ostensible variations in style, form, objects of focus, leaders, and techniques, the self-help culture as a whole, it can be said, shares some basic features. For instance, Dale Carnegie (1888-1955), the author of *How to Win Friends and Influence People,* a classic of the self-help genre, famously wrote (in the same book) - "When dealing with people, let us remember, we are not dealing with creatures of logic. We are dealing with creatures of emotion, creatures bristling with prejudices and motivated by pride and vanity" (19). Now it is this kind of patronizing attitude that is essential to self-help texts. Moreover, the premise of self-help as a cultural movement, one believes, is both presumptuous as well as generalizing and it treats subjectivity as diseased and lacking enough intelligence to cure itself without any external aid; hence the 'help' in self-help.

But on the contrary, a Modern Spiritual Classic, in general, views the mind/ego/self in a positive light. Its reference point is not the value system created by society, but a metaphysics which enables it to look at the self/ego as a manifestation of something[7] *dimensionally*[8] bigger

than itself, and thus enable an outlook free of the therapeutic obsession which drives and governs self-help. For instance a Nisargadatta Maharaj's book would not be (and cannot be) titled something like 'You Can Win'[9], assuming a defeated self which ought to win over the world, but would rather be called 'I Am That', where 'I', the self, would be raised to the level of the 'God'/Atman and cherished as its taintless, ever-perfect manifestation. Moreover, an MSC's reasoning, unlike self-help's, would not be *instrumental, but philosophical*. It would question commonsense, raise fundamental queries, and have little concern for the effects of the causes it would trigger in its readers/subjects.

To digress a bit, one must note that although there are as many differences as there are ostensible similarities between an MSC and a self-help text, one common substratum which causes the conflation of the two genres is the fact that they both take the 'self' as their subject matter, that both are concerned very less, at least at the level of appearance, with the social. It is the personal self – the mind and its stuff - that appeals them both. However, their understanding of this thing they call self, their respective philosophies and politics, or the style and methodology they adopt for actualizing their objectives, differ radically from one another.

Returning to the original line of thought: self-help texts other than being patronizing to the self that they seek to treat, also manifest an *obsession with action* (or answers) as compared to a *curiosity towards understanding* (something to be found in an MSC). They (self-help texts) either take the self/mind at its face value, or at best, refer vaguely to psychoanalytical terms; in other words – psychobabble. Vague assertions based on the *howness of action* and an absence of a rigorous enquiry dedicated on the *whatness of ideas* constitutes the structure of a self-help text. For example, a quick (critical) glance at the title of Robert Holden's (born 1965) 1998 publication *Happiness Now!: Timeless Wisdom for Feeling Good FAST* reveals why the book would have become a success. As per me, what it basically did was it invited buyers to 'feel good fast' without having to do much. Neither did it have time to elucidate rationally/analytically ideas such as happiness, goodness, feelings, etc., which it was fundamentally concerned with, nor did it show any sign of self-criticality allowing its buyers the freedom to assess its absolutist claims (and become readers). In brief, it presented itself as a readymade solution to infinitely complex and nuanced problematics of subjectivity and managed to infuse subliminally into the masses an impression that happiness can be achieved *just*[10] by buying this book.

Also, it is the aforementioned obsession of self-help texts with action[11] (howness) instead with thought or criticality (whatness) and their unphilosophical 'Mcdonaldization[12]' of various existential concerns that comes out as *the* politics of the self-help movement. In other words, a self-help text is fundamentally steeped in something called a '*Profit-Bias*', which is not the case with an MSC.

What is meant by profit-bias and how an MSC differs radically from self-help texts on this point is something we will discuss, but let us first look at some valuable criticism of self-help movement from anti-self-help writers so that we may later locate an MSC more concretely vis-à-vis self-help (by taking into account these critics' views), and thereby arrive at a final difference between the two genres. In last few decades, self-help industry has faced some serious criticism from cultural critics across Europe and America in form of various articles written in famous journals and in full-fledged writings devoted towards dismantling the whole movement. Writers such as Steve Salerno, Kathryn Schulz, Wendy Kaminer, Micki McGee, and Robert J. McAllister, have written quite staunchly against the American self-help movement. So much so that their ideas compel one to ponder upon the claims made by these texts.

To refresh: the two points that we have gathered up till now that define self-help texts are:- firstly we saw that they patronize the audience they seek to address, secondly, that they are instrumental in their approach and share an obsession with answers or action. …Now, let us also look at what the aforementioned critics have to say about self-help so that we may include their assertions in these two deductions and form a wholesome (as well as credible) understanding of self-help to ultimately compare and contrast it with MSCs and be able to fathom the crucial difference between the two, which concerns us at this point of writing.

1. Steve Salerno's *SHAM: How the Self-Help Movement Made America Helpless* published in the year 2005 uses the word 'SHAM' as an acronym for 'Self-Help and Actualization Movement' and argues that the self-help movement has not only proved ineffective in meeting its claims, but has also proved socially harmful (24-25). Therein he raises crucial questions like: "If self-help is so effective at what it's supposed to do, then why is there so much evidence that Americans, and the society they inhabit, are so screwed up?" (36). His point is that if the books and tapes that are sold under the self-help tag in such a large number actually work for the buyers, then one should expect lives to improve and not

meet the same customers again and again with same problems, which does not really happen (89). He also points out how motivational books and tapes provide the buyer with a momentary boost that subsides within a short span of time, making the buyer crave for more and become a repeat customer (91). Finally, he attacks that major argument in self-help, which shields and sustain it, by calling it another trick to dupe and maintain the customer. The argument being that if things don't work out for someone, then s/he must know that s/he is not good enough yet, that his/her thoughts are not positive enough to let the newness and positivity emanating from the tape/book/program affect her, and that s/he should either go for a different method or be patient with the present one.

> If SHAM doesn't transform your life, it's not because the program is ineffective. It's because *you're unworthy*. Victimization-based formats make this point unflinchingly, telling participants whose lives remain stagnant that they are slaves to their dysfunctions, that they'll have to invest more effort if they hope to rise above their innate handicaps. And so you go away thinking, *Well, maybe the next book or seminar will do the trick. Or the next after that . . .* (8)

2. American cultural critic Kathryn Schulz writes in her essay: "The Self in Self-Help: We have no idea what a self is. So how can we fix it?":

> Let us call it the master theory of self-help. It goes like this: Somewhere below or above or beyond the part of you that is struggling with weight loss or procrastination or whatever your particular problem might be, there is another part of you that is immune to that problem and capable of solving it for the rest of you. In other words, this master theory is fundamentally dualist. It posits, at a minimum, two selves: one that needs a kick in the ass and one that is capable of kicking. (2)

> […] the master theory of self-help: It mandates a conflict between two parts of the self, but beyond that, it makes no particular demands and answers no particular questions. Who is divided against whom, who has the power and who is powerless, how to ensure that the "right" part of yourself winds up in charge: All this is up for grabs. (2)

As articulated in these lines, Schulz's problem with self-help is that it lacks philosophical insight. Her basic contention is that self-help hijacks and appropriates highly complicated and mystical problematics like the Self or human mind into simplistic binaries of positive and negative thought or of good and bad thought ("your sacred soul against your mortal flesh") – without even acknowledging the work done by thinkers/philosophers in the past on same topics, or even attempting to find out what and where is this thing called "sacred soul" which they so often bring in (2).

3. Robert J. McAllister in his work *Emotion: Mystery or Madness* (2007) accuses self-help movement for making people addicts to seeking external aid for personal problems (156). He writes that "The more people read them [self-help books], the more they think they need them... more like an addiction than an alliance" (156-7).

4. Wendy Kaminer in her book *I'm Dysfunctional, You're Dysfunctional: The Recovery Movement and Other Self-Help Fashions* published in 1992 analyses some concepts and components of self-help industry, for example: Twelve-step program, Dysfunctional families, Codependency, Recovery, etc., and writes that : "The self-help tradition has always been covertly authoritarian and conformist, relying as it does on a mystique of expertise, encouraging people to look outside themselves for standardized instructions on how to be, teaching us that different people with different problems can easily be saved by the same techniques. It is anathema to independent thought" (4).

In brief, the four new points we get from these critics are that self-help is ineffective, addictive, unphilosophical, and unreliable. Adding these with the first two, we get six defining features of any self-help text; and they are as follows:

1. **Loop of Victimization and Empowerment:** Self-help movement sustains itself in the market by maintaining an ever-growing loop of victimhood and empowerment, wherein it makes the customer aware of his sufferings, which it says are difficult to get away with, while simultaneously it breeds hope of empowerment in him/her.

2. **The Short-Cut Obsession:** Self-help texts lack philosophical enquiry and are instrumental in their approach, which means that their focus is action, and not understanding, and they are obsessed with objectivity and deny ambiguity.

3. **Reductionist Politics:** The politics of self-help is reductionist in nature, and it is so because it facilitates mass marketing[13] for it.

4. **The Myth of Sickness:** Self-help creates a culture of disease, spreading the feeling that there is something wrong with people and they must strive to become something/somebody else.

5. **One-Fits-All Theory:** Self-help texts function by a principle of standardization, creating singular, readymade, one-fits-all model, like the Twelve-step program, and with that look forward to address and answer some infinitely complex and varied socio-psychological issues like addiction, depression, divorce, etc.

6. **It Worked With Me, So It Works:** Self-help employs anecdotal reasoning for proving its success. For instance, *emotionally represented anecdotes* of a few successful cases are repeatedly broadcasted to gain more and more customers, while the majority which failed to derive any utility from the program/book/tape is ignored.

Now after having gone through the six defining elements of any self-help text, I wish to aver that each of these points is but an offshoot of one central idea contained in any self-help text – viz. Profit-Bias. Profit Bias, it can be said, is that one yardstick which if employed to measure the difference between self-help and MSC can reveal a fundamental difference between the two.

What *is* Profit-Bias? Let us look at that now. Profit bias is an act of deliberate choice wherein one selects or favors, as a strategy, certain elements of a particular matter over another for utilitarian motives. The ethic of such a decision making is contained in the result of the action only. In other words, profit making is the only ethic involved; and a bias potentially capable of breeding profit, or any desired result, say fame, is not considered unethical. The term is also used widely in politics to hint at the prejudice of the capitalist class in their decision to vote for a particular political party and never even consider critically their decision making processes.

The question now arises how Self-help contains profit-bias? Broadly speaking, there are two major *symptoms* of the self-help movement that make me assert that it contains Profit-Bias.

1. Firstly, the fact that it emphasizes on and propagates only those ideas and values which are easier to sell as *information products*[14] and seeks its identity from the world.

2. And secondly, that almost all self-help texts have a tendency to misrepresent or/and conceal the *subject position*[15] of their authors.

The title of Robin Sharma's bestseller *Who Will Cry When You Die* (1999) is a perfect point to begin an exposition of the first symptom. Death we all know is a mystery; but only because it mystifies life post itself. Just like it would not be an exaggeration to say that all mortals at some moment or the other go through the desire to find out whether life exists after death or not or what happens to the dead after death, similarly, it can be averred that the curiosity to find an answer to a question like - Who will cry when I die, or whether life lived was worthwhile or not? – troubles almost everyone. And it seems to me that the title of Sharma's book has emerged out of a recognition (or from an observation of the prevalence) of this idea only – from the fact that the contemporary human self, though not consciously, but certainly, lives in, or at least goes through, a state of self-assessment doubting throughout whether any of her relatives or friends will truly mourn her death or not; or to put differently, whether or not the world will remember her after she is gone. Note that we cannot take the titling of the book to be an incidental event, we will have to assert that the choice of the title signifies a bias as it picks up an already existing question in the market field and promises to deliver an answer to it. We will also have to bring forth the question of *ethic in writing* and ask how a piece of work that has its locus outside of itself in the market and which concerns itself only with ideas that have remarkable mass coverage and are easier to sell, or a writing which has no intrinsic center to it and lives on a rhetorical claim of 'helping' its readers[16], can be referred to as a Classic, that too a Spiritual Classic.

Moving on from this particular example to dive more deeply into the first symptom, but *with* the aforementioned problematic in our heads:- we can see how self-help in general feeds on basic subjective frailties like fear, conflict, laziness, etc. and promises values that the masses in general strive for. It chooses quite deliberately a particular value system and limits itself only to that. For an example, it'd never say something like: 'We, as a commune and not as individuated beings, must aim towards a society wherein the means of production are shared equally by all classes and there is no distinction amongst humans on the basis of caste, creed, race, community, etc.', or that: "Life is beautiful and meaningful *as it is* – without success, money, fame, recognition, etc. and even if one wishes to attain these, one must know that there is no secret as

such that can be told.' On the contrary, it'd deliberately reinforce an already-existing value system in its subjects by repeatedly telling them statements like: 'Your thoughts are everything', 'You must take the responsibility of your life', 'You can transform', or my personal favorite - that 'There is a higher power than you *in* you, which loves you a lot[17]', and by instilling in them with the help of such statements the belief that they themselves can help themselves provided they allow themselves to be helped.[18]

In a nutshell: self-help as a politically charged text with power, aims to maintain and sustain the status-quo, and as a psychological text, resists as much as possible any thought that can potentially either liberate its subjects from their narcissistic tendencies or help them realize the futility of seeking values like happiness or success. And all of this it does fundamentally because conformism and narcissism, we know, are way easier *information products* to sell to the masses than those ideas that have a radical or subversive bent.

Furthermore, another interesting idea that pops up in this respect is that - whichever form of guidance self-help gives to its subjects, be it Power Yoga[19], Guided Meditation, giving Mindfulness methods, explaining The Law of Attraction, and so on, they are all directed towards achieving something *in* and the world. For example, a self-help advert will write something like: 'Power Yoga *for* Weight Loss', or 'Meditation *for* a Concentration Mind'. And besides this, what is even worse is that the authority that a self-help master assumes, which allows herself to sit on a pedestal and guide others, too does not emerge, as it should, from her 'subject position'; rather, it emerges from, and its degree is directly proportional to, the (amount of) recognition/appreciation/acceptance the personality/image of the author receives *from the world*, which again is manufactured with the help of ideological process like self-fashioning and marketing. The argument goes like: 'If a self-help author is popular and if his writings are bought, then there must be substance in him'. We must note the externality manifested in this statement about the authority of a self-help author. In short, what is being said is that the evidence of expertise which gives a self-help writer the authority to speak/guide is contained in and determined by her Cultural Capital[20] and not by an intrinsic quality of hers. The nub of the matter being, something stated before as well, that the reference point of self-help unlike how it seems, is the outside world, the social system, and hence, it neither has nor can afford any space for subversive thought.

To reiterate (for the sake of clarity): we argued that the authority of a Self-help author is culturally manufactured and that *the proof of their expertise is their personal success, which they receive and maintain by selling themselves as experts*. We must note that other than an externality in the authority of a Self-help author, there is also a hidden circularity, meaning that the Cultural Capital which becomes the proof of expertise for a Self-help author and bestows her with the authority to guide the masses, gets raised, in the first place, with the help of the same authority that it provides.

The case of an MSC, however, is different. As stated initially as well, its reference point is not the concrete material conditions of the world, but a metaphysics which enables it a philosophical and often subversive outlook on social systems and structures. To put simply, an MSC's author being a liberated one, meaning a *Jivanmukta*[21] or a realized Yogi, relates with the world in order to give and not to take; his/her relation with the world is of love and not of attachment. And only out of compassion and love for the world and without expecting anything in return, the liberated one works as a Guru/Master and disseminates his/her teachings, which in turn take the form of an MSC. For example history has witnessed the presence of many Mystics, or to be specific, Fakirs, who have lived an obscure life not desiring much from the world, but have authored, or at least served as inspiration, for many MSCs. One personally is aware of a minimum of two cases: firstly of Ramakrishna Paramhansa (1836-1886) around whom the MSC *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (1942) is based, and secondly of Nisargadatta Maharaj who authored the MSC *I Am That* (1973) (which was translated by one of his close disciples Maurice Frydman (1901-1976) from original Marathi into English). Factually speaking, the former was an ordinary priest in Dakshineshwar Kali Temple located in Dakshineshwar, Kolkata, and latter lived the life of a middle class man at Khetwadi - a small locality based in Southern Mumbai.

Note that both of these do not seem to be personalities with high Cultural Capital, or at least were not so during the times they lived, yet they produced MSCs, and that could happen, I believe, precisely because, unlike Self-help, their authority was not an offshoot of their Cultural Capital, but of their *Subject Positions*.

We will go into detail about the concept of Subject Position and see how it plays an elementary role in the constitution of an MSC when we will look at the second symptom, but let us first summarize what all we have gathered up till now. We basically unraveled many ideas in

the process of diagnosing the first symptom of Profit-bias in Self-help. Firstly we saw that the subjects self-help deals with arise from a decision making process that is biased against those ideas and queries that the world already desires an answer for, and secondly, that the expertise of self-help authors on these subjects is not genuine but constructed, and thirdly, we deduced how authority in Self-help is determined by a *circularly externalized* process of manufacturing Cultural Capital, and thereby, the evidence of expertise, and lastly we contrasted this position with that of an MSC to discover that the authority therein is an expression of the Subject Position of the author and not of his/her Cultural Capital.

Now seems to be an apt moment to jump into the second symptom of profit-bias in self-help, which is that self-help texts, in general, either misrepresent or conceal the *subject position* of their authors. The term subject position, in context of this research, means *the state of consciousness or the subjectivity of the author of a particular writing, and is indicative of the position s/he takes vis-à-vis the object of the text by making some specific but abstract claims to prove his/her entitlement over the subject matter of the text*.

The contention here is that self-help texts do not consider it important at all to bring forth openly and clearly the subject position of their authors as it allows them to represent (subliminally) the author as any desirable image, or in other words, as a myth[22], of/in the market, and thus generate more capital – cultural or otherwise.

To digress a bit, one calls self-help movement as something steeped badly in profit-bias and is so passionate about distinguishing it from Modern Spiritual Classics, because one sees self-help primarily as a business industry that disguises itself in the cultural space as a spiritual phenomenon by masquerading quite effectively the persona of a compassionate parent having the benign motive of 'helping' its children. In addition, one also wants to assert, although at the risk of sounding absolutist and naïve, that self-help being what it is – an industry with a profit-based ethic - is drugged so badly with Profit-Bias that it *cannot* ever be critical of itself and its methods, even if they may be doing a lot of harm to the society in general and to the individual customer/reader in particular. This point, one remembers, is also made by Steve Salerno in his book *SHAM: How the Self-Help Movement Made America Helpless* as he asks: "What if it's actually SHAM that's screwing people up?" and writes (8):

Does it not make sense that a society in which everyone seeks personal fulfillment might have a hard time holding together? That such a society would lose its sense of community and collective purpose? That the self-centered individuals who compose that society would find it difficult to relate to, let alone make sincere concessions to, other self-centered individuals?

Yet SHAM artists and their apologists refuse to accept responsibility for the collateral damage self-help does to society. That's no surprise, really, given that they refuse to be held accountable even when they harm the very individual consumers whom they lure in with grand promises of transformation, happiness, and success. (8)

Coming back to the original line of thought: one believes that just as it does not require much attention as a reader to notice a conscious self-fashioning[23] of/by self-help masters for/in the culture they seek to promote, similarly it can easily be observed how these masters don the potentially sellable image of a 'Guru' to achieve their respective motives. What basically happens is that: *Marketers become Masters!* And this misrepresentation of marketers are masters comes out as a strategic choice on part of the marketers to sell themselves; which for me is a symptom of Profit-Bias as these marketers are biased against a specific cultural image so that they may manipulate the audiences into believing them and buying their content. In short, they become Gurus, because the world demands Gurus, not because they *are* that (like the author/inspiration of an MSC). In an MSC, however, *Guru's subject position precedes Guru's identity*.

Going deeper in the claim of Gurudom by a self-help guru: the Sanskrit word 'Guru', in one sense, means 'the dispeller of inner darkness'; 'Gu' here means darkness and 'Ru' the one who dispels it. Going by this definition, a Self-Help 'guru', arguably, cannot be a 'Guru' as s/he possesses not the light that can dispel darkness, but only exhibits a pretense of possessing it because of the demand of such a possession in the market. Had the society demanded a different image, it would have donned that as well. Moreover, one sees that the strategy of Self-help to *use* the idea of a 'Guru', or of Spirituality or Yoga, to serve its motives produces almost irrevocable effects as it not only superimposes upon these ideas limited and biased interpretations of them, but also manufactures misleading opinions about them in the society. One notices in this respect

how an idea as beautiful as Spirituality {which has been understood as a movement towards the spirit of things (as compared to an acceptance of how things seem to be), as a deeply philosophical and mystical exercise of/by the human subject in solitude of his/her consciousness or by a particular group of people in society to seek the essence of their existence and derive meaning out of it}, gets reduced to and becomes synonyms of something as shallow as self-help.

Another interesting case of such manipulation of ideas comes forth when one studies the significations of the term 'Yoga' in popular culture. Those who are familiar with the ancient Indian sage Patanjali and his treatise on Yoga known as *Yoga Sutras* (compiled around 400 CE), can easily notice the conceptual as well as practical difference between what Patanjali thought of as Yoga and what floats around in the market today by the same name. It would not be an exaggeration to say that what Patanjali presented as a means to Samadhi or Ananda or as an octagonal model to attain the climax of one's being, has got appropriated today into a special kind of physical exercise with a godly touch to it.

Nevertheless, coming back to the moot point of concern right now, which is how the question of subject position differentiates an MSC from self-help:- a little while back we arrived at the idea that self-help texts conceal the subject position of their authors so that they (the authors) obtain the power to represent themselves as any desirable image in the market. Now, let us address this point from another angle and hypothesize that *the inexpression of subject position in self-help is actually an expression in disguise*, that the choice of the author to stay mum regarding his/her state of consciousness is a clever act of positing himself/herself *as* somebody. To substantiate this assertion and to also understand practically the importance of the idea of subject position especially in the case of non-fictional texts that make claim of profundity or sacredness and follow an instructive style, let us compare two writings: one, in which the narrative voice clarifies the authorial subjective position in light of the claims made about the text, and the other in which claims are made (about the uniqueness of the text and the abilities its author) but without any such clarification.

Given below are the excerpts from these two writings. First set (numbered 1) is from Makarand. R. Paranjape's *Acts of Faith: Journeys to Sacred India* (2012) and the second (numbered 2) is from Rhonda Byrne's *The Secret* (2006)

1. … I would like to believe that this book is an example of such grace. For at every step of its completion, I have seen a hidden hand directing its outcome. In that sense this book itself is an act of faith.

    There should be no confusion about the subject position of its author, though. I have no pretensions to spiritual realization. This is not the work of a person who has attained self-mastery or one who claims to guide the perplexed. Rather, it is a record of my struggles with myself, the help I received, and the path I trod. If it is useful to fellow-seekers or strengthens their faith, I shall consider my labours rewarded. (10-11)

2. A year ago, my life had collapsed around me. I'd worked myself into exhaustion, my father died suddenly, and my relationships with my work colleagues and loved ones were in turmoil. Little did I know at the time, out of my greatest despair was to come the greatest gift.

    I'd been given a glimpse of a Great Secret—The Secret to life. The glimpse came in a hundred-year-old book, given to me by my daughter Hayley. I began tracing The Secret back through history. I couldn't believe all the people who knew this. They were the greatest people in history: Plato, Shakespeare, Newton, Hugo, Beethoven, Lincoln, Emerson, Edison, Einstein.

    Incredulous, I asked, "Why doesn't everyone know this?" A burning desire to share The Secret with the world consumed me, and I began searching for people alive today who knew The Secret. (ix)

    […]

    My intention in creating The Secret was—and still is—that it will bring joy to billions around the world. The Secret team is experiencing the realization of that intention every day, as we receive thousands upon thousands of letters from people across the world, of all ages, all races/ and all nationalities, expressing gratitude for the joy of The Secret. There isn't a single thing that you cannot do

with this knowledge. It doesn't matter who you are or where you are, The Secret can give you whatever you want. (xi)

[…]

As you travel through its pages and you learn The Secret, you will come to know how you can have, be, or do anything you want. You will come to know who you really are. You will come to know the true magnificence that awaits you. (xii)

The first piece has been picked up from the acknowledgement section of the book and the second comes from the foreword written by the author herself. Both of these, as they are, kind of runways for the reader to take off into the book, because of the places where they appear, can be posited as being suggestive of the politics of the author; and one *wants* to do that for the sake of comparing them and seeing how their difference, which essentially is of subject position clarification, is the difference between a self-help text and a writing akin to an MSC. A quick glance at both the pieces makes it clear that both are making certain claims, which probably are going to be substantiated in the forthcoming sections of the book. But since one does not have access to those sections, one would not delve into the veracity of the claims made, but rather look at the tone/form in/through which these claims are made.

Makarand Paranjape's *Acts of Faith: Journeys to Sacred India* claims to be an upshot of a divine blessing, viz. grace, and quite similarly, Rhonda Byrne's *The Secret* presents itself as a book that can "bring joy to billions around the world" (by helping its readers find out who they are and achieve whatever they desire) (xi), and its author as a messianic force with a Secret to reveal to the masses. But is this all that there is, are these two really doing the same thing – creating a divine aura in the beginning by making big claims so that the reader may suspend his/her criticality and just believe whatever is said in the book? Or something else is happening? Or is this happening, but only in one of the cases? My argument is that indeed such a thing is happening, but only in one of the two cases, which, is the case of a self-help text.

One does not need much of an argument to prove that in no circumstances and by no criteria *Acts of Faith: Journeys to Sacred India* can be called a Self-help text. For it is evident from the excerpt picked from it that neither it is making a claim of "guiding the perplexed" (Paranjape 2), nor is it escaping from clarifying the subject position of its author. Now, left is

Byrne's work, which one things can easily be proved self-help. So let's prove it so by bringing in the six characteristic points of self-help we unraveled in the initial part of this chapter and test its selected excerpts in light of them.

1. **Loop of Victimization and Empowerment:** The message in the first excerpt, with which the book opens, is that there is a "Great Secret—The Secret to life" (Byrne ix), which only the author and a few more lucky ones have been blessed with. Note that this kind of message at the very beginning of the book is meant to fill the reader with a sense of lack – something upon which the book will base itself. Soon after giving out this message it is added that the author, being the benevolent one that she is, has taken the responsibility upon herself to reveal this Secret to the rest in the form of this book. And it is claimed thereafter that once the hitherto unsuccessful and weak reader learns this secret, s/he will become omnipotent: "The Secret can give you whatever you want" (Byrne xi).

2. **The Short-Cut obsession:** The belief that there can be and is a secret to life.

3. **Reductionist Politics:** An interesting case of how much and to which extent can a self-help book be reductive comes up when we see Byrne mention nine different personalities from diverse disciplines spread across the history of time in one single sentence and contract them all one under vague idea and write: "I began tracing The Secret back through history. I couldn't believe all the people who knew this. They were the greatest people in history: Plato, Shakespeare, Newton, Hugo, Beethoven, Lincoln, Emerson, Edison, Einstein" (ix). She, quite interestingly, not only clubs these personalities (Plato, William Shakespeare, Sir Isaac Newton, Victor Hugo, Beethoven, Abraham Lincoln, Thomas A. Edison, and Albert Einstein) together, but also credits them with the possession of the Secret that she is trying to sell in her book.

4. **The Myth of Sickness:** The book begins with these lines: "A year ago, my life had collapsed around me. I'd worked myself into exhaustion, my father died suddenly, and my relationships with my work colleagues and loved ones were in turmoil" (Byrne ix). If we just keep aside for a while the personal aspect and see these lines in light of the fact these are the opening lines of a bestseller that received huge criticism from the intelligentsia for being a façade of scientific knowledge and for duping the customers into believing in a Secret and giving false hope to people looking for some real help, then we

might go beyond their benign and pitiable appearance and appreciate the idea these lines can be a marketing gimmick meant to elicit response from the market by evoking something as universal as suffering.

5. **One-Fits-All Theory:** It propagates in the form an overarching Secret the idea that one solution can befit multitudes of humans and their infinitely complex and varied problematics.

6. **It Worked With Me, So It Works: '**The Secret *helped* Byrne; it worked for her. It got revealed to her in her moments of 'greatest despair' and helped her come out of them. And since it helped her, it is proved that not only it exists but also works.' *This* seems to be the reasoning used in the text to argue the truthfulness and efficacy of the information product being sold. This anecdotal style of reasoning, as mentioned earlier as well, is an important characteristic to self-help.

Now that Byrne's book has passed the test with flying colors and has come out as a quintessential self-help text just by the examination of a few paragraphs from it, let's go back to the comparison we had initiated between select excerpts from Byrne's and Paranjape's works, the objective of which was to understand the importance of clarifying subject position in certain kinds of writings and to prove how a self-help text by escaping subject position clarification enables a misrepresentation of its author's subjectivity.

When the narrative voice of *Acts of Faith: Journeys to Sacred India* says that it would like to believe that this book has emerged from a divine inspiration, namely "grace" (Paranjape 2), it immediately follows it up with a rational and critical act wherein it normalizes the mystical aura created by the claim with an honest clarification about the subject position of its author. It states: "There should be no confusion about the subject position of its author, though. […] This is not the work of a person who has attained self-mastery or one who claims to guide the perplexed" (Paranjape 2). What this act does is that it endows a certain materiality to an overtly spiritual claim, suggesting that the book to come is as spiritual as material, as sacred as profane, as mystical as real, and as divine as mortal; and as a result moderates the tone of the claim to allow the reader the freedom to be critical in his/her reading process. But on the other hand, when we look at Byrne's *The Secret*, we do not encounter there any moderation in the claims made. Rather we notice, at the very outset, the fact that there is no separate narrative voice in the

lines and the author herself is narrating the text, which to an extent gets qualified as we consider the fact that the book is author's personal mission of delivering the Secret to the world, but also gets problematized when we take into account the possibility that perhaps the first person narration in the text is used as a device to conceal the subject position of the author.

Nonetheless, as we move forward to the claims, we see that they in this case, unlike the previous one, are not at all complemented or moderated with any rational input, and are in fact, toned up high to ensure that the reader experiences an awe for them and suspends his faculty of disbelief to follow whatever the books says like some enchanted mindless bunny. It is also noticeable that where the former uses humble and moderately crafted statements like: "I would like to believe that this book is an example of such grace" (Paranjape 2), and "If it is useful to fellow-seekers or strengthens their faith, I shall consider my labours rewarded" (Paranjape 2), this case uses words and phrases emphatically and in an absolutist tone to engender an aura of value. Confidently made assertions like: "There isn't a single thing that you cannot do with this knowledge. It doesn't matter who you are or where you are, The Secret can give you whatever you want." (Byrne xi), and "As you travel through its pages and you learn The Secret, you will come to know how you can have, be, or do anything you want (Byrne xii)", compel the reader into believing in the veracity of the pitched information product, namely The Secret, and breeds the seed of hope in him/her, which in turn makes the sale of the book more probable. For instance, a middle-class man having read these statements will dream of class ascendency and buy the book, or a divorcee can buy it in hope of finding his/her true love, or a 'not-so-good-looking' woman may buy it in hope of becoming more fit/'beautiful'.

Another important purpose of these high-toned claims besides ideology formation and ensuring the sale of books is to inflate the persona of the author and create a cultural myth of her; and this becomes obvious when one realizes that all claims made in this case about the power of the book are actually claims about the power of the author only, and such claims when coupled with some direct ones: for instance when Byrne asserts that she knows the same secret which personalities like Plato, Shakespeare, Newton, and Einstein once knew, engender an enormous/mystical persona out of the author, which not only 'helps' in the sale of book/idea, but also becomes bigger and bigger as more and more books are sold. In other words, the author is made to transform with the help of these claims from a *Marketer* with an information product to

sell in the market to a benevolent *Master* on a spiritual mission of sharing the secret of life with fellow human beings.

And this transformation, which is more of an impersonation, or as one calls it: misrepresentation, one believes, is never possible in a case like Paranjape's *Acts of Faith: Journeys to Sacred India*, where the authorial subject position is clarified and the tone of the claims is moderated. Hence, we see how relevant subject position as an idea is in texts that make spiritual claims. Now as we can appreciate the value of subject position clarification, especially in context of writings that make big claims, either about their authors' subjectivity or about their own potency or about both, let us close this comparative enquiry by mentioning the deductions we made from it and stating the conclusion that arose from those deductions.

Firstly we deduced that we cannot judge a text solely by the magnificence of its claims and that we should rather study the form in which those claims are made; secondly, we discerned the relevance of Subject Position as an idea and saw that a text that escapes subject position clarification bestows itself with an ideological power to misrepresent its author's position, and as a result, causes harm not just to an individual reader, but also to a culture as a whole; and lastly, formed the conclusion that since clarification of subject position in a writing brings authenticity and open-endedness and eventually reduces the possibility of conflation of fundamentally distinct genres of writing and qualitatively different kinds of subjectivities, it ought to be an imperative for texts that make lofty spiritual claims.

This comparative enquiry, apart from revealing the politics of self-help texts and highlighting the importance of subject position clarification, also resolved the few queries with which we had begun this chapter. For example, the germinal question of this chapter, the one that set the ball rolling: 'Why and how Self-Help and Spirituality seem synonymous in popular culture?' got answered as we unraveled and studied the process through which the commoditization of Spirituality takes place in popular culture under the rubric of Self-Help and analyzed how the Marketers are represented as Masters in these kinds of texts.

Now, as we bring an end to the comparison, let's refresh and state the narrative we have created so far in this chapter: *We began by saying that for the sake of defining an MSC, it is required that we differentiate it from Self-Help, because in popular culture they both are often*

confused with each other; then, we set out to discover some key features of self-help so that we may argue how none of them is present in an MSC, and then by bringing in some major critics of self-help, we gathered its six defining features, all of which we clubbed under one overarching idea, viz. Profit-Bias, of which we said, two primary symptoms are found in any given self-help text: first one related to the concept of Information Products and the second one to the idea of Subject Position. Currently, we are just about to finish our exposition into the second symptom. So let's do that by seeing the role and function of Subjection Position as an idea in an MSC.

As far as the case of an MSC goes, we must understand that an authentic, clear, and honest exposition, either within the writing or without it, about the subject position of its author or the 'Guru' upon/around whom the text is conceived and created is really crucial to it deriving its identity; and unless an authentic relationship between the subject position and the object of a text is ascertained, a writing cannot be put under the category of an MSC. In other words, the claims/assertions made in an MSC, unlike self-help, do not emanate from a disguised or culturally manufactured subject position, rather they emerge from a state of consciousness that is *entitled* to make those claims.

Moreover, in an MSC, both the object, i.e. the idea(s) with which it deals or which it wishes to establish, and the subject position, i.e. the state of consciousness from where it emerges, are not constituted by and dependent upon either the personality of the author or the market forces. Instead, the object of the text, its subject position, and the relationship between the two have, in this case, a metaphysical/mystical locus (something which also accounts for the 'spiritual' element in it).

The best example to substantiate this assertion is Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol*. It is contended by Aurobindo and many other critics of *Savitri* that the epic poem did not emerge from the personal self of its author but was only received and translated by it, and for this reason it should be attributed not to Sri Aurobindo – the person but to an ontological category coined by him called the Overmind.

In this respect, Aurobindo in a series of essays titled "On Savitri", which he wrote parallelly to the epic poem's creation process, has mentioned some really interesting points, which if recognized can help us go deeper into the Overmind aspect of the text, and thereby, help

us differentiate an MSC with Self-help in respect to the idea of subject position. Where in earlier cases of Self-help writings we saw how subject position was constructed vis-à-vis the market forces under the spell of Profit-Bias, here Aurobindo gives us a glimpse of the nature of subject position in an MSC, as he writes:

> One has to use words and images in order to convey to the mind some perception, some figure of that which is beyond thought. (10)
>
> I used Savitri as a means of ascension. I began with it on a certain mental level, each time I could reach a higher level I rewrote from that level. […] In fact Savitri has not been regarded by me as a poem to be written and finished, but as a field of experimentation to see how far poetry could be written from one's own yogic consciousness and how that could be made creative. (7)
>
> I receive from above my head and receive changes and corrections from above without any initiation by myself or labour of the brain. Even if I change a hundred times, the mind does not work at that, it only receives. (7)

The implication of these statements, if noted, is that: since the role of the 'mind[24]' in the creative process is of a medium to receive and translate as it is and without any appropriation something which is beyond itself, the authorial subject position of the text cannot be located in the personal self of Sri Aurobindo; but needs to be traced in a state of consciousness that is beyond his mind, and by the virtue of being that, is unidentified and untouched by any and all prejudice contained in it. Now, if we contextualize this implication in light of Profit-Bias, we see that Aurobindo is basically saying that the relationship between *Savitri*'s subject position and the claims it makes is not founded upon a bias against profit making and generating Cultural Capital, but is based on an *internal yogic practice*, which being an exercise devoid of Ego has not any concern for the demands of the market forces.

Now, as we go back to the argument to support which we had brought up *Savitri* while keeping in view the aforementioned deduction (that the relationship between the subject position and the object of an MSC is founded upon an internal mystical realm and not on market forces), we find ourselves face to face with the idea of the '*Guru*'. What is a Guru and what is his function in the creation process of an MSC are two questions we will take up in the forthcoming section of the chapter, but before we do that, let's aver that it is the Guru from whose (mystical)

state of consciousness/subject position an MSC arises, and that an MSC becomes an MSC if and only if it is either a firsthand work of a Guru narrating his spiritual journey as is the case with *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1946) or if it has been written about him/her by somebody who happened to be close to him/her - both spatially and subjectively, and spent a considerable amount of time with him/her to re-flect on and reproduce the past authentically as is done by Mahendranath Gupt aka 'M' in the case of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (1942).

The nub of the matter is that unlike Self-Help which requires the central presence of a *Marketer* to make the best out of the text via Profit-Bias, it is the presence of a genuine *Master* that constitutes an MSC. And this point being the point of ultimate difference between Self-Help and MSCs, brings us to the closure of the long-running process of differentiation between the two.

To review: in this process of contrasting the two kinds of texts, we discovered that Self-Help is an industry and it works on the demand-supply model. We also observed how Self-help creates, as it were, a culture where simple answers are demanded over ambiguous ones, short cuts over long routes, painkillers over health, discussions over conclusion, and so on, and then feeds upon its subjects. In other words, we realized that Self-Help is a market driven phenomenon and it speaks/writes *about*[25] only that which the world wishes to hear/read and speaks/writes *as*[26] those whom the world wishes to hear/read; and finally, concluded the process by containing the entire journey and the multifarious derivations made from it in one idea, i.e.: *Where Self-Help is a product of the mind of a Marketer, an MSC arises from a state of no-mind via the Guru.*

Now… after having traversed a long and indeed tedious journey trying to define an MSC negatively by distinguishing it from Self-Help in light of Profit-Bias, the time has come to define it positively, which we will do in the forthcoming section of the chapter titled: (as a response to the interrogative title of the chapter: "What is a Modern Spiritual Classic?") 'A Sacred Text in English' by looking mainly at the idea of the 'Guru' and studying how s/he plays a crucial role in the constitution of an MSC. But before we enter that segment of this chapter, let us close this one by stating once again the reason(s) for undergoing this tedious differentiating process so that we may realize that by defining what an MSC *is not*, we have made it quite easy for us to define what it actually is.

We began this chapter by giving a negative definition of a Modern Spiritual Classic - by hypothesizing that it is *not*-Self-Help, and this beginning was based on the observation that popular culture conflates Self-Help with Spirituality and for us to define an MSC properly, we must first free it from the clutches of Self-Help. But the primary reason for proceeding on this journey, unlike it was stated in the beginning, was not this observation, but something beneath it. To articulate it now: it was actually the basic problematic of the research only that required us to first and foremost separate the two kinds of writings. How? Let's see.

To refer to the introductory chapter of this dissertation: we had begun by stating that if 'religion' *indeed is* fundamentally metaphysical and involves a spiritual quest, then the […] modern mind that wants to know the history of religion […] [should] look for the ways and signs through which the *original metaphysical element concealed and contained in 'religion'* may seek to express itself in an overtly irreligious and hostile environment;[27] and as a response to this statement, we hypothesized the idea of an MSC proposing that in a world driven majorly by secularist discourses, and where religion, or to put better, the idea of the sacred, has receded to the subconscious, a Modern Spiritual Classic as a literary genre is one coherent and substantial medium for the primordial spiritual force to manifest itself. But now, as we have, in a long process, placed the idea of the Guru at the center of an MSC, we can replace an MSC with a Guru in this proposition and note that the answer to the research problem is actually the 'Guru' only; meaning that is that the functioning of a Guru via an MSC that serves as a vent for the hitherto repressed spiritual element of religion, and that this research for it to be able to resolve its basic problematic must establish the idea of a Guru. Hence, it became crucial for one to show forth the fundamental difference between a *Marketer* and a *Master* (Guru) by contrasting Self-Help with an MSC as devotedly as possible.

Another important point which also compelled one to differentiate these two is the fact that Self-Help emerged as a cultural phenomenon in the West in late 90s as a substitute for the Guru. This assertion gets a support when one notices that Self-Help was born at a time when Western society was experiencing an overpowering need of a 'Guru' (mainly because of a shift it had undergone from theocentricism[28] to anthropocentricism[29] with the Renaissance) to serve the function of the missing God, and it also becomes clear how a historical condition that ideally

should have been the ground for the Guru as a non-institutionalized mystical force to come into forefront, became the pretext for Self-Help to establish itself.

To conclude: one traversed a long and indeed tiring journey for distinguishing Self-Help from the idea of an MSC, essentially because one observed that in a culture where religion is on a retreat, but the search it epitomizes is intact, seeking becomes almost a natural act, and a seeker in such a culture, broadly speaking, is available with only two options: to either be faced with a *Marketer* or with a *Master*. And given the fact that self-help has the flamboyance to attract audiences and create a condition where the presence of a *Master* (Guru) in the society can be totally undermined, the probability of a seeker reaching a *Master* instead of a *Marketer* is minimal. Hence, one considered it essential and inevitable for this project to begin by exposing the ideologies of self-help and showing how it is purely meretricious and bears no connection whatsoever to Spirituality[30].

Now, it is time we move forward to the second section of this chapter, which will exhibit a positive definition of an MSC.

A Sacred Text in English

A Modern Spiritual Classic is a sacred text that is conceived by/around a 'Guru', is written in (or translated into) any language of universal recognition, and has three major characteristics: firstly of a modern text, secondly of a form of writing endowed with mysticism (where mysticism means the quest of the mind to attain freedom from its conditions by realizing the true Self), and thirdly, of a widely recognized title with enduring cultural value. These three characteristics, it ought to be noted, are also signified respectively in an MSC by the three terms that constitute its name: 'Modern', 'Spiritual', and 'Classic'; or to put it the other way around: in these three terms only are contained the three major elements that comprise the essence of an MSC: its Modernism, its Mysticism, and its Reception.

Although there can be (and are) numerous factors that can facilitate the attribution of these three qualities in an MSC, the most crucial amongst them is the presence of a Guru, which bestows the MSC with its second and most decisive feature, viz. mysticism. As a result, it can be said that it is only in light of mysticism that an MSC gets endowed with its other two characteristics. And this point gets verified as soon as we see that an MSC like *Savitri* could not have been so widely popular in modern times without Sri Aurobindo – a mystic-being at its heart.

Now, having made this point, let us look at all the three characteristic one by one in detail.

1. **Modernism**: An MSC receives its modernism mainly from the *form* that it takes and from the *style* which it employs to deal with its subject matter. For example, an MSC like *Autobiography of a Yogi* owes its modernity to its construction as an autobiography and to its peculiar usage of footnotes to modernize the overly mystical claims made in the text.

2. **Mysticism**: An MSC receives its mysticism from the Guru. A Guru, in the shortest possible terms, could be 'any-body'. What matters is not the form he takes, but the state of consciousness/subject position that he[31] is. In other words, different Gurus may have different *statutes* in the world, but they would be one in their *state*. Hence, a Guru could be a Yogi[32] or a Jivanmukta or a Prophet, and despite traditional and cultural differences,

the texts emerging *through* his various forms could collectively be named Modern Spiritual Classics because of the oneness in their subject positions**.**

Paranjape in his book *Acts of Faith: Journeys to Sacred India* has a chapter dedicated to the meaning(s) of a Guru. Some of the ideas contained here will be helpful to gain clarity over the matter.

The chapter titled 'Ten Meditations on the Guru,' meditates on the Guru as a vibrant life-force living amongst us, and provides the reader with some really creative insights into the matter. One has picked three specific excerpts from the chapter, which, by explicating the state of consciousness/subject position of a Guru, will clarify the point one has been making since long: that a Guru as an author/inspiration of an MSC is the conditional possibility of mysticism/spirituality to take place in the modern world, and that a modern writing, which makes mighty spiritual claims but has a false guru behind it, is not an MSC but self-help.

The three excerpts are as follows:

2.1 The Guru is not a person but a function, a process, a principle. Whoever takes us closer to God, the higher consciousness, to our reality, is the guru. Whoever takes us away from it cannot be guru. (199)

2.2 The guru as the 'self' pulls us to the truth from within; the guru as the 'guide' points to the truth outside. Thus from both within and without we are urged towards the goal. Within and without are, after all, purely relative. Actually, God, guru and self are identical. (201)

2.3 The guru is how non-duality presents itself to duality. We function in latter most of the time, but long for the former. The guru reminds us that 'I,' 'you,' 'he,' 'she,' 'this,' 'that' and so on are not the ultimate reality, however convincing they may seem. All these are one, indivisible and integral. Only the guru can show us our non-separation from all that is, from the humblest particle of dust to the distant stars. (207)

3. **Reception**: While discussing this last characteristic, it is important to bring in the idea of sacredness in an MSC, which helps account for its 'recognition and labelling' as an MSC amongst readers.

An MSC receives its sacredness as an upshot of a scriptural quality bestowed upon it by the culture/community in which it is conceived, written, published, and circulated. For example, texts like *I Am That*, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol*, and *The Bijak of Kabir*, because of having been written by/around mystic figures like Nisargadatta Maharaj, Ramakrishna Paramhansa, Sri Aurobindo, Kabir have gained widespread recognition as holy scriptures by followers/disciples of these mystic figures/Gurus, and have been translated and published in multiple languages as well as editions.

It is notable how *Bijak* for Kabirpanthis is not a secular text but indeed a scripture; which they *recite* and *remember*, and not just read[33]. Similarly, *The Gospel* and *Savitri* for sannyasis of the Ramakrishna order and the disciples of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother are mediums for them to connect with their Gurus and guide themselves on a daily basis towards their spiritual goal.

Now that we have looked at the three basic characteristics of an MSC, let us list some titles that illustrate them.

Published over the course of twentieth century, are several noteworthy writings from mystics and Gurus across the globe that fall under the category of Modern Spiritual Classics. Ten of them have been picked on the basis of their closeness to the definition of an MSC discussed above, and can be listed in a chronological order as:

1. *The Bijak of Kabir* by Sant Kabir, translated into modern Hindi by Linda Hess and Shukdeo Singh (first published in 1911), is a compilation of Sant Kabir's compositions. It is considered a sacred text – a holy scripture - by the followers of Sant Kabir, who are famously known as Kabirpanthis.

2. *The Prophet* by Labanese-American writer-poet-artist Kahlil Gibran was originally published in 1923, and is a spiritual masterpiece of the poetic style. It has been translated into over forty different languages. Joan Acocella, a contemporary American journalist,

begins her article "Prophet Motive: The Kahlil Gibran Phenomenon" by stating the immense cultural value of the book. She writes:

> Shakespeare, we are told, is the best-selling poet of all time. Second is Lao-tzu. Third is Kahlil Gibran, who owes his place on that list to one book, "The Prophet," a collection of twenty-six prose poems, delivered as sermons by a fictional wise man in a faraway time and place. Since its publication, in 1923, "The Prophet" has sold more than nine million copies in its American edition alone. There are public schools named for Gibran in Brooklyn and Yonkers. "The Prophet" has been recited at countless weddings and funerals. It is quoted in books and articles on training art teachers, determining criminal responsibility, and enduring ectopic pregnancy, sleep disorders, and the news that your son is gay. Its words turn up in advertisements for marriage counsellors, chiropractors, learning-disabilities specialists, and face cream. (1)

3. *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiences with Truth* by Mohandas K. Gandhi alias Mahatma Gandhi was first published in 1927 and translated from original Gujarati to English by Mahadev Desai. This book stands alone as an MSC for the Reception aspect.

4. *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol* by Sri Aurobindo, originally published in 1940.

5. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* written by Mahendranath Gupta (1854-1932) under the pseudonym 'M' and translated into English from original Bengali by Swami Nikhilananda. It was first published in 1942 and narrates the conversations Ramakrishna Paramhansa had with his devotees and with people who visited him.

6. *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1946) by Paramhansa Yogananda.

7. *God Speaks* by a lesser known mystic called Meher Baba (1894-1969) originally published in 1955 has a cultic recognition amongst the followers of the mystic.

8. *Meetings with Remarkable Men* by a twentieth century Russian mystic George Gurdjieff was first published in 1963 and translated from original Russian into English by a British intellectual named A.R.Orage (1873-1934). It is a quintessential MSC with an emphasis on the Mysticism aspect.

9. *The Way of the Sufi* by Idries Shah was first published in 1968. It is, as the name suggests, a writing devoted to Sufi mystics and Sufism and argues in favor of an influence of Sufism on Western civilization.

10. *I Am That* by Nisargadatta Maharaj, translated into English by his disciple Swami Bharatananda, famously known as Maurice Frydman. It was first published in 1973 and is a Modern Spiritual Classic par excellence.

Having looked at a few exemplary cases of MSCs, it is time to move towards the next section of the chapter and establish the last but certainly not the least important feature of an MSC – one that exhibits the fact that MSCs are *a form of re-search*. This feature of an MSC will try to show that the accusation made against most spiritual narratives - that they are other-worldly or that they deal with 'mystical-stuff' and contain no rational or/and empirical evidence, is not a well-founded argument.

In order to establish it, we will look at a few footnotes of Paramhansa Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi* and argue that it is an MSC with a research based attitude towards mysticism, in other words, a form of re-search.

A Form of Re-search[34]

> These pages reveal, with incomparable strength and clarity, a fascinating life, a personality of such unheard-of greatness that from the beginning to end the reader is left breathless…In these pages is undeniable proof that only the mental and spiritual striving of man has lasting value, and that he can conquer all material obstacles by inner strength…We must credit this important biography with the power to bring about a spiritual revolution. (*Schleswig-Holsteinische Tagepost*, Germany)

These lines are addressed to Paramahansa Yogananda's (1893-1952) autobiography titled *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1946). They were published in a German magazine in 1946 - the year the autobiography was released - as a form of critical appreciation for the book. Out of the numerous reviews and appraisals that this book received, it elucidates the point perfectly. Therefore it can be used as a vantage point for entering an analysis of the text. It contains the two basic aspects of the text's narrative: 'the idiosyncratic or the personal' and 'the spiritual', and presents a harmonious outlook on them.

The opening sentence of this piece speaks of the first aspect as it appreciates the ability of the book to transform the individual reader by its revelation of "a fascinating life, [or of] a personality of […] unheard-of greatness," and manifests the greatness of Paramhansa Yogananda, the person. The second and the third sentences, however, exhibit a wider perspective. They talk not of the individual Paramhansa Yogananda, but of a Yogi, reading about and meditating upon whose life can bring about not only individual transformation, but also a "spiritual revolution."

The contrast between these two aspects: between Yogananda as the localized individual-seeker, and Yogananda as the liberated master forms the basis of the narrative of the text. This contrast is also an important element of an MSC since it suggests that the mysticism of the book is not other-worldly or purely abstract in nature but is of a kind that bears a concrete-material relation with the world of phenomena; and perhaps that is why, a literary genre as modern as autobiography has been used to articulate it.

Furthermore, the narrative flow of the text when studied closely reveals some really interesting ideas in this respect. For instance, the first person narration makes the reader dwell in various contrasts (such as those between the personal and the mystical, reasoning and faith, science and miracle, sacredness and profanity, and so on) and juxtaposes them to question stereotypes attached to autobiography as a genre of writing or/and with mysticism as a spiritual phenomenon. This process of juxtaposing binaries gets manifest in the narrative mainly through an adjoining of the two Yoganandas: one who being a body bears a name (Mukund Lal Ghosh[35]) and whose life can be chronologized, and the other who being a realized Yogi, belongs to a state of consciousness that is beyond time-keeping and naming[36].

Hence, in light of these observations, the fact that this book is not a conventional autobiography dealing with an individual's life starts unfolding itself, and one starts appreciating the possibility that perhaps it is a Modern Spiritual Classic of the autobiographical form with an emphasis on the 'modern' aspect of it.

As we speak of the extraordinariness of this particular book, we must also simultaneously accept the fact that it is not one of its kind, meaning that it does have a historicity to it and has emerged out of a particular historical condition, alongside, and/or as a reaction of several other texts. Spread across the vast canvas of the twentieth century, are many spiritual autobiographies akin to Yogananda's, which are as spiritual or/and modern as this book is. *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiences with Truth* (1927) by Mohandas K. Gandhi, which as the title suggests, narrates a series of writer's experiences with 'Truth' is written by a widely recognized spiritual figure and by no means is any less a Modern Spiritual Classic. Therefore it ought to be recognized that MSCs, like any other literary product do not emerge out of a vacuum or in isolation, and are conditioned by the various socio-politico-cultural variables of the times in which they was conceived, produced, and circulated.

Published for the first time in 1946, a year before India got its independence from British Raj, *Autobiography of a Yogi* bears both nationalistic and global relevance. Nationally, it corresponds with the freedom movement in India and bears an intimate relation with the revolutionary changes that were taking place in Indian socio-politico-cultural and religious spheres at that time; globally, it can be said that the end of the Second World War, the popularization of Einstein's General Theory of Relativity, and the intellectual debates that were

prevalent in the modern West in the first half of the twentieth century about ideas such as Enlightenment and Reason, are some factors vis-a-vis which the book was written. In other words, it can be said that *Autobiography of a Yogi* as a book is relevant not only for practitioners of Yoga or for those interested in mysticism, but also for sociologists or literature students interested in studying the influence of movements in the Western society on the literary productions of twentieth century India as well as how Yogis like Paramhansa Yogananda and Swami Vivekananda were shaping themselves and their writings as responses to the discourses prevalent in the West.

The book is 478 pages long and comprises of forty nine chapters (which seamlessly manifest the development of the narrator from Mukund Lal Ghosh to Paramhansa Yogananda, and finally to a globally renowned Yogi), and can be roughly divided (chapter-wise) into six parts portraying the different phases of author's spiritual journey. The first part of the narrative (chapter one to ten) narrates Yogananda's search for a Guru before his spiritual initiation, second (chapter eleven to twenty six) recounts his beginning years as a Sadhaka[37]; third (chapter twenty seven to thirty six) speaks of Yogananda's life as a Swami, fourth (chapter thirty seven to thirty nine) describes his encounter with America, fifth (chapter forty to forty six) reports his meetings with various Saints and Yogis, and sixth concerns his journey back to the West. A chapter-wise detailed analysis of the book is beyond the scope of this study and must be restricted to this overview since the objective is, to reiterate, to prove that this book has a re-search based attitude towards mysticism.

Speaking of the objective, there are a few questions in this regard that ought to be addressed. For instance, what does it mean for a writing chock-full of descriptions of mystical occurrences to be called one with a 'research based attitude'? What connotations does the word *research* have in such a context? What is it that can be averred from a writing that conflates established binaries like reason and miracle, mysticism and realism in a logical manner? Additionally, how can we argue for its immediate relevance as containing truly radical and pathbreaking ideas to convey to the modern society? Each of these questions are so relevant that they call for a rigorous unpacking.

In the very first reading of *The Autobiography of a Yogi* it becomes evident that it attempts a re-cognition of several ancient texts and yogic practices vis-à-vis the developments in

modern society at various levels. This will be evident to the reader when s/he notices the abundance of footnotes in the book (that often occupy entire pages). These footnotes mostly serve the purpose of substantiating the otherwise unbelievable claims of the text, and are the primary medium through which the book obtains its modernity. Given the kinds of occurrences that are mentioned in the book, had they not been there, it would have been impossible for any rational creature to read the book as an autobiography and not as science fiction. For instance, in the third chapter titled "The Saint With Two Bodies," when Yogananda narrates a situation wherein he shows how a yogi named Swami Pranabananda could teleport himself, the book suddenly starts sounding more like science fiction than an autobiography. However, just when the reader enters into doubt, s/he is made available with an enlightening footnote that elucidates the event by expounding an empirically argued theory of teleportation. The footnote goes like this:

> In its own way, physical science is affirming the validity of laws discovered by yogis through mental science. For example, a demonstration that man has televisional powers was given on Nov. 26, 1934, at the Royal University of Rome. "Dr. Giuseppe Calligaris, professor of neuro-psychology, pressed certain parts of a subject's body and the subject responded with minute descriptions of persons and objects on the opposite side of a wall. Dr. Calligaris told the professors that if certain areas on the skin are agitated, the subject is given super-sensorial impressions enabling him to see objects that he could not otherwise perceive. To enable his subjects to discern things on the other side of a wall, Professor Calligaris pressed a spot on the right of the thorax for fifteen minutes. Dr. Calligaris said that when certain spots of the body are agitated, the subjects can see objects at any distance, regardless of whether they have ever before seen those objects." (24)

It is debatable whether there is merit in Dr. Calligaris' findings, but one thing that is clear is that after going through this footnote the same reader who had almost discarded Yogananda's claim (of having met a Yogi who could teleport) for its irrationality, begins to rethink the boundaries that separate the possible from the impossible. It is this very possibility of the modern subject to be able to rethink his/her boundaries (and question human limitations) in light of

his/her reading of the book, for which a Modern Spiritual Classic like *Autobiography of a Yogi* is written.

To take two more examples (of footnotes), which will show how the book apart from complicating modern knowledge systems, is also attempting a re-cognition of ancient texts: firstly, we see in the eighth chapter titled "India's Great Scientist, J. C. Bose" how Yogananda, in a lengthy footnote, credits ancient Indian spiritual traditions for their knowledge of atomic structure. The footnote is as follows:

> The atomic structure of matter was well known to the ancient Hindus. One of the six systems of Indian philosophy is *Vaisesika*, from the Sanskrit root *visas as*, "atomic individuality." One of the foremost *Vaisesika* expounders was Aulukya, also called Kanada, "the atom-eater," born about 2800 years ago.
>
> In an article by Tara Mata in *East-West,* April 1934, a summary of *Vaisesika* scientific knowledge was given as follows: "Though the modern 'atomic theory' is generally considered a new advance of science, it was brilliantly expounded long ago by Kanada, 'the atom-eater.'[…]" (69)

Secondly, towards the end of chapter twenty six titled "The Science of Kriya Yoga," Yogananda, in a series of arguments tries to establish the worth and efficacy of Kriya Yoga, cites Bhagavad Gita, and furthermore, to substantiate the proclamation made therein writes a footnote referring to modern scientific discoveries on the same topic. The footnote goes like this:

> Modern science is beginning to discover the extraordinary curative and rejuvenating effects, on body and mind, of non-breathing. Dr. Alan L. Barach of the College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York has originated a local lung-rest therapy that is restoring to health many tuberculosis sufferers. The use of an equalizing pressure chamber enables the patient to stop breathing. *The New York Times* of Feb. 1, 1947. Quoted Dr. Barach as follows: "The effect of cessation of breathing on central nervous system is of considerable interest. The impulse for movement of the voluntary muscles in the extremities is strikingly diminished. The patient may lie in the chamber for hours without moving his hands or changing position. The desire to smoke disappears when voluntary respiration

stops, even in patients who have been accustomed to smoke two packages of cigarettes daily. In many instances the relaxation is of such a nature that the patient does not require amusement." In 1951 Dr. Barach publicly confirmed the value of the treatment, which, he said, "not only rests the lungs but also the entire body, and seemingly, the mind. The heart, for example, has its work decreased by a third. Our subjects stop worrying. None feel bored."

From these facts, one begins to understand how it is possible for yogis to sit motionless for long periods without mental or bodily urge toward restless activity. Only by such quietude may the soul find its way to God. Though ordinary men must remain in an equalizing pressure chamber to obtain certain benefits of non-breathing, the yogi needs nothing but the *Kriya Yoga* technique to receive rewards in body and mind, and in soul-awareness. (244)

Similar to footnote one we can say that it is a secondary issue whether or not Barach's lung-rest therapy is indeed as effective as it is claimed, what is of primary importance here is the fact that Yogananda by mentioning Barach's findings, manages to situate a text as ancient as Bhagavad Gita parallel to Modern Physics; this in itself is a remarkable task as it not only modernizes/re-cognizes the Gita, but also indicates the relevance of mysticism and Yoga in modern times. Also, it can be said that the *two* paragraphs of this footnote symbolize the *two* contrasting phenomena named science and mysticism, and the fact that these two (paragraphs), in turn, combine to make a footnote symbolizes that perhaps footnotes in this text are a technique to combine binaries and modernize mysticism; and therefore, can be called one of the primary methodologies of the re-search that this text is concerned with.

As we have looked at a few examples, we can appreciate the fact that just as this text is full of mystical occurrences, it also is replete with footnotes that not only elucidate such occurrences by providing evidences in forms of names, dates, witnesses, etc., but also modernize ancient texts and traditions by citing scientific findings in support of them.

The question that arises now is - are footnotes the only symptom of re-search in this text or there is any other crucial sign that also ought to be read? As will be shown, the answer to this question is: indeed there is.

Apart from copious footnotes, it is the interdisciplinarity contained in the narrative that brings in the element of re-search in the text. Yogananda by constantly referring to scriptures from ancient times and by citing works from multifarious disciplines like physics, theology, astronomy, literature, etc. creates a platform for dialogue between diverse timelines and disciplines in the book. As a result of this diversity, the book becomes an interplay of genres; the reader sees various literary forms merging into one here. Genres of writing like autobiography, travel narrative, historical accounts, scripture, and letters, etc. combine with one another to create an ecology of ideas in the text.

Why does Yogananda do this? Why does he make his autobiography an ecology of ideas? Why does he include inputs from almost all disciplines when the essential subject matter of his autobiography is mysticism, and not physics, or psychoanalysis? One way to respond to this question is to aver that by manifesting an interdisciplinary attitude, Yogananda acknowledges modernity's segregation of intellectual thought into various disciplines and takes it a step further to suggest that neither epistemic solipsism nor a disciplinary attitude, but an interdiscursivity amongst various disciplines and discourses alone is capable of leading humanity to Truth. The other way of responding, however, could be to simply say that interdiscursivity in the text is a necessity for it to obtain the quality of a good research.

Moreover, this interdiscursive attitude is reflected in the book not only in a coming together of diverse disciplines and genres, but also in the form of Yogananda's conversations with various voices like those of scientists, yogis, saints, politicians, spiritual disciples etc. For example, in the forty fourth chapter titled: "With Mahatma Gandhi at Wardha," Yogananda narrates his meeting with personalities like Mahatma Gandhi, Mahadev Desai, and Mira Behn, and recounts a conversation he had with one of them. Yogananda writes:

> The afternoon brought me an opportunity for a chat with Gandhi's noted disciple, daughter of an English admiral, Miss Madeleine Slade, now called Mira Behn. Her strong calm face lit with enthusiasm as she told me, in flawless Hindi, of her daily activities.

> "Rural reconstruction work is rewarding! A group of us go every morning at five o'clock to serve the nearby villagers and teach them simple hygiene. We make it a

point to clean their latrines and thatched mad huts. The villagers are illiterate; they cannot be educated except by example!" She laughed gaily.

I looked at the admiration of this highborn Englishwoman whose true Christian humanity enables her to do the scavengering work usually performed only by "untouchables." (421)

This simple conversation between a yogi and a spiritual disciple can be studied as a brief but an appealing critique of the caste system in India. For we see how Yogananda by using the words "*true* Christian humanity" bestows a spiritual dimension to the whole issue and suggests that social evils like caste system cannot be eradicated merely by political means; rather they require an application of spiritual values like compassion and service. This act of critiquing caste and underlining Gandhi's works by alluding to a small conversation, in turn provides this autobiography with an opportunity to transcend its idiosyncratic limits and become a mode to critique power.

To take three more examples of interdiscursivity in the wider sense – in the sense of merging disciplines: we see in the thirtieth chapter titled "The Law of Miracles," how Yogananda while expounding a principle of miracles, which he calls the Law of Maya, incorporates modern physicist Issac Newton's law of motion and writes:

Newton's Law of Motion is a law of *maya:* "To every action there is always an equal and contrary reaction; the mutual actions of any bodies are always equal and oppositely directed." Action and reaction are thus exactly equal. "To have a single force is impossible. There must be, and always is, a pair of forces equal and opposite." (265)

Second example is from the fifth chapter titled "A "Perfume Saint" Displays His Wonders," where we note how Yogananda gives a theory of the miracles performed by Gandha Baba, a yogi who could materialize frangnances out of thin air. Yogananda, in this respect, mentions a footnote wherein he critiques Western psychology for its limited perspective on consciousness. The footnote goes like this:

Studies in consciousness by Western psychologists are largely confined to investigations of the subconscious mind and of mental diseases that are treated through psychiatry and psychoanalysis. There is little research into the origin and fundamental formation of normal mental states and their emotional and volitional expressions – a truly basic subject not neglected in Indian philosophy. Precise classifications are made, in the *Sankhya* and *Yoga* systems, of the various links in normal mental modifications and of the characteristic functions of *buddhi* (discriminative intellect), *ahamkara* (egoistic principle), and *manas* (mind or sense-consciousness). (47)

Lastly, in chapter twenty six titled "The Science of Kriya Yoga," we see how Yogananda while explaining the spiritual value attached with the sound *Aum*, writes an extraordinary footnote that brings the various spiritual traditions together under one idea. The footnote is as follows:

These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true *witness*, the beginning of the creation of God." – *Revelation* 3:14 (Bible). "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Words was God….All things were made by him [the Word or *Aum*]; and without him was not any thing made that was made." – *John* 1:1-3 (Bible). *Aum* of the Vedas became the sacred *Hum* of the Tibetans, *Amin* of the Moslems, and *Amen* of the Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Jews, and Christians. Its meaning in Hebrew is *sure*, *faithful*. (237)

As we look at all the three examples at once, we note the commonality between them. We see how all of them are interdiscursive in nature, for they refer to disciplines other than mysticism and attempt to unite contrasting traditions.

To speak of the third example first, it seems that there cannot be a better instance of interdiscursiveness than this particular footnote. In this one idea, viz. *Aum*, numerous traditions of the West and the East come together on a single platform. Yogananda, when he asserts that the *Aum* of the Vedas is, in essence, the *Amin* of the Moslems or the *Amen* of the Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, and so on, makes a call for the oneness of diverse cultures and traditions, and argues that Truth (which in this case is represented by the cosmic sound signified by the many

version of the word *Aum*) is not to be searched with the lens of tradition or culture, but has to be sought by developing an internal eye by practicing Kriya Yoga.

On the other hand, the second and the first example, on other hand, bring in disciplines like psychoanalysis and modern physics (as references to support writer's position), and thus become symptomatic of the interdisciplinary zeal of the text.

Now, as we have studied over six cases seeing how this text by using footnotes and in-text references (to disciplines other than mysticism) defies, in every way possible, all the conventions attached with genres like autobiography and mysticism, we can say that *Autobiography of a Yogi* is indeed a writing that, by the virtue of being both logical and magical, and ancient and modern at the same time, can be called a Modern Spiritual Classic with a research based attitude towards mysticism.

The Making of *Savitri*

The Vedic tradition, in the form of stories narrated in the Epics and Puranas, has supplied modern academics with enough *myths of immortality and transcendence* - where death is (mostly) conquered by the mortal with the help of either some external force or his own will - to ask for and inquire into the structural and conceptual thought behind them. For instance the myth of Trisanku narrated in Ramayana where Trisanku after having given his kingdom to his son Hariscandra wishes to ascend to heaven in his body, and requests Vasista, the family priest to take him there. However, Vasista denies him this favor on grounds of the impossibility of the task. Reacting to this refusal Viswamitra, who always is jealous of Vasista's knowledge and power, promises Trisanku that he will fulfil the latter's wish. Eventually however, Viswamitra fails to do so and builds only an artificial heaven for Trisanku in the middle of heaven and earth. The myth of Naciketas just like this myth is also relevant in this context. It was told in the Katha Upanishad, where a young boy named Naciketas meets Yama, the God of Death, and asks him about the mystery surrounding death.

The question being: is it merely incidental that these two tales have transcendence as a common factor in them, or can it be so that this commonality is suggestive of some profound idea contained in the texts from where they emerge? The answer to this question perhaps is not very difficult; for when we study the stories narrated in the Vedic texts, we notice a basic similarity in their plot line, which goes as follows: a mortal transcends, or at least wishes to transcend, to heaven, tastes immortality, flouts the ordinariness of humans, and questions in a magical style the limits of human existence. With a noting of this similarity, it becomes clear that stories that seem fantastic and unreal at the outside, are actually *myths* that act as creative mediums for the mystical findings of ancient sages to manifest themselves.

What these findings are and how they are symbolized by myths, shall be shown when we unpack the Satyavan-Savitri myth. Currently, let's look at an important problematic concerning the study of myths, which ought to be recognized before we move on.

It would be a cliché to say that it has been a historian's or a rationalist's style of reading a myth (within a skeptical framework) by inspecting its truth value that has been the dominant mode of approaching myths until literary theory came up with the idea that myths ought not to be

studied by questioning their objective factuality. Rather they must be looked at in themselves. This approach makes sense as it is indeed true that when we start taking the appearance of the myth as the myth in its totality, we fall in a trap which keeps us in oblivion of the essence of the myth; on the contrary when we approach a myth with faith, or with an attitude to study it *in-itself*, then the myth starts opening itself to us. To take an example: if we undertake a study of The Myth of Trisanku and raise a question like: 'how is it possible that a mortal could materialize a habitat in air?' then we would simply blindfold ourselves towards the conceptual or the symbolic layer concealed within an overtly fictitious construction of the myth. In other words, we would not be able to appreciate the idea that the habitat in-between of Heaven and Earth in the story is symbolic of Trisanku's state of mind, and that by placing Trisanku in an artificial habitat between Earth and Heaven, the myth critiques the ultimate ambition of Kings of the time to obtain liberation on their own will.

Don't we find people asking even today questions like: did the monkey god Hanuman *really* fly to Lanka? We do, right? But we must understand that this methodology is not a *useful* one; though it might serve political purposes, but it simply is not useful in a study of the myth per se. On the other hand, what really works, if one wishes to study a myth in proper, is an approach fueled by the idea that a myth is its own reality and must be studied in its own context. Hence, the question to be asked should not be whether Hanuman ever existed or not, or if his flight to Lanka ever happened? Instead, one must ask: what does the presence of Hanuman – a semi-human God – in an epic like Ramayana symbolize? And what connotations can the *flight* such a 'character' across an ocean to serve his 'Master' have? If one goes by this approach, then it is possible that a totally unknown and hitherto unavailable ontological ground may start opening itself to him, which it can be said, will be the essence of the myth – '*the symbol' behind 'a legend'*[38].

Now, as we have glanced at the problematic of reading myths, let's come back to the original question concerning their structure and symbolism and see how Sri Aurobindo (following the methodology mentioned above) unraveled the hidden symbolism of one such myth by creating a Modern Spiritual Classic out of it.

Explaining the plot line of the Satyavan-Savitri myth as it is narrated in a chapter named *Vana Parva* in the Mahabharata by sage Markandeya as a response to a question put to him by

Yudhishthira, Vladimir Iatsenko (a teacher of Sanskrit in Auroville from 1993) in his essay titled "Savitri and Satyavan: The Path to Immortality", writes:

> The story is about a princess of Madra, Savitri, so named because she was an incarnation of the Goddess Savitri, as a result of her father, king Asvapati, who performed severe penance over 18 years in order to gain progeny, specifically one hundred sons. The Goddess was pleased with his *tapasya*. However, she bestowed him not with sons but with a single daughter.
>
> Savitri was so beautiful in her youth that none could approach her for marriage, being afraid of her splendour as of a supernatural power, devakanyeti. Thus the girl had to find a husband for herself. The Svayamvaram marriage was announced and she went around the world in a golden chariot in search of her mate. She travelled through all the kingdoms, lands and forests, but there was none to match her divine qualities, until finally in the forest she met Satyavan, the son of the blind and exiled King Dyumatsena
>
> When she returned to her father's palace, Devarsi Narada was there on a visit to Asvapati. When Savitri - announces that she has chosen Satyavan, Narada exclaims that she has made a wrong choice, a big mistake, *mahat papam.* "Although he is the best among men," says Narada, "he will die in one year from now, and nothing can be done about it." After hearing such shocking news, King Asvapati asks Savitri to find another person to marry. But Savitri refuses, saying that she cannot choose twice, when her heart and mind have once decided.
>
> Thus she marries Satyava - n and moves to his home in the forest. She serves Satyavan and his parents in every way without complaint, remembering the words of Narad and counting the days of Satyavan's life. Neither Satyavan nor his parents know anything about it. The time goes by very quickly, and three days before the destined day, Savitri performs a *mahavrata tapasya*, standing for three days and nights without sleep or food, like a pillar in deep meditation. On the morning of the fourth day, after completing the vow, she notices that Satyavan is going to the forest to cut wood. She goes along with him, after some debate with

him and his parents who want her to take rest after performing such a difficult *vrata*, but she requests them to let her go with Satyavan and they cannot refuse her.

In the woods Satyavan suddenly feels dizzy and lies down with his head on her lap. He feels as if thousands of knives are piercing his body and falls unconscious. Then she feels the presence of someone else. She sees a dark figure with red eyes approaching them. It is Yama, the God of Death, who has come to fetch Satyavan. He takes Satyavan's soul and returns to his kingdom. But Savitri follows him without delay. She speaks to him in perfect poetic Sanskrit, surprising him with her high knowledge and deep understanding of Dharma. So the Lord of Death, who is at the same time the Lord of Dharma, is immensely impressed with Savitri - and bestows upon her a series of boons:

1) Return of sight for Satyavan's father, Dyumatsena;

2) Return of the kingdom which he once lost;

3) One hundred sons for her own father Asvapati, the boon he was aspiring for in his tapasya;

4) One hundred sons for Savitri and Satyavan;

5) And finally the life of Satyavan.

In the morning Savitri and Satyavan return home and see that the king Dyumatsena has got both his sight and his kingdom back. Neither Satyavan nor his parents know what has actually happened. Only the Rishis were aware, and praise Savitri for her Divine Power of Love and Truth. (28-29)

Now, if we look at the whole story from an aerial viewpoint, we see that its structure is reminiscent of most Vedic myths, but only till the last unit. In the climax the myth distances itself from the norm and becomes a quintessential modern narrative.

With Narada's intervention, the climax of the story gets predicted in the beginning only, and the reader watches the plot unfold, remembering and believing what s/he has been already

told, but not knowing that there is going to be crucial moments of deviations, and that the climax which was declared by divinity at the outset will be altered by human will – this, in a sense, being the basic structure of the myth, reveals how the narrative, like most of the Vedic myths, is not theocentric but anthropocentric as ultimately it is 'human will' that triumphs over fate and divinity, because of intelligence gathered from a close study of wisdom texts. This anthropocentricism of the myth represented in its centering of Savitri – the human over fate makes the myth modern, which, in turn, also becomes one of the reasons for Sri Aurobindo to pick it up after millennia and create an MSC out of it.

Speaking of Sri Aurobindo and the creation of a Modern Spiritual Classic out of a myth, it is time to discuss the factors that facilitated the creation process and lead to the conversion of Savitri – the myth into *Savitri* – the MSC.

Although there are several factors to which the role of facilitating the journey of Satyavan-Savitri myth can be attributed to (from being an ancient tale narrated in the Mahabharata to occupying a central identity of a Modern Spiritual Classic) can be attributed, the most crucial one amongst them is *English* (as a modern language), which because of a certain dynamism inherent in it, could encompass a genre of poetry as unconventional as Mysticism and allow Sri Aurobindo to flout the norms attached with poetry of his times and pour into words what he 'received' from the Overmind to bring into existence a form of mystical poetry.

Aurobindo while clarifying the criticism against *Savitri* that it is too much philosophy and hardly any poetry, remarks that since the poem "is an experiment in mystic poetry […] cast into a symbolic figure," it is inevitable that it would "philosophize," and hence, seem unorthodox to a reader accustomed to reading modern or romantic poetry (12). He writes in his essay titled "On Savitri":

> Another question is the place of philosophy in poetry or whether it has any place at all. Some romanticists seem to believe that the poet has no right to think at all, only to see and feel. This accusation has been brought against me by many that I think too much and that when I try to write in verse, thought comes in and keeps out poetry. I hold, to the contrary, that philosophy has its place and can even take a leading place along with psychological experience as it does in the Gita. All

depends on how it is done, whether it is a dry or a living philosophy, an arid intellectual statement or the expression not only of the living truth of thought but, of something of its beauty, its light or its power. (11)

And at another instance, he credits, although indirectly, English language for its pliability and writes:

The structure of the pentameter blank verse in Savitri is of its own kind and different in plan from the blank verse that has come to be ordinarily used in English poetry. It dispenses with enjambment or uses it very sparingly and only when a special effect is intended; each line must be strong enough to stand by itself, while at the same time it fits harmoniously into the sentence or paragraph like stone added to stone; the sentence consists usually of one, two, three or four lines, more rarely five or six or seven: a strong close for the line and a strong close for the sentence are almost indispensable except when some kind of inconclusive cadence is desirable; here must be no laxity or diffusiveness in the rhythm or in the metrical flow anywhere, — there must be a flow but not a loose flux. This gives an added importance to what comes at the close of the line and this placing is used very often to give emphasis and prominence to a key phrase or a key idea, especially those which have to be often reiterated in the thought and vision of the poem so as to recall attention to things that are universal or fundamental or otherwise of the first consequence — whether for the immediate subject or in the total plan. (13)

If we join these two points, what we get is the fact that English as a modern language with its ability to mould itself according to the demands of the genre or/and of the writer, not only allowed Aurobindo to unpack the symbolism of the myth by "philosophizing," but also helped him create the effect of a Mantra in each line of the poem. In other words, we discern that English language played a crucial role in the transformation of the myth into a symbol.

The last section of the chapter concerns itself with unravelling the Vedic symbolism in the opening lines of the poem, which will substantiate the argument regarding the role of English language in bringing forth the symbolism of the myth.

It was the hour before the Gods awake.

Across the path of the divine Event

The huge foreboding mind of Night, alone

In her unlit temple of eternity,

Lay stretched immobile upon Silence' marge.

Almost one felt, opaque, impenetrable,

In the sombre symbol of her eyeless muse

The abysm of the unbodied Infinite;

A fathomless zero occupied the world.

A power of fallen boundless self-awake. (1)

These are the lines with which the epic poem *Savitri* begins. They speak of the advent of a dawn, which, it can be said, is not merely literal, but is also a symbol as the title of the opening canto itself is named 'The Symbol Dawn'. Debashish Banerji, a well-known critic of Sri Aurobindo's works has written an essay (titled "Savitri Book I, Canto I The Symbol Dawn") that devotes itself entirely to an unpacking of the symbolic meaning of this dawn. He argues that the dawn of the opening canto is symbolic of and relates to the cosmogonic theory of the Vedas (19). He writes:

> In the Vedas, we see dawn as the goddess Usha. She is the daughter of the sun, the solar godhead, Surya Savitr, and she appears at the end of each night to unfurl the gates of manifestation when Being becomes, reveals its contents. This opening of the gates of the manifestation, allowing the power of Being to unconceal itself, is the profound inner meaning of 'the symbol dawn' […]. (19)

To phrase Banerji's position in a different way it can be averred that the dawn here symbolizes, in the macrocosmic sense, the moment of creation of the cosmos, and in the microcosmic sense, the moment when *Jiva* – the life force – takes birth. This moment is also

referred to as *Brahma Muhurata* in the Hindu tradition, and is popularly considered as an apt time frame for meditation and other spiritual activities to take place. In this sense, the beginning of the epic poem with the advent of dawn becomes symbolic of a pious moment to enter a reading of the epic[39].

Later in the essay, Banerji also connects the dawn with the Vedic cycle of birth, bondage, suffering, and liberation as he avers that each time dawn occurs, it occurs because of and in reference to the night that preceded it, meaning that the reason behind the current birth is the death of the previous (unfulfilled and unrealized) life (21). As per him, the *Jiva* (represented by Satyavan in the myth) being caught in a cycle of birth and rebirth, suffers and struggles for freedom, and the advent of dawn is symbolic of a hope of its ultimate liberation (21). This cycle of birth and rebirth, of repeated being and non-being, conceptualized in the Vedas in a cyclical model containing *Kalpa* and *Yuga*, where *Pralaya* marks the cessation of life and is followed by the beginning of another *Kalpa* - a new cycle/a fresh seed, is, according to Banerji, the ultimate (macrocosmic) meaning of the dawn (22).

In light of these ideas it can be concluded that the dawn is primarily a symbol of incarnation of Savitri, who in Aurobindo's words, is "the Divine Word, [the] daughter of the Sun, [the] goddess of the supreme Truth" and has "come down" to save Satyavan, who represents "the soul carrying the divine truth" (7). Following this conclusion it can also be averred that Savitri, who in the Mahabharata was merely a legendary character, became symbolic of a mystical incarnation mainly because of her evolution from *an ancient legend sculpted in Sanskrit* to *a modern symbol carved in English*.

As we come to end of this chapter, let's state that Savitri's evolution from a legend to a symbol (vis-a-vis modern English) is actually Savitri's metamorphosis into a Modern Spiritual Classic; and that this phenomenon has two major consequences: first that a myth, which used to be a part of a text earlier, obtains a separate textual identity, and second that a Modern Spiritual Classic that mirrors the psychical and spiritual movement of a mystic and shows light to spiritual disciples across ages and generations comes into existence.

Savitri as a Modern Spiritual Classic

It is not difficult to prove *Savitri* a Modern Spiritual Classic; what is indeed difficult is to be original in this respect; because the fact that *Savitri*, since its publication in 1940, has garnered constant attention from writers, thinkers, and artists across the globe, has made it almost impossible today to come up with any hitherto unheard-of and fresh outlook on it. And that is why, this chapter, instead of agonizing over trying to say something new about the text, will simply present three separate, and already established viewpoints to exhibit it as a Modern Spiritual Classic.

We know that enough has been said and written about *Savitri* from the viewpoint of its modernism, mysticism, and reception, but we also need to note that nothing as of yet has attempted a unification of these three under one common rubric. This chapter, with one section each devoted to these three aspects, and by looking at each of them in light of their contribution to *Savitri*'s becoming of an MSC, will try to unite these separate viewpoints under the concept of a Modern Spiritual Classic.

Savitri's Modernism

The modernism of *Savitri* can be explained mainly from two perspectives: firstly by acknowledging the contemporariness of its ostensibly antiquated subject matter, and secondly by manifesting the uniqueness of its poetic form.

Speaking of the first: we established in the previous chapter the idea that *Savitri* – the epic poem has emerged out of Savitri – the myth. Now, when we said this did we imply that since *Savitri* is an offshoot of an ancient Vedic myth, it cannot be relevant to the matters of the present age? Certainly, we didn't! Because the moment we had argued that it is an MSC, we, in a way, had diluted all possibilities of such an implication. But interestingly, this implication, which we did not even consider, is a commonplace misconception amongst many. It is a popular tendency within and without the academia to label creative texts centered on ancient ideas as either other-worldly or as being irrelevant to contemporary political issues. And a similar accusation is often tossed upon *Savitri*.

Sri Aurobindo, it is needless to argue, was not a mystic in the sense of being other-worldly. He was an active participant in the national freedom struggle against the British Raj and kept himself updated to the developments happening in the various spheres of life. And this fact becomes evident when one looks closely at *Savitri*, wherein he incorporates ideas from fields ranging from physical sciences to politics while narrating the same old ancient myth about Savitri's descent upon earth to save Satyavan from death. The other way to present this argument could be to say that the Vedic cosmogonic cycle, which is symbolized in the epic poem by the various characters, as a theory, is relevant even to today's man as it deals with perennial life issues like birth, death, suffering, liberation, and so on.

Hence, it should be a matter of no surprise if one finds an allusion to quantum physics or to Second World War in the poem. And, interestingly, one does find a few strong references to atomic theory in Book II, Canto V and Canto X.

Two of such references are mentioned below. Let's have a look at them.

1. An ocean of electrical Energy

   Formlessly formed its strange wave-particles

   Constructing by their dance this solid scheme,

   Its mightiness in the atom shut to rest;

   Masses were forged or feigned and visible shapes;

   Light flung the photon's swift revealing spark.

   And showed, in the minuteness of its flash

   Imaged, this cosmos of apparent things. (155)

2. Proton and Photon served the imager Eye

   To change things subtle into a physical world.

   And the invisible appeared as shape (241)

One has not studied physical sciences in depth, but still by looking closely at these lines say that the first excerpt is clearly an ingenious poetic representation of the atomic theory of matter that states how matter is constituted by energized atoms, which "dance" around a nucleus to create material. Speaking of creation, we see how the second excerpt comes out as a quintessential case of an ancient theory (the Vedic cosmogonic theory) being re-cognized and re-presented in light of a modern theory. In this case, the image is of creation of something out of nothing ("And the invisible appeared as shape"), which if we remember, is indeed the image of the symbol dawn in the opening canto of the poem.

Now, having looked at these two examples, which show how the subject matter of the poem is as modern as perhaps its form is, let us have a look at the *difference* in the poetic form/style of *Savitri*, which, it can be said, makes it modern in the sense of being radical and pathbreaking.

For Aurobindo, poetry was not merely a play of language or mind, but was akin to the Vedic mantras, which he argued were revelations to the sages who, because of their deep intuitive faculties, could *see* the Truth and elicit the word to express it. Aurobindo explaining his conception of the poet and of poetry, presents some really insightful ideas on how poetry should be understood not merely as a function of the intellect or of the imaginative faculty of mind, but also as an exercise in mysticism. He writes in one of his critical works titled *The Future Poetry* (1985):

1. Vision is the characteristic power of the poet, as is discriminative thought the essential gift of the philosopher and analytic observation the natural genius of the scientist. The Kavi was in the idea of the ancients the seer and revealer of truth, and though from him we have wandered far enough to demand from him only the pleasure of the ear and the amusement of the aesthetic faculty, still all great poetry instinctively preserves something of that higher turn of its own aim and significance. Poetry, in fact, being Art, must attempt to make us see, and since it is to the inner senses that it has to address itself, - for the ear is its only physical gate of entry and even there its real appeal is to an inner healing, - and since its object is to make us live within ourselves what the poet has embodied in his verse,

it is an inner sight which he opens in us, and this inner sight must have been intense in him before he can awaken it in us. (31-32)

2. The poetry determines its own form; the form is not imposed on it by any law mechanical or external to it. The poet least of all artists needs to create with his eye fixed anxiously on the technique of his art. He has to possess it, no doubt; but in the heat of creation the intellectual sense of it becomes a subordinate action or even a mere undertone in his mind, and in his best moments he is permitted, in a way to forget it altogether. For then the perfection of his sound-movement and style come entirely as the spontaneous form of his soul […] (13)

These two excerpts exemplify Aurobindo's understanding of poetry. In the first one, it is evident how poetry for Aurobindo is not merely "the pleasure of the ear and the amusement of the aesthetic faculty," but has a mystical function of making the reader 'see', and the second one shows how form is not external to mystical poetry but is intrinsic to its creation process. And these two *differences* in Aurobindo's conception of poetry from those of modernist and romanticist poets, it can be said, makes *Savitri* modern in the sense of being radical and pathbreaking.

Savitri's Mysticism

Savitri receives its mysticism from its association with Sri Aurobindo. It is a well-known fact that the epic poem was written not in one go but was created vis-a-vis the evolution in Aurobindo's state of consciousness; and the proof of this is the essay titled "On Savitri," which he himself wrote parallelly to the creation process of the poem. This essay written over a period of more than fifteen years, ranging from 1932 to 1947, illustrates Aurobindo's central role (as a mystic) in endowing _Savitri_ with its mysticism. A close look at this essay makes it clear how it would be absurd to call _Savitri_ a mystical poem without placing Aurobindo at the center. Replete with various kinds of remarks by the poet, this essay highlights the fact that _Savitri_ bears an innermost connection with its poet's state of consciousness and is, primarily and essentially, a reflection of Aurobindo's subject position.

A few of such remarks are mentioned below:

1. I used Savitri as a means of ascension. I began with it on a certain mental level, each time I could reach a higher level I rewrote from that level. Moreover I was particular — if part seemed to me to come from any lower levels I was not satisfied to leave it because it was good poetry. All had to be as far as possible of the same mint. In fact Savitri has not been regarded by me as a poem to be written and finished, but as a field of experimentation to see how far poetry could be written from one's own yogic consciousness and how that could be made creative. (7)

2. I can perfectly understand …that all should be lifted to or towards at least the minimum Overhead level or so near as to be touched by its influence or at the very least a good substitute for it. I do not know whether that is always possible in so long a poem as Savitri dealing with so many various heights and degrees and so much varying substance of thought and feeling and descriptive matter and narrative. But that has been my general aim throughout and it is the reason why I have made so many successive drafts and continual alterations till I felt that I had got the thing intended by the higher inspiration in every line and passage. It is also why I keep myself open to every suggestion from a sympathetic and

understanding quarter and weigh it well, rejecting only after due consideration and accepting when I see it to be well-founded. (13)

3. I don't think about the technique because thinking is no longer in my line. But I see and feel for it when the lines are coming through and afterwards in revision of the work. I don't bother about details while writing, because that would only hamper the inspiration. I let it come through without interference; only pausing if there is an obvious inadequacy felt, in which case I conclude that it is a wrong inspiration or inferior level that has cut across the communication. If the inspiration is the right one, then I have not to bother about the technique then or afterwards, for there comes through the perfect line with the perfect rhythm inextricably intertwined or rather fused into an inseparable and single unity; if there is anything wrong with the expression that carries with it an imperfection in the rhythm, if there is a flaw in the rhythm, the expression also does not carry its full weight, is not absolutely inevitable. If on the other hand the inspiration is not throughout the right one, then there is an after examination and recasting of part or whole. (8)

As we look at all the three pieces in one go, we deduce that basically all of them are suggesting an intense relationship between Aurobindo's mystical quest and the creation process of the epic poem. And this relation, they seem to be indicating, is not that of a poet with his/her poem, but is more akin to the (intimate) connection of a meditator with his/her method/process of meditation. In other words: these lines seem to be declaring that *Savitri* is to be understood not merely as an *outcome* of a yogic practice, but more importantly, as a dynamic method ("means") *used* by the author to "see how far poetry could be written from one's own yogic consciousness."

And this declaration, in turn, makes it clear how the second and probably the most significant aspect of *Savitri* as an MSC (its mysticism), is a result of Aurobindo's presence in it.

Savitri's Reception

Savitri is a classic beyond doubt; and the proof of this is its widespread popularity in the contemporary spiritual arena, especially amongst the followers of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother. As stated in the first chapter, a Modern Spiritual Classic receives its sacredness from the followers/disciples of the mystic or Guru by/around whom it is written. And _Savitri_, by all means, exemplifies this idea.

Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Puducherry, founded in 1926 by Aurobindo himself is devoted to spreading the teachings of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother; and _Savitri_ being Aurobindo's magnum opus occupies a central position in this mission. There are numerous activities - both literary and otherwise - of the Ashram, which can be named in this respect. For example, it publishes on a regular basis over five hundred titles in various European and Indian languages, which are distributed by SABDA – a centralized book distribution system of the Ashram.

> Sri Aurobindo Ashram is the primary publisher of the works of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. As of January 2015 it keeps some 200 publications in English in print, of which 78 are books by Sri Aurobindo, 44 books by the Mother, 27 compilations from their works, and 47 books by other authors. These books are printed at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, which has been in operation since the 1940s. They are distributed by SABDA, the Ashram's book distribution service, which has been in operation since the 1950s. SABDA also carries books relating to Sri Aurobindo, the Mother, and their yoga brought out by other publishers, making the number of English books on their list more than 600. The Ashram also publishes books in 17 other European and Indian languages, for a total of more than 550 publications. SABDA carries these and other non-English titles: in all there are 1678 titles in 23 languages. (Sri Aurobindo Ashram)

Apart from this, the Ashram also organizes events on a day to day basis, wherein _Savitri_ is recited just like any sacred scripture.[40] In fact, an audio recording of the whole epic poem by Nirodbaran - the chief physician of Aurobindo - is also available on the internet, and is referred to by the disciples of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother as a text for guidance in meditation.[41]

Another proof of *Savitri*'s immensity as a modern text (other than the activities of the Ashram) is that it has traversed (in translation) not just the boundaries of language, but also of genre. For example, around four hundred and seventy oil paintings illustrating select passages from the epic poem (known as 'Meditations on Savitri') are available. They were created by The Mother and her chief disciple named Huta. Savitri Bhavan located in Auroville is the habitat of these marvelous paintings. The official website of Savitri Bhavan has a brief write up about these paintings, and it goes as follows:

> ['Meditations on Savitri'] This is the title given by the Mother to a series of 474 oil paintings created by her with a young Gujarati Sadhika, to whom she had given the name 'Huta'. These illustrate selected passages from the whole of Sri Aurobindo's revelatory epic poem Savitri. In 1967, when all of these paintings had been exhibited in the Ashram, and were being kept at Golconde, Huta communicated to the Mother her strong feeling that "Savitri must have her own place". The Mother went into a deep concentration, then said emphatically, "It will   be."
> When Savitri Bhavan was started, Huta felt that this was the "own place" which the Mother had promised for Savitri. So beyond all expectation, this great treasure was entrusted to our care in June 2001, along with facsimiles of the Mother's original sketches, written instructions and comments, copies of her recorded recitations of the selected passages, and of her recorded explanations of Savitri. This is a unique treasure, which will be a goldmine of insight to future scholars seeking to gain a deeper understanding of Sri Aurobindo's vision. (Savitri Bhavan)

Be it these paintings or the recitation phenomenon or the widespread publication of secondary material on *Savitri*¸ one thing is certain that the epic poem continues to be a source of spiritual guidance for seekers across the globe even after seven and a half decades of its publication. *Savitri*'s reception, it also needs to noted, is restricted not only to ashram circles. Numerous critical essays explicating it from all possible angles have been written over the course of the last century; and the epic poem has been read and studied in great number by scholars and researchers across universities.

Now, after having looked at *Savitri*'s modernism, mysticism, and reception one by one, we can safely aver that these three attributes of the epic poem disconnected as they are to one another limit the text to themselves only, but once we unite them in light of a greater idea we open ourselves to the fact that *Savitri*'s modernism, mysticism, and reception are not attributes disparate and exclusive to one another, but are essentially one as they together constitute *Savitri*'s identity of a Modern Spiritual Classic.

Conclusion

Driven by the desire to unearth and explain a modern phenomenon, perhaps as vast as Spirituality, one, over the course of this dissertation, came across and brought forward a multitude of ideas, most of which, to recall, were related, either directly or otherwise, to the central problematic of this research (which we know is about the possibility of *real* mysticism taking place in the modern world). These ideas, spread as they were over a vast landscape, ranged from Self-help, to Profit Bias, to Guru, to Re-search, to the structure and style of Vedic myths, to the function of English language¸ and so on. And this multiplicity of ideas, often represented as long-windedness and lack of structure in writing, one believes, was indeed located around the central thesis of the dissertation: which argued that Modern Spiritual Classics (as writings dealing simultaneously with mystical and modern subject matters and becoming source of spiritual guidance and inspiration for readers across languages, nations, generation, and so on) ought to be given as much importance as any student of literature gives to literary classics like *The Waste Land* (1995) and *Ulysses* (1922).

To pick up the most crucial of ideas which we discussed in the dissertation and to also conclude this journey, let's relook at the function of the Guru. In our defining of an MSC, we gave the Guru a central position. Guru, we said, is not a form, but a state of consciousness, which materializes itself out of compassion for those identified and stuck with forms. In one sense, we also made a case for Savitri - the mythical character to be the Guru of Satyavan by exhibiting how the mythical character is indeed the Divine Word.

The Guru, as it is explained in the *Sanatana* dharma, and as it is also understood by various spiritual figures born in Hindu tradition, is said to be a living embodiment of the Brahman. Out of Paranajape's ten meditations on the Guru listed in his work *Acts of Faith: Journeys to Sacred India*, one is titled 'The Guru Is an Embodiment of Non-Duality'. Explaining how Guru is indeed an expression of the non-dual in duality, he writes:

> […] We may have many gurus and guides, [but] the real guru is one. That is the *sadhguru* or the true guru. […This] one guru may come to us in many forms or guises […] (206-207)

The Guru with a capitalized C, which these lines refer to as "*sadhguru*," being that one formless Being which manifests itself as the world, it can be said, has been performing, since 'the dawn', the function of freeing Satyavans from their bondage; and since Satyavans are located in time and space and keep varying themselves, he too has been varying himself as per the form taken by them.

The Guru/*sadhguru* keeps calling. His calling never stops; only the form of his calls change. Sometimes he calls through Vedas, and sometimes through Modern Spiritual Classics, sometimes through the Vedic seers, and sometimes through modern mystics. And if one indeed seeks liberation/self-realization, then it is necessary to not only re-cognize but also receive these calls, which will not be possible if s/he mistakes a Self-Help book to be a Modern Spiritual Classic, or in other words: a marketer to be a master/guru, because then the call would go unattended.

Let's 'end[42]' this journey on this cautious note.

Notes and References

1 By modern mind may be understood that phase of historical consciousness where the individual has gained precedence over the community, where reason and rationality are foregrounded over feelings and emotions, where science dominates what has earlier been the space of religion, and where history replaces tradition and culture flourishes on nature's corpse.

2 The term religion is understood and used in this research as an umbrella term to refer to the universality of the spiritual endeavor it epitomizes, and the sociological contention about it being a discursive ideological tool - 'the opium of the masses' - is put aside very consciously for the sake of argumentation.

3 An abbreviation for the term Modern Spiritual Classic, and would be followed throughout the dissertation.

4 It is a sacred text in English.

5 The myth is narrated in the chapter *Vana Parva* ("The Book of the Forest") of Mahabharata by sage Markandeya.

6 An author's Subject Position will later emerge as one of the two key distinguishing elements between Self-Help and MSCs.

7 It needs to be noted here that the idea of something bigger and higher than oneself, the positing of some sort of supramental authority, is to be found in both an MSC as well as a self-help text, *but* difference lies in what they mean by it and for what purpose they evoke it. For instance, Twelve-step programs – a key component of the self-help movement – believe in the existence of a secularized form of God – some abstract spiritual force - to whom the sufferer must surrender in order to cure herself, and similarly *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1946) a major MSC by Paramhansa Yogananda (1893-1952) also argues and demonstrates the presence of an overarching-spiritual power. However, despite the apparent similarity, the fact remains that the former is a case of sheer artifice, whereas the latter is substantiated by an ancient tradition of Yogic practices. We will delve deeper into this difference later when we'll talk of 'Profit-Bias' – an idea that is central to the difference between a self-help text and an MSC.

8 The word is italicized to highlight a crucial point that unlike self-help which attributes absolute power to the mind and is premised upon a dualistic model that creates two fragments in

it - one that is negative and enslaving (our "inner children") as it is born out of our accumulated past events in the form of negative "tapes", and the other that is positive and can empower us if only we allow new "life scripts" to affect it - an MSC gives no power to the mind and bestows all power to the Supramental, which it posits at a dimensional difference from the mind. For example, Robert Holden writes in his book *Happiness Now!: Timeless Wisdom for Feeling Good FAST*: "Circumstances and situations do color life, but you have been given the mind to choose what the color shall be" (122). Now this kind of approach basically argues that the same mind that is suffering can liberate itself from the suffering and does not take into account the limitedness of the mind, compelling one to raise questions such as: how can the same mind which is conditioned have the free will to choose, and what are these two fragments of the mind which are in conflict, and how to ontologically differentiate between them.

9 Title of Shiv Khera's (born 1961) publication in 1998.

10 Just here implies solely by purchasing the book; the reading bit is not even involved. Note that *reading* may require a minimal amount of exertion from the reader, which can potentially complicate the emotion that one is promised happiness quickly and easily, which in turn can reduce the possibility of the book being bought.

11 Robert Holden in *Happiness Now!: Timeless Wisdom for Feeling Good Fast* writes, "Revel in your freedom. Live wholeheartedly, laugh loud, love much, spread joy, be truthful, and give yourself to everything. You, who are already whole, can lose nothing. Your ego may fall from time to time, but you will not. Live big!" (238). Note that all statements are basically a call for action and no mention is of the 'actor' or self that will act.

12 McDonaldization is a term used by 20th century American sociologist George Ritzer (born 1940) in his book *The McDonaldization of Society* (1993). Ritzer uses the metaphor of McDonald food chains to address some of the lifestyle changes taking place (primarily) in contemporary American culture and (generally) across the globe. He states four primary components to his theory of McDonaldization: Efficiency, Calculability, Predictability, and Control (13). The 'Efficiency' aspect of the theory concerns us here. He believes that the wide ranging process of rationalization has led to an obsessive yearning for efficiency; desire to complete a task or find a solution to a problem with minimal effort and time involved, he opines, governs the approach behind all pursuits in contemporary culture (13).

Though Ritzer did not talk about self-help culture in relation to his theory McDonaldization, he did come close to it while discussing the effect of the American education culture on other societies.

For him McDonald food items are the fastest way to get full from being completely hungry (15). And if we replace a McDonald burger with a self-help text, hunger with human condition, and promise of satiation with the promise that self-help texts make, then we may understand how the concept of Efficiency fits perfectly to the self-help movement.

13 "Mass marketing is a market coverage strategy in which a firm decides to ignore market segment differences and appeal the whole market with one offer or one strategy. The idea is to broadcast a message that will reach the largest number of people possible" ("Mass Marketing").

14 Information product is a term used to describe any artefact that contains knowledge in a form that is easily transferable to others. For example: an E-book, a video cassette or DVD, a magazine, YouTube lectures/discourses, etc.

15 It ought to be noted that the usage of this phrase as it will occur repeatedly in the writing will not be in the way Michel Foucault (1926-1984) used it. One would refer to as a claim made by the author of a writing, or of any text, for that matter, about his/her abilities/achievements/attainments vis-à-vis the object of the text. For example, in context of an ostensibly spiritual writing, this idea would reflect on its author's direct or indirect claim to self-mastery/enlightenment/liberation/attainment of Siddhis. This idea would remain central to the process of differentiating between self-help and MSCs as it would decide whether or not a self-help author is entitled to don a particular role and speak about or/and write on certain topics.

16 Which too arguably is an expression in bad faith.

17 Note the presence of a vague binary model which we discussed few paragraphs before and an emphasis on the power of the self.

18 A contradiction in terms central to self-help.

19 Power Yoga also referred to as 'Gym Yoga' my many, is a modern appropriation of the Vinyasa style of Yoga, and focuses on mainly on arranging bodily joints into numerous postures, viz. *Asanas*, while regulating the flow of *Prana* in the body by watching and manipulating breath.

20 Cultural Capital is a concept expounded by the 20th century French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) in his essay titled "The Forms of Capital" originally published in 1986. It refers to the "collection of symbolic elements such as skills, tastes, posture, clothing, mannerisms, material belongings, credentials, etc.," by an individual to gain power and authority in the society ("Cultural Capital").

21 A Jivanmukta, according to Advait Vedanta school of Hinduism, is a mystic who has realized his true Self or has gained liberation during the tenure of his life.

22 The word 'myth' is used here in the same sense as 20th century French literary theorist and semiotician Roland Barthes (1915-1980) uses it; which argues that any and all cultural texts in the contemporary post-modern era are myths as they are not merely signifiers but also signified and are not what they purport to be - natural and benign - but contain in them certain socio-political attitudes, viz. ideologies.

23 Self-fashioning is a term introduced by 20th century American literary theorist Stephen Greenblatt (born 1943) used to describe the process of constructing one's identity and public persona according to a set of socially acceptable standards" ("Self-fashioning").

24 Meaning the vast manifest world.

25 Symptom one of Profit-Bias: selling easily sellable information products.

26 Symptom two of Profit Bias: misrepresentation of authorial subject position.

27 Refer to page number one of the dissertation.

28 Keeping the abstract God at the center of one's existence.

29 Substituting the abstract God with the concrete human being as the center of one's existence.

30 Refer to page number seventeen to read what is meant by the word 'Spirituality' in context of this dissertation.

31 The usage of a masculine pronoun for the Guru is merely incidental and contains no hidden connotations. The Guru being a state of consciousness is neither male nor female. The Guru may *reside* in a male or a female body, but since s/he is not identified with it, s/he is not it as such.

32 This term can have several meanings, but the sense in which it is used here is of a self-mastered practitioner of Yoga who has become one or has formed a union – yoga – with the 'Truth'.

33 It is this everyday practice of recitation (and not reading) of the text, which makes an MSC sacred.

34 The hyphen is crucial as it represents the connotation of the word research in this context. The word research which usually is understood as a process of meticulous investigation on a given idea to prove it right, has a wider meaning in this context. Re-search with a hyphen here implies an act of revisiting the past (either an ancient text or a tradition or a practice) in light of the contemporary to rejuvenate it.

35 Paramhansa Yogananda's family name and his identity before he entered the ancient monastic order and was bestowed the religious title of *Paramhansa* in 1935 by his Guru.

36 Refer to an important feature of a Guru discussed in the previous section that mentions how the Guru despite being *in* a body is not a body.

37 One who follows a given Sadhana - a spiritual path - to attain self-realization.

38 The indication is towards the subtitle of *Savitri* – A 'Legend' and a 'symbol'.

39 We can note how, in this respect, *Savitri* comes close to western classics, which mostly begin with an invocation of some higher deity.

40 See video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G_uiYkjfKHE

41 See video: http://www.aurobindo.ru/workings/musics/savitri_nirod_e.htm

42 If this dissertation, by any means, or at any time in future, enables either a full-fledged research (perhaps a PhD), or even an academic noting of the massive spiritual phenomena that Modern Spiritual Classics (as a literary genre) are, then one would consider his labours rewarded.

Appendix

Some questions, although not central to the objective of this dissertation, are integral to the project of establishing *Savitri* a Modern Spiritual Classic. They, if unpacked, can reveal some interesting ideas, which this dissertation could not discuss in detail.

Five of such questions are mentioned below.

1. What is the object of *Savitri*'s making? Is it merely about modernizing a myth and raising philosophical questions or does it mirror the psychical and spiritual movement of a mystic? To what extent will it be appropriate to call it an Indian Writing in English text? Will doing so not ignore the other meta-literary planes upon which the text functions?

2. How is the subject position of the author related to the object of the text? Would it be appropriate to personalize the subject of this text? If we posit that the epic poem is a modern Veda, then can it be averred that like the Vedas what it also contains does not depend on any individual authorship and authority? In other words, can we call it *apaurushiya* - a text impersonal?

3. What all factors other than English language facilitated the transition of a myth in Sanskrit in the Mahabharata to an epic poem in English (with a separate textual identity and agency)? How do the mythical characters in the poem, like Savitri and Satyavan, become symbolic representations of the cosmogonic and ontological truths of the Vedas?

4. What is the methodology adopted in this modernizing process? Is it merely reception of ancient philosophies? Or reception coupled with re-cognition as well as re-creation?

5. What is the nature of *Savitri* – the MSC? How can/does it appeal the modern reader? What are its hermeneutics? If confronted, how will it react to some typical modern concerns like the notion of authorship, the linearity of time and narration, market, and so on?

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