Reading Savitri through Gilbert and Gubar: Rebellion, Desire, and Narrative Framing in *Aadhe Adhure*

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Abstract

Mohan Rakesh's play *Halfway House* or *Aadhe Adhure* (1969) in the Hindi original, emerges from a post-independence urban Indian milieu grappling with changing gender roles, middle class aspirations, and fractured identities. At its core is the character of Savitri—a dissatisfied wife, exhausted mother, and emotionally alienated individual who refuses to conform to the expectations traditionally imposed upon Indian women. This paper seeks to read Savitri as a transgressive figure while engaging with a long-standing literary lineage of women who defy idealised notions of femininity. In this context, the framework proposed by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) offers a productive lens for interpreting Savitri's deviance.

Keywords: Feminist, deviance, gender, mad, modern, reclaim

While Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's central concern in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) is the self-expression of female authors within patriarchal literary traditions, their conceptual binary—the 'angel in the house' versus the 'madwoman in the attic'—has been widely adopted as a symbolic framework for reading gendered representations in literature more broadly. In this paper, their metaphorical paradigm has been extended to analyse how a male-authored text, *Aadhe Adhure* (1969), represents a woman who defies idealised domestic roles and is, in turn, rendered emotionally and morally illegible. The play depicts a dysfunctional middle class nuclear family where the sustained antagonism between the husband and wife infects even the children.

 ISSN: Print 2229-6557, Online 2394-9244

Savitri attempts to break away from this sordid existence but to no avail. This feminist reading seeks to appropriate and reinterpret the character of Savitri as a symbolic representation of the discontents of early modern Indian womanhood. Her very name mocks the mythic connotations of the ideal wife. This act of feminist reading reclaims the narrative from patriarchal judgment and foregrounds Savitri's resistance as politically and emotionally intelligible, even if the text itself renders her morally suspect.

Although Gilbert and Gubar were primarily concerned with how women authors navigated patriarchal literary traditions, *Madwoman* provides a relevant framework to analyse broader cultural constructions of femininity. In this context, Savitri—as represented by a male dramatist—embodies the dissonance of a woman who refuses to conform to idealised roles and yet is not granted the status of tragic heroine or martyr. This resistance to legibility places her not within the attic, but outside the structure altogether—visible, articulate, and culturally threatening.

In their analysis of nineteenth-century British women writers, Gilbert and Gubar famously identified a binary structuring of women's representation in patriarchal literature: the 'angel' and the 'madwoman'. The 'angel in the house' was the paragon of Victorian womanhood—pure, passive, moral, and self-sacrificing—while the 'madwoman', exemplified by Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* (Bronte, 1999), embodied repressed rage, desire, and emotional volatility that society refused to accept.

This binary can be applied to representations of Indian women in the early decades after independence. The Indian ideal woman—often imagined as the *pativrata*, the chaste and enduring wife, or the emotionally selfless 'Mother India'—shares many characteristics with the Victorian angel. Both figures are expected to stabilise the domestic realm, uphold cultural morality, and endure hardship without complaint. In this context Savitri, who does not conform to this prototype, and Bertha Mason have comparable subversive potential. The similarity is uncanny in the scene where Juneja, described as the fourth man, supposedly exposes Savitri. Appropriating the high ground of a Sage, Juneja is ruthless in his denunciation of her even as she is depicted as laughing "hysterically" (p. 74), a misogynist term loaded with a history of female insanity.

Indian women, belonging to the middle class, had by the 1970s begun

to step out of the domestic space of the house but were still judged by traditional standards. The apparent freedom they exercised in the ability to work and secure financial independence is undermined in the play where the patriarchal control holds sway over the iterations of Savitri's agentive acts of self-assertion. Though the play dramatises Savitri as a strong female character who is visibly angry, discontented and articulate about it, it appears to deliberately foreground her extramarital overtures to undermine the validity of her position.

Despite the hysteria implied in her uncanny laughter, Savitri is not depicted as descending into a Bertha-like madness. However, she is not spared the patriarchal gaze wherein she is marked by the depravity of covertly desiring a string of men. Savitri who refuses to fulfil her angelic duty towards her husband and children is punished by being denied any resolution in her attempts to escape. Although Savitri puts up a spirited fight, the cards are stacked against her. Her defiance is negated through the portrayal of her sexual deviance which was and still is a taboo especially for middle class Indian women. Savitri's character and context beg the fundamental question that Gilbert and Gubar sought to address regarding the fate of an independent woman operating in a restrictive society.

The modern urban independent woman in India, whether accessed through historical narratives (*The Other Side of Silence*, 1998), novels (Mukherjee, *The Twice Born Fiction,* 1971) or the whole gamut of genres (Tharu, *Women Writing in India*, 1993), finds herself in a contestatory relationship with the conventional society she must contend with. Savitri's search for emotional validation outside the domestic space is construed as degeneracy and is punished by isolation. Binni is a weak character who does not question the gendered assumptions of the men around her. When her parents ask her why, despite her protestations, she does not appear to be happy, she replies that Manoj her husband has told her that she has brought her dissatisfaction from her home—"He speaks with such assurance that... that I start... I start despising myself" (p. 19). Nevertheless, despite being gullible she has seen her mother struggle to keep the family afloat and in Act 1 makes statements like "You're the only one who feels responsible here" or in an indirect jibe at the father "If you can't manage, I'd like to know who can" (p. 23). Towards the end of this Act, Ashok, in conversation with Binni, speaking in riddles questions his mother's sacrifices for the family "If

 ISSN: Print 2229-6557, Online 2394-9244

she can't manage, why does she try to continue?" (p. 42). His implicit charge at this point is that the mother's contribution towards the house is the sole reason for the degeneration in the family.

By Act 2, Binni's concern for her mother takes a severe beating. Her support for the mother is totally shaken when the fourth man reveals that Savitri was interested even in Manoj, who apparently chose the daughter over the mother. In this feminist reading, the fourth man's accusation "I say you have that man in a trap he has become incapable of doing anything for himself" is seen as the height of collective male scapegoating of the mother (p. 67). Savitri's protests and even her vivid descriptions of her physical abuse, in one instance "he sits on my chest and bangs my head against the floor" fail to evoke sympathy as the narrative is heavily loaded against her (p. 71). Her son Ashok makes it clear that there is no appreciation for her financial support as he blames her for the pervasive rotten nature of the family as a whole, as well as the dysfunctional interpersonal relationships. Despite being marginalised by the male characters, Savitri refuses to submit to their misogynistic discourse. Despite the narrative silencing towards the end of the play Savitri defies authorial censure and remains defiant. Her character is a landmark in the growth of the independent woman who refuses to be hemmed in by the oppositional forces around her that seek to impose the narrow sexist binaries that obtain in society.

The fractured relationships that *Aadhe Adhure* titularly points to is a testament to the transitional society that Rakesh presents. With traditional structures no longer holding sway, the dysfunctional modern family depicted in the play is at the point of emotional disintegration. The modern alternatives have not yet emerged from the crucible of change. Within this transitional domestic sphere gender roles are reversed. In the play Savitri is presented as the breadwinner while the husband, Mahendranath, is the ineffectual stay at home husband.

As a mother, Savitri is forced into financial independence, the traditional role of the man, while the father wallows in self-pity rather than make himself useful around the house. The incessant and unequal share of responsibilities that she is thrust with is disruptive. No longer confined or dependent she refuses to conform to the stereotypical notions of either motherhood or wifely duty. She refuses to seek validation through the nationalist discursive constructs of the self-denying *pativrata grihalakshmi* whose only solace is to serve her husband and family.

Her defiance is characteristic of early modern female characters in Indian literature who challenged the normative role of womanhood they were expected to follow. However, this assertion of selfhood and subjectivity renders Savitri alienated rather than empowered. Her visibility comes with a price, the struggle to find peace in a world that holds her accountable for the fragmentation that has beset the family. The middle class male anxieties of Mahendranath and the playwright alike privilege female virtue which Savitri is condemned for lacking.

Scholars such as Sarkar, in *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation* (2001), have illustrated how nationalist discourse appropriated the figure of the self-sacrificing Hindu wife as a symbol of cultural continuity and moral strength. Similarly, Chatterjee's analysis in *The Nation and its Fragments* (1993) shows that the "new Indian woman" was constructed as modern in education and manners, but spiritually and morally had to conform to premodern ideals. In this traditional-cum-modern model, the woman was expected to be publicly modest, domestically loyal, and emotionally stoic; in short, an Indian variation of the 'angel in the house'.

Savitri's behaviour unsettles the domestic order not because it is irrational, but because it violates the code of feminine silence and self-erasure. Indian critics have grappled with this defiance in varied ways. Most critics of the play locate it in the Western modernist context of Naturalism and Absurdism. Nigam sees the play as the "failure of fragmented personalities" (p. 92). According to Rastogi, the writer wants to highlight "the fact that people hardly understand each other" (p. 115). Even Kumar, despite noticing the gender bias in the play, concludes that the message to be derived from the play is "all mankind is the same" (p. 144). As Mukherjee notes in *The Twice Born Fiction* (1971), many female characters in post-independence Indian novels occupy a liminal space, socially mobile and educated yet emotionally alienated due to cultural expectations that continue to delegitimise female desire and subjectivity. Despite the narrative discomfort she causes, Savitri remains at its centre, unresolved and resistant, destabilising the very moral architecture of the Indian middle class household.

Unlike the archetypal 'madwoman in the attic', locked away, marginalised, or metaphorically annihilated, Savitri occupies the centre of the modern stage, both literally and symbolically. She is hyper-visible and verbally dominant, performing her social dissonance rather than

 ISSN: Print 2229-6557, Online 2394-9244

concealing it. However, her centrality in the narrative comes at a significant cost, as it effectively attributes the family's dysfunction entirely to her. The dramatic experiment of a single actor playing all the male roles serves to emphasise the male dramatist's discomfort with Savitri's defiance and the rendering of it as a Cleopatra-like hankering after infinite variety. This shifts the focus from the unproductive patriarchal narcissist who neither performs the traditional gendered duty expected of him nor is willing to function beyond the stereotypical notions of masculinity. Juneja, who is described as the fourth man and is presented with sage-like wisdom, declares, with the finality of a verdict:

> Because the meaning of life to you is how many different things you can have and enjoy at the same time. One man alone could never have given them to you, so no matter whom you married, you would have always felt as empty and as restless you do today. (p. 74)

The repositioning of female deviance, from marginality to unsettling centrality, marks a crucial shift in Indian dramaturgy. As Bharucha notes in *Rehearsals of Revolution*, *Aadhe Adhure* is radical in its refusal to offer catharsis: "Savitri remains unresolved, too knowing to be pitied, too exhausted to be heroic" (1983, p. 96). The appreciation of her transgressive performance that challenges the limits of patriarchal discourse is also the result of feminist appropriation of a character who otherwise was condemned and sullied for her breach of propriety. Savitri can be read as being heroic in demanding emotional fulfilment instead of being confined to an instrumental role for the sake of the family.

Savitiri's centrality to the play is unquestionable but it serves to make her singularly responsible for the making of a dysfunctional family and its existential crisis. Butalia mentions how Partition added to the patriarchal conception of women.

> If colonialism provided Indian men the rationale for constructing and reconstructing the identity of the Hindu woman as a 'bhadramahila,' the good, middle class, Hindu wife and mother, supporter of her men, Independence and its dark 'other,' Partition, provided the rationale for making women into symbols of the nation's honour. (p. 192)

Savitri tries to push the limits of this circumscribing nationalist cum communal discourse. She defies the colonial patriarchy that overwrites the existing traditional set-up. The Victorian sense of femininity and respectability entered the nationalist consciousness with a strong sense

of delimitation of gender roles. She stands alone in her tragic pathos as a trailblazer who, though driven by personal motives, challenges the binaries of masculinity and femininity. In doing so she is harking back to a precolonial embrace of the continuity of sexual identities—"The colonial ideology of masculinity systematically delegitimised the androgynous ideals embedded in Indian traditions, branding them as effeminate, and equated true manhood with dominance, aggression, and control" (Nandy, p. 7).

Savitri, in this radical self-fashioning, refuses to live vicariously through the well-being of her children. Victorian values, in this respect too, are analogous with the Indian cultural imagination wherein the mother is regarded as the locus of the emotional well-being and moral development of the family. In traditional narratives, even flawed or suffering women are redeemed through their maternal instincts. Savitri, by contrast, is a mother who no longer pretends to love unconditionally. Her interactions with her children Ashok, Binni, and Kinni are marked by exhaustion, anger, and emotional disconnect. Rather than idealising her children or living vicariously through their happiness, she sees them as a burden, symbols of a failed domestic set-up. Her anormative motherhood is thus de-sacralised and stripped of sentimentality.

This unsettling portrayal resonates with what feminist critics such as Rich, in *Of Woman Born*, identify as the distinction between "motherhood as institution" and "mothering as experience" (1976, pp. 13-15). Rich argues that the cultural ideal of the mother as a selfless, nurturing being is a social construction used to regulate women's behaviour, rather than a universal truth. Savitri embodies this disjunction: she performs the institutional duties of motherhood but refuses its emotional idealisation. She does not mask her disappointment, and in doing so, she breaks the tacit emotional contract of Indian motherhood—that the mother should suffer quietly and never indict her children for her own unhappiness.

Indian feminist readings echo this discomfort. As Chatterji (2002) has explored in her work on gender representation in Indian cinema and theatre, the figure of the emotionally detached mother challenges one of the most sacrosanct ideals of Indian womanhood—that of unconditional maternal devotion. In violating this, Savitri becomes a morally suspect figure—not just to the characters within the play, but to its viewers or readers as well. She is judged not for being a bad mother in a functional

 ISSN: Print 2229-6557, Online 2394-9244

sense as she has raised them, educated them, and kept the household afloat but for her refusal to conform. Ashok upholds this patriarchal assessment of his mother. The scene between Ashok and Binni, in which the son blames the mother, despite her efforts, for the family's unhappiness, reveals a deep ideological bias in Rakesh's play. While the father's emotional absence and failure to support the family goes largely unexamined, the mother who has had to practically raise the children as a single parent, is presented as a picture of solipsism. She and only she is held accountable for the dysfunctional family. The weight of the dramaturgy in its plot, devices and structure all function to pin down Savitri for narrative censure.

Savitri, then, is held accountable for the dystopic family, where each of the three children are marked by an emotional void attributed to failed upbringing. Ashok, as irresponsible as the father, whiles away his time between a girlfriend whom he gifts objects stolen from home and cutting out images of actresses from magazines. Despite the mother's efforts he has never tried to hold on to a job. Binny attempts to evade the oppressive atmosphere at home through marriage but finds the discontentment following her. Kinni, the most brattish, is intractable and rude, ready with sarcastic jibes unperturbed at being accused of indulging in sex talk with her friend. In this sense, the family becomes a mirror of its emotional architecture, each member afflicted mentally and unable to connect emotionally. Though the play is appreciated for its psychological realism and social critique, to a feminist reader the narrative is loaded with sexist bias. Savitri is unequivocally portrayed as culpable, whereas the character of Mahendranath is invested with pathos. He is portrayed as a victim of unrequited love for his wife, helpless in his dependence on her while she has had a string of aggravating flings which are represented as provoking for the husband and his defendant in the sex war, his son Ashok.

Savitri is an iconoclast in her refusal to perform maternal affect, the societal expectation of the manifestation of emotional care and warmth. She enacts what Ahmed calls a refusal of the "emotional norms" assigned to women in familial and cultural spaces (2004, p. 169). For a feminist, her discontent exposes the gendered asymmetry of familial duty. Her husband Mahendranath's physical aggression and economic failure are treated as footnotes. He is empathised with and even exonerated by both the children and broader society. But Savitri's visible dissatisfaction,

despite her economic competence, is treated as unnatural. Her isolation, then, is not a fall from grace but a refusal to seek it.

Savitri's sexual/emotional deviance is the most difficult and unpalatable aspect of her subjectivity, which challenges the sacrosanct institution of marriage. The implicit gesturing towards her overtures with male figures such as Juneja, Jagmohan, Singhania, Manoj and Shivjeet is treated with suspicion by both her family and the moral gaze of society. Unlike her husband Mahendranath, whose failures evoke pathos, Savitri's yearning for emotional reciprocity is projected as moral depravity.

Such characterisation recalls Irigaray's theorisation of female desire as subversive, which patriarchal institutions seek to limit the expression of within the scope of marriage. Women are acceptable only as objects of desire. Savitri subverts this expectation, insisting on the legitimacy of her yearnings. In doing so, she further distances herself from the idealised 'angel', who is supposed to find her emotional and spiritual fulfilment in dutiful renunciation. Even within Indian cultural traditions, female sexuality is often framed as either dangerous (as in the *apsara* or temptress trope) or erased entirely (as in the *pativrata* ideal). Savitri refuses both positions, claiming neither purity nor seduction, but a mundane, unfulfilled yearning that the play never fully resolves.

Her sexual agency, then, becomes a site of narrative discomfort, much like her emotional detachment from her children. Building on the feminist insights of Tharu (1993), one can argue that the modern Indian woman in literature is often punished for asserting her desires, not through overt tragedy, but through more insidious forms of marginalisation, such as narrative erasure, social illegibility, and emotional scapegoating. She becomes a figure who cannot be assimilated into the moral logic of the domestic world, even if she continues to live within it. Moreover, the play does not grant her sexual agency any dramatic triumph. There is no escape, no transformation, no new beginning. Her potential lovers are either weak, unavailable, or indifferent. In this way, Rakesh avoids both the moral condemnation typical of patriarchal narratives and the liberation fantasy often seen in early feminist literature.

In the play's climax, Savitri's expose of the domestic abuse she has suffered for lacking robotic compliance is topped with an even bigger revelation of her seeming marital infidelity merely two years into her marriage. The manifest authorial judgement is evident from the contrived

 ISSN: Print 2229-6557, Online 2394-9244

ending which is calculated to puncture Savitri's earlier verbosity. The revelation is underscored by the cosy equation she shares with Jagmohan before the climax. The familiarity between the two is played out by physicality, the mention of the multiple haunts they had been to and of course Jagmohan calling her "Cuckoo" (p. 54). The authorial mediation attempts to strip Savitri's articulations of their radical nature.

The present reading is an attempt to redeem Savitri's character despite the narrative bias. Sangari and Vaid, negotiating the representation of women, recognise its political nature—"The representation of women in literature and reformist writings is never innocent; it encodes tensions between tradition and modernity, between indigenous patriarchies and colonial modernities" (p. 15). Even as the narrative seeks to contain Savitri's subversive potential, it cannot be completely drowned in the chorus of male voices. Indeed, rather than merely being a character she acts as a mirror to the tensions that breach the veneer of normalcy in society. According to Singh, "The female character is not simply a flawed figure or a deviant individual, but a cultural signifier through which social anxieties, patriarchal contradictions, and ideological negotiations are played out" (p. 22).

Savitri, then, is to be celebrated for her humanity in her insistence that her experience and emotions count. Savitri maybe a fictional character who takes on the male establishment in her refusal to be muzzled but she opens up a discursive space for women who struggle to articulate their lived experience. As Rich observes, "the most radical thing we can do is to stay true to the truth of our own experience, however raw, partial, or incomplete" (1979, p. 212).

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 ISSN: Print 2229-6557, Online 2394-9244