

## K.R.S. IYENGAR: A DOYEN OF INDIAN ENGLISH WRITING

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### ABSTRACT

*Kodaganallur Ramaswami Srinivasa Iyengar (1908-1999) is a widely admired poet, critic and an erudite scholar who straddled the world of English and Indian literature with perceptible self-assurance. He is a pioneer in a systematic study of Indian Writing in English. His lectures as visiting Prof. of Indo-Anglian Literature at the University of Leeds in 1959 were published in 1962 as Indian Writing in English. This monumental study of India's contribution to English Literature was not only a pioneering work, but remains a standard work of reference, which succeeding literary historians have drawn upon with profit. The range of his scholarship is remarkably wide spanning in its ambit the English, Indian and Commonwealth literatures as well as the American and African, bringing about thereby a happy fusion of the principles of criticism of the East and West. His literary output includes such diverse disciplines as poetic compositions and translations, literary history and criticism.*

**Keywords:** K.R.S. Iyengar, Indo-Anglian Literature, Indian Literature, Commonwealth Literatures.

### Introduction

K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar is a Karmayogi who had realized the unity of Indian literature and culture from the Vedic Age to the present day.

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Iyengar is one of the last surviving humanistic critics who so gracefully combines penetrating literary insight with a sure sense of human values.

—Allen Tate

His works are distinguished by excellence and cultural contours. At a time when American literature was pushed under the umbrella of English literature, Iyengar wrote whole essays on Thoreau's *Walden* (1954), Melville's *Moby Dick* (1953), Tennessee Williams Plays, O'Neil's Drama and Edgar Allan Poe's Poetry (1961) to emphasise its individuality. He also wrote at length on G.M. Hopkins (1948), James Joyce, the Nobel Prize winner French poet St. John Perse or a Jewish writer Kafka.

His writings bear witness to his vast knowledge of and profound scholarship. Mulk Raj Anand regards him a noble, gracious and enlightened scholar (Sastry 4), C.D. Narasimhaiah, a scholar of singular distinction in English studies (Sastry 6). A seer, an educationist, a savant of letters, a connoisseur of literature, a perceptive literary critic, Iyengar was a scholar extraordinaire. He was a leading and the foremost literary critic in the field of Indian writing in English and through his major works of criticism he had given a new dimension to the Indian literary criticism.

During the forty years of his teaching career, he delivered hundreds of lectures on a wide variety of topics at various universities and institutions. When the study of American literature was not so popular, Iyengar wrote extensively on Thoreau, Melville, Tennessee Williams, O'Neil, Edgar Allan Poe, Hemingway and Faulkner. He had the distinction of being an elected member of Modern Language Association of U.S.A. and fellow of Sahitya Akademi. He has been closely associated with the P.E.N. since 1938 and participated in the P.E.N. Congress and UNESCO Symposium at Tokyo in 1957. The Andhra, Sri Venkateswara and Nagarjuna Universities conferred on him the degree of D. Litt. *honoris causa*. As a teacher, he had become a legend, progressively acquired the status of an icon, revered as much for his profound learning as for his deep humility.

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Born on 17th April, 1908 at Sattur on the banks of river Tamraparni in Tamil Nadu to Ramaswami and Lakshmi, Iyengar was a brilliant student, though somewhat taciturn. He received the B.A. degree in English and Mathematics, and accepted the post of a teacher at Chithambara College, Ceylon. Returning to India a few years later and taking his M.A., he joined the newly started Lingaraj College, Belgaum in June 1933. After a stint of eleven years there, he moved to Basaveswar College, Bagalcot and served for three years. In 1947, he joined Andhra University, Waltair as professor and head of the English department. He retired as Vice Chancellor (1966-68) in November 1968 and shifted to the Delhi branch of Sri Aurobindo Ashram where he was bestowed the title of Adhishthata by Mother. He served the Sahitya Akademias a Vice- President (1969-77) and also as an Acting President (1977-78). The decade long active association with the Akademi brought him into contact with many of the leading writers in several Indian languages. Further, the several regional and national seminars held under the Akademi's auspices commemorating Guru Nanak's 4<sup>th</sup> birth centenary, or the birth centenaries of Lenin, Kumaran Asan, or Sri Aurobindo, and Ramayana conference were opportunities for him to meet fellow writers and "bask in the fellowship of faith in our Indian literature that speaks in many voices but reflects the tremors of the same sensibility, mind and soul, and view our literature as a unifying and enriching force for now and always." (Meet 87)

His teaching faculties were legendary, his lectures were packed with deep knowledge, thorough analysis and a touch of humour. Teaching was more than a profession or even vocation for him. He believed that, "Teacher is a conduit, the channel of communication, the paraclete-link, between the pupil-aspirant and the knowledge- Reservoir....It is of course a far cry from the Acharya-kul ideal to the competitive bargaining, trade- union- conditioned teaching labour of today...." (Meet 79) People from all discipline listened to him spellbound—be it a valedictory address or a keynote speech at the auditorium. He took as S. Krishna Sharma remarks, "the audience through the intricacies of the issue at hand, and rounded off the discussion with such a neat...finesse that the listeners were flabbergasted (58)." And MulkRaj Anand says "consciously or unconsciously he was following the tradition of teachers like Bonamy Dobree and F. R. Leavis....received from either of them inspiration for treating students graciously, as friends, and not only as pupils in classroom." (Sastry 4) His students fondly remember his lectures for their "shining simplicity, an immediacy of feeling, a delicately grained sensibility, a suppleness of form and ease of expression...replete with scintillating wit and sparkling humour and occasional subtle implosions of irony(Sahitya Akademi citation)."

He was conversant with the writings from the Vedic times to his own day. English was his major instrument. However, he knew Sanskrit and Tamil well and this enriched his English style in a big way. Also, he constantly kept widening his parameters by reading translations from other languages. He was equally at home in other disciplines like philosophy, history, science and mathematics (Nandkumar 34). He believed that when an Indian writer comes out with his work in English, the writer comes carrying a rich tradition from Vedic times onwards that gives the work a distinctive flavor not to be found in other English writings. In his speech at Sahitya Akademi, when he was honoured with a fellowship in 1985, he underlined the need to uphold this aspect:

May our writers of today and tomorrow, like their great forbears reaching back to the Seers and Bards of Vedic antiquity, and evading the diverse 'enemies of promise' lurking around, uphold their elected vocation, their unique sacerdocy, and prove votaries of Truth and Beauty, and transmitters of Hope and Grace. To be a writer in India today is to try through severe askesis, the arduous discipline of life, thought, feeling and language, and each to the measure of his or her capacity, to be worthy of this vocation second to none other, and this again calls for endless faith and humility. (Nandkumar K.R. 35)

His works include the standard biography of Sri Aurobindo and *On the Mother: the Chronicle of a Manifestation and Ministry* (1978) that won him Sahitya Akademi Award in 1981, the biographical studies of Swami Vivekanand and S. Srinivasa Iyengar, critical studies of great literary figures like Shakespeare, Lytton Strachey, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Francois Mauriac and Rabindranath Tagore. *The Story of a decade of Indian Politics* (1939) profiles S. Srinivasa Iyengar's role in the nationalist movement in the period from 1920 to 1930. It is an absorbing study of the politics of India from Gandhi to Subhash Chandra, with an equal focus on S. S. Iyengar's role as the Congress President in 1927. This moving account of a person's and a nation's biography at a momentous juncture in history is a testimony to the penetrating insight of Iyengar as a political analyst of high order.

The task of writing the life of a seer and a mystic like Sri Aurobindo must have been a formidable challenge to Iyengar, as Keats says that a man's life of any worth is a continual allegory and very few can see the mystery of his life (Gittings 13), but he successfully completed the task of capturing

the entire scenario in all its complexity, dividing it into four parts: humanist and poet, patriot and prophet, pilgrim of eternity, and architect of the life divine. "It evokes an integral view of life in which the individual, social and national lives unfold in concentric circles enveloped within cosmic life....Iyengar traces Sri Aurobindo's life of progressive Divine manifestation contextualizing it in the history of an emerging nation." (39 Vijayasree, K.R.) He titled it as *Sri Aurobindo: A Biography and A History* (1972) as he believed that Sri Aurobindo's writings could not be detached from his life and his life too could not be easily separated from the mainstream of Indian and world history.

He had published a large number of papers and reviews. Several of them are collected in *The Adventure of Criticism* (1962), *Mainly Academic* 1969, *Two Cheers for the Commonwealth and A Big Change* (1969). He represents in essence a happy blend of a poet and a critic, and belying the oft-repeated charge that the critics do not make good poets, he emerged as a poet, a trans-creator of our ancient epics. His books of verse include *Tryst with the Divine* (1974), *Microcosmographia Poetica* (1978), *Leaves from a Log* (1979) and *Australia Helix* (1983). He has rendered into English verse the Sundara Kanda of the *Ramayana* of Valmiki, *The Epic Beautiful* (1983), *Devi Mahatmyam* (1977) and *Atma Bodha* (1966), the *Kural* of Tiruvalluvar and selections from *Tirumandiram*. He has to his credit several books, some of which are epoch-making. His work on Lytton Strachey has been adjudged as the most perceptive critical study and established Iyengar as an accomplished critic of life and letters. A staunch Aurobindoite, he has made significant contributions to Aurobindo studies. According to V. V. B. Rama Rao, "...his essays in criticism and history of literature have become indispensable text books for students of English literature (14)." The formidable abundance and diversity of his writings truly dazzles one's eyes.

It was during his stay in Velvettiturai, Sri Lanka in 1928-31 that he began writing and contributing to various journals and newspapers. He wrote book reviews and review articles on books and authors in the *Indian Educator*, the *Scholar* and other monthly journals of the time. Then he started a weekly literary column 'Books Day by Day', later 'From My Library Table' in Federal India, a *Madras Weekly* edited by Vavilla Venkateswara Sastrulu. He regularly contributed his articles to *Triveni*, *The New Review*, *Twentieth Century*, *Hindoosthan Quarterly* and *Aryan Path*. This regular literary journalism continued after his return to India and during his long years of service in Belgaum, Bagalkot and Waltair.

As a visiting professor at the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Simla in October 1972 as part of the Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Celebrations, Iyengar delivered six lectures which were published later as *Dawn to Greater Dawn* (1975). In these lectures Iyengar besides introducing the Yogi and the poet, highlights the uniqueness of the Savitri theme in *Mahabharata* setting, and shows how king Aswapathy was the Forerunner and his daughter Savitri, the preordained Redeemer. In this first introduction to *Savitri*, a modern massive blank verse epic of almost 24000 lines by Sri Aurobindo, which has been widely acclaimed by Raymond Frank Piper as "perhaps the most powerful artistic work in the world for expanding man's mind towards the absolute", Iyengar brings the reader face to face with the inner spiritual drama unfolded in *Savitri*. While the Savitri- Satyavan romance rises to the sublime, the Savitri- Yama (Death) dialectic covers the regions of Eternal Night, Double twilight and Everlasting Day, and concludes with the victory of Love over Death, and the ushering in of the Supramental Age. One has to agree with C. D. Narsimhaiah that "...but for Iyengar Aurobindo's poetry would have been a closed book to us (Sastry 7)."

Iyengar turned to lyric and narrative poetry later in life, and it all began with his first published poetic composition *Zero Hour* (1970). It was followed by other writings such as *Tryst with the Divine* (1974), *Microcosmographia Poetica* (1978), *Leaves from a Log* (1979), and *Australia Helix: A Spiral of Verse Sequences* (1983). While *Tryst with the Divine* (1974) records the impressions imprinted on a devotee's mind and heart at Sri Aurobindo Ashram, as the blurb says, "a sequence of reflections occasioned by three visits to Pondicherry during 1973, attempts to evoke the atmosphere of the Ashram, the centre of education and Auroville, and recalls the unique mystery of Sri Aurobindo and the mother in the context of the current crisis of survival for man and the world":

The very trees here seem to meditate, and the leaves swing in prayer. And the Mother is constantly engaged in the process of transforming the humanity to usher in the life divine on this flawed earth:

Fosterer of the cells' new consciousness,  
Fosterer of life and mind:  
Giver of the soul's freedom in knowledge  
Giver of the highest good:  
Supreme solvent of inadequacies,  
Accept this flawed offering.

*Microcosmographia Poetica* (1978) probes into the mystery of poetic creation and critical function

The poetic word, a complex of sound, and sense  
and cadence, is seeing speech...

The ducks called the swan the ugly duckling:  
so much for weights and measures.

*Leaves from a Log* (1979) is remarkable for its variety of theme and mood. The emergency poems record a sensitive soul's reaction to the darkest period of post-independence India. *Australia Helix* (1983) is a collection of a hundred and ten evocative poems, divided into nine books of twelve each, from 'Nomadic Nonage' to 'Terror and Transcendence' with an inclusion of 'Zero Hour' (written in 1969-70). The rat race, the worship of Mammon and Belial, the senseless violence mark the apparently unending darkness of life. The world is on the brink as we have made machines slave and slay for us, think and judge for us, as we have made human thought expandable, human sensibility a risk, as we have mechanized the heart and atrophied the soul. In such a situation one would look to the Universities, the repositories of the intellect, but the universities too have become

The latter-day pyramids  
where half-dead academics in resentful coma  
cultivate mutual companionship  
while angry neophytes rage and tear:  
The mummies have lost immunity  
and the museum keepers their old integrity.

It was Iyengar who introduced us, above all, to Indian writings in English as Indo-Anglian literature, and gave it a currency, a local habitation. His enthusiasm for Indo-Anglian literature found diverse means of expression when he moved to Belgaum in 1933, and whenever he could find an occasion, he wrote or spoke about the Indo-Anglians—be it the humorist S. V. V., the poets Seshadri, G. K. Chettur and U.N. Bhushan, and the novelists Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayana and Raja Rao. Iyengar, the first historian of Indian writings in English, firmly believed in the discipline as an enriching flow into English literature. He was aware too of the general view that Indo-Anglian literature was just *desi* English, 'an aberration at worst and an oddity at best'. It was in this background that Sophia Wadia published Iyengar's article on Indo-Anglian literature in the Indian P. E. N. for November 1938 and asked him later to write a whole monograph on the subject which was published in 1943 with a foreword by C. R. Reddy, who made a categorical and eloquent declaration:

Indo-Anglian literature is not necessarily different from Indian literature. It is a part of it, a modern facet of that glory which, commencing from the Vedas, has continued to spread its mellow light, now with greater, now with lesser, brilliance, under the inexorable vicissitudes of Time and History, ever increasingly up to the present time of Tagore, Iqbal and Aurobindo Ghosh, and bids fair to expand with our and our humanity's expanding future. He came out with a detailed literary history of the Indian contribution to English literature in 1945. The lectures delivered by him during his tenure as a visiting professor in Indo-Anglian literature at the University of Leeds in 1959 were the first ever attempt to present the whole conspectus of this 'strange mass' of Indo-English literature to a critical academic audience. These lectures, with a few additions, were brought out later as *Indian Writing in English* in 1962. Thus it won acceptance and academic respectability at last and is now generally viewed as part of the prized global heritage of literature in English.

He was a critic who tempered his scholarship with sympathy. Mulk Raj Anand expresses his gratitude to Iyengar and says, "...he rescued me from the label of a 'communist, propagandist tradition from the point of view of a modern humanist.'" (4 *K.R.*) He never made the mistake of measuring either Indian writers or their works with an Indian yardstick. He had all the ideal attributes of a critic—empathy, understanding, objectivity, honesty, impartiality and discernment. He believed that an ideal critic should be neither a fault-finder nor a mere eulogizer, he should be as widely read as was a Saintsbury, be learned but wise, be an upright judge without ceasing to be a gentleman at the same time. He should be a philosopher with his own point of view, having the capacity for digesting ideas and responding to diverse emotional situations by articulating his responses clearly, interestingly, enjoyably, perhaps even memorably.

Most of the subsequent Indian criticism, it would not be an exaggeration to say, leans heavily on the findings and observations of Iyengar. He begins with Macaulay Minutes and traces back the origin of English education in India. He observes how early Indian writers were influenced by Anglo-Indian poets Henry Derozio, Sir William Jones, Meredith Parker, David Lester Richardson, Sir Adwin Arnold who

derived their inspiration from traditional Indian themes. He predicted that the Indian writings in English has greater opportunities for striking out new path and achieving quick recognition as Indo- Anglian literature. In his next book, *The Indian Contribution to English Literature* (1945), Iyengar writes: "The best Indo- Anglian poets have given us something which neither English poetry nor any of our regional literatures can give; in other words, they have effected a true marriage of Indian process of poetic experience with English formulae of verse expressions." He observes that Raja Rammohan Roy had a vision of a new, modern India by a harmonious integration of our ancient wisdom and traditional strength with the emerging new scientific disciplines from the West. His writings ranged from subjects like the rights of women, the freedom of the press, the judicial and revenue systems in India to religious tolerance and the plight of Indian peasantry. The early scene of Indian literary Renaissance had many scholars such as Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Dwarkanath Tagore, Keshub Chander Sen, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Kashinath T. Telang, and Mahadev Govind Ranade, deeply steeped in English, Sanskrit or any other regional language, most of them being bilingual.

Iyengar's style has an easy flow while the analysis of themes and style are eminently lucid. In Iyengar's world, even Gandhi appears as a creative wielder of the English language, and his autobiography is referred to as "one of the imperishable classics of our time." The Gandhian thinking on political, economic and social issues became thematic content for many writers like Kamala Markandaya, Mulk Raj Anand and K. Nagarajan. And it was solely due to Gandhian theme of *Kanthapura* (1938) that Raja Raogained a special place along with Anand and Narayan. Iyengar observes, the theme of *Kanthapura* may be summed up as 'Gandhi and our village' but the style of narration makes the book more of a *Gandhi purana* than a piece of mere fiction. C. D. Narsimhaiah, widely acclaim Iyengar but says "My only grievance against him is he didn't make discriminating judgment about authors." It was mainly due to Iyengar's untiring efforts through lectures, seminars and symposia, besides the books, that Indian Writing in English came to be accepted as a serious literature and it has been included in the curricula of many of the Indian Universities.

Iyengar's *The Adventure of Criticism* (1962) is a collection of forty- five essays dealing with literary theory, literary forms, literary history, and works of literary art followed by literature in broad relation to diverse aspects of life. Iyengar views creation and criticism, as also literature and life as complementary activities. He makes a comprehensive survey of Indian, European, and American literature in its national context but his main emphasis has been on those elements that make literature acquire a timeless quality. He makes a perceptive and detailed assessment of writers such as Melville, Edgar Allan Poe, Thoreau, Tolstoy, Gandhi, Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, Allen Tate as well as symbolist writers such as James Joyce, Franz Kafka, L.H. Myers, Hannah Closs, and John Perse. This adventure of Iyengar into literary criticism was hailed as a "distinguished book" by Allen Tate; "humane criticism at its best" by A. N. Jeffares; and was highly praised for its "breadth and richness" by Richard Beale Davis. His critical canons were derived from both Indian and Western traditions, including and integrally transcending both or meeting in a new synthesis, his range as a critic is almost global in its sweep, and whether he discourses on Lytton, on Shakespeare, or any modern Indian writer, his comments are highly illuminating. As August Closs has observed in *Universitas* "...The Adventure of Criticism is the meeting of the waters: East and West. Iyengar transcends all national barriers and upholds an ideal of timeless beauty and grandeur".

As a critic, Iyengar believes, "...even as literature interprets life, so also criticism--serious criticism interprets literature. It is the function of criticism to penetrate through the shell and reveal the hidden pearl of truth, the packed significances behind the imitative framework of literature." (5) What he believed—"the poet is the seer, and he is also the revealer of what he has seen, the preserver of what he has found" (23)— he practiced in his life. To him the poet is no doubt the original creator: but the *sahridaya* is a creator too, "for unless he can re-create in his heart the poet's experience, unless his whole heart can vibrate in tune with the undertones of suggestion in the poem, it is no poem for him, only a bundle of words; he has merely mumbled some words, not incanted the mantra that opens wide the gates of Reality." (25) The whole adventure of literary scholarship comprising historical, ethical, and archetypal criticism, comes within the scope of the essays collected in this volume. To him the great epics are the 'common heritage' (53) of the world, and he firmly declares that racial myths and legends are not idle tales. An old myth rendered in the modern context often carries far more significance. According to Iyengar,

Savitri, Ahalya, Pygmalion, Prometheus, Psyche...are oracles of life still.... Many a Shakuntala wears her heart out somewhere or other---mute, inglorious, yet surely of the lineage of Kalidasa' matchless heroine. Many a Savitri still strives at the bedside of her Satyavan, and re- achieves the miracle of victory over Death described by the bardic poet of old....Do we believe in the utter vitality—the

transcendent reality—of the persons we encounter in literature? Do they haunt our memories—Do they unexpectedly cross our path--- as an Antigone does, as a Hemlet, or a Faust, or a Stavrogin, or an Ahab does? (34)

*Shakespeare: His World and His Art* (1986), perhaps the first authoritative and substantial study by an Indian critic, covers in detail Shakespeare's world and his art. Here Iyengar not only furnishes the best of critique, but imparts a comparative dimension to his appraisal by drawing parallels between the Shakespearian situations and those from Indian classics. Shakespeare's poems and all the thirty- seven plays are critically analyzed in their chronological sequence, and also in their grouping as poems, comedies, histories, problem plays, tragedies and romances. This comprehensive study of the many-splendoured theme of his dramatic achievement comprising plot, imagery, characterization, humour, wordplay and technical artistry by an Indian scholar is packed with an integral vision and critical evaluation. An account of life of this supreme dramatist, the Shakespeare Canon and the problems of chronology, classification and periodisation are followed by a survey of Shakespeare's England, the emergence of new drama, the playhouses and the valuable insights into the intellectual and philosophical contents of his immortal works which are perpetually exciting and rewarding.

In his view, "It is the art of Shakespeare that creates the illusion that what is, perhaps, impossible in the eyes of commonsense can nonetheless be acclaimed as the higher probability, the veracity of the world of romance(337)"and "the chief mark of Shakespearian characters is not mathematical consistency but the propensity to surprise convincingly, to plumb the depths, to suggest the infinitudes of the Spirit, to forge the filiations between diverse planes of reality (638)." Shakespeare took over many conventions from the drama of his time particularly soliloquy, but he was no mere copyist. According to Iyengar Shakespeare charged these conventional aids with new significance and made them fulfill functions which his immediate predecessors hadn't as much dreamt of—for example, enabling the reader to peep into a human crater, or watch the wires and the machinery behind the man's comfortable façade, or follow the ventriloquist's art of giving body and life to misgivings, irritations, impulses, brainwaves, hysterics and exultations. He says, "In Shakespeare's hands, the soliloquy becomes a nervous essay in psychological abstraction, or an experiment in dissection as scientific as any conducted in a laboratory (645)."

What stands apart in Shakespeare, according to Iyengar, is:

The essence of human predicament is isolated and held up to our gaze, and this confrontation is its own reward. We make a circuit of variegated emotions--- surprise, anger, disgust, admiration, terror, pity--- and are content to be back, exhausted but also becalmed, in our familiar moorings of traditional truth to which Shakespeare has now given a new freshness.(680)

The book is also remarkable for its lucidity, simplicity and profundity. While this sumptuous volume, as Prema Nandkumar says, is a boon to the teacher of Shakespeare in the Indian classroom, the parallels with Indian myths and legends certainly make the book a rich gift to Shakespeariana. (80 *Makers*) Iyengar makes a subtle parallel study that *The Winter's Tale* and, in fact, the last plays of Shakespeare offer no serious problems of comprehension to the Indian student who is familiar with works like Sudraka's *Mrichchakatika*, Kalidasa's *Sakuntalam* and Bhavabhuti's *Uttararamacharita*. Cloten and Imogen recall Samsthanaka and Vasantsena ( in Sudraka's play); Autolycus likewise recalls Sarvilaka in the same play; and Hermione, Kalidasa' *Shakuntala* and Sita of *Uttararamacharita*.

He had the rare honour of being one of the distinguished writers and creative thinkers who were invited every year by Sahitya Akademi to deliver the Sahitya Akademi Samvatsar lectures. These lectures reflecting a deep concern for human values open up new vistas of thinking regarding a literary movement, a current literary trend, some original thinking about a great writer or a new path in literary criticism. The fourth *Samvatsar Lectures* (1989) were delivered by Iyengar on the theme of "The Man of Letters and the Doomsday Clock". The great seer while outlining the nuclear peril observes: " Either scenario is open to humanity today: the mad plunge into the abyss of pride and strife and racial suicide, or the long night's journey back to brotherhood and survival, and the task of peace and universal well being."(27) But he has a hope for the better tomorrow that " when the man of letters turns his words into winged squadrons of the Spirit, the resulting revolution in thought, feeling, conviction and action will avert nuclear Doomsday, smash the Machine and the Clock, and greet the Greater Dawn." (51)

In 1978 Iyengar embarked on rendering the Sundara Kanda of the Valmiki Ramayana into English verse and the result was *The Epic Beautiful* (1983). He believed that the *Sundara Kandawas* the *Bija Kanda*- the seed book- of the Ramayana and he was almost convinced that Valmiki had indited the *Sundara* first and the other books were added to it later. As Aristotle observes that Homer selected for

the *Iliad*, not the Trojan war itself but only a single action in it: the wrath of Achilles, its causes, course and consequences, similarly, Iyengar believed that if we view Ramayana narrative divided into seven Kandas as the planned enlargement of an initial core inspiration, it would not seem improbable that originally the Sundara Kanda was the nucleus and the rest were later additions. The introductory episodes in the Bala Kanda explain the circumstances which prompted Valmiki to compose the *Ramayana*, bestowing special attention on crucially significant action centering round Sita lonely in her strength and unflinchingly defiant in Asoka grove in Lanka. Valmiki who was deeply moved by the bereavement suffered by a female Kraunch bird, had first to tell the story of Sita in the captivity of Ravana and experience and enact the catharsis of the emotions of pity and terror, and transcend them before he could think of completing the rest of the complex epic edifice. The *Ramayana*, after all, is Sita's saga sublime, and Sita's grace, glory, and her wounded life and her wounded name are the haunting episodes of the whole narrative. Even in her captivity, in her suffering, Iyengar notices that Sita is immaculately and transcendently beautiful, rich in her purity, royal in her poise, noble in her transparent humanity, and worshipful in her veiled divinity. (24 *The Epic*) Therefore he titled his translation, not the Book Beautiful, but the Epic Beautiful, for he felt that by itself the *Sundara* had the unities of Time, Place and Action, and hence justified the title. He follows 10- 7- 10- 7 syllabic unrhymed quatrain (2863) as his approximation to the Sanskrit *anushtup*, divided into seven books and sixty-eight cantos. Besides a long introduction of epic tradition in India, the universality of the appeal of the Ramayana, the beauty and centrality of *Sundara Kanda*, the book has also a verse rendering of *Aditya Hridayam*. While translating the *Sundara Kanda* he had increasingly grown aware of the ambience of the Asoka Vana, of Sita's inferred presence everywhere, of the sad and sublime Sita, of Sita the paradigm of womanly grace and glory forever standing under the *Simsupa* tree. The figure of Sita haunted him like a deeply disturbing yet eternally cleansing presence and power. He writes, "Any tree I passed by seemed to be the Simsupa in Asoka Grove, and I seemed in my waking coma to look for Sita, often find her too; and taking a leap in time forward, see also the other Sita in Valmiki's Ashram, for a second time rejected by Ram...."

That was how he stumbled on the idea of retelling the Ramayana as *Sitayana: Epic of the Earth-born* (1987), intended to be no mere translation or abridgement, but a new and free re-recital of a familiar old tale, a saga of "the fair and sprightly, the insulted and injured Sita, the symbol of sweetness and light, of silent strength and sufferance sublime." (89 Meet) The rendering of Rama-Sita-Ravana saga carries a fresh approach and organizing principle in viewing of the saga in a new perspective as essentially the story of Sita: *sitayah charitam mahat*. Aurobindo's call to the Indian poets in English may also have had something to do with his taking up the pen for a sustained narrative on an epic heroine.

Iyengar retains only one fourth of Valmiki's narrative and invents the rest. He alters scenes and adds new ones dealing with birth, childhood and education of Sita. He also inducts entirely new characters like Yajnavalkya, Maitreyi, Katyayani and Gargi, drawing these personages from *Brihadarayaka Upanishad*. He makes no deliberate attempt to modernize or rationalize the story, but highlights in relief the immediate present from the ancient narrative. The thoughts projected through Sita's mind, since she is the brooding spirit of the whole saga, ranging from purely personal reminiscence to metaphysical queries, echoing at the same time the doubts and queries of contemporary Indian mind, lie at the heart of the reinterpretation of the epic.

After retelling Ramayana as *Sitayana*, the saga sublime of her heroic sufferance, Iyengar ventured to tell a story of the seven heroic women, seven noble mothers, the eternal feminine, the Adya Shakti, the phenomenon of evolution, in varied candidly human manifestations. He selected from the rich gallery of the epic and Puranic heritage, notably the *Mahabharata*, the *Bhagavata* and the Tamil classic *Silappadhikaram*, these seven revered figures: Devahuti, Sukanya, Devayani, Damayanti, Renuka, Draupadi and Kannaki to project something like a rainbow arc of the evolving feminine psyche in the epic *Saga of Seven Mothers: Satisaptakam* (1991).

As in *Sitayana* (1987), here too, the tilt is towards the heroines and their psychic compulsion to face and master increasingly difficult or complex situations thrown up by the evolutionary drive that carries the race forward. Iyengar uses the word sati in connotation such as sat, pure existence, of *sat-chit-ananda*, the triune Omnipresent Reality, the holy, fair and chaste woman, the guardian and saviour-strength of her spouse, and the bearer, fosterer, humanizer and diviniser of the coming generations. The unifying theme of the seven tales of this saga is the perennially haunting phenomenon of maidenhood, womanhood, motherhood, visibly human though inherently or potentially divine. There are also, besides the life histories of the selected seven variations of the Grace and glory of the mystic of motherhood, some undercurrents of mythical, legendary, historical, and philosophical overtones to preserve in some measure the complex appeal of the original narratives. These seven emanations suggest a progressive

“self-finding and a coming to terms with the male of the species, so that woman and man ... can jointly march towards the future” (xvii *Satisaptakam*) promising a new and greater Dawn because Iyengar believed that the transformation of humanity is the call of the future. Pradip Bhattacharya succinctly remarks:

It is a unique effort to portray the evolution of the female archetype, Adya- Shakti, through the four ages of humanity as envisaged in the Itihasa-Purana of Bharata Varsha... The author prefers to look at his creations as typifying the evolution of One Power; as a Rainbow Arc whose seven colours are subsumed as it were in the splendor of the White Rose... For him it has not been a five-finger exercise, a literary challenge, a tour-de-force, or even a search for roots, but verily a yogic process through which he has achieved the conviction that

...the mists  
will recede and disappear,  
and retreating from the brink the race will  
renew itself and endure. (67)

The retelling of the two ancient epics is regarded by K. Krishnamoorthy as a “watershed in Indian creative writing in English (35).” He further says, what is more, woman shines here as Beauty and grace in her multiple roles, not only in the domestic sphere, but in the timeless quest for spiritual light in the human evolution towards perfection.

*Krishna- Geetam* (1994) is a fresh re-telling of age- old Krishna saga set in the perspective of the diverse incarnations of Vishnu, but Iyengar, in *Krishan- Geetam*, beautifully captures the various facets of his life—the child Gokul- Krishna, the boy prodigy drawing upon the powers of his Yoga Maya, and the ravishing flute player of Vrindavan, culminating, on the one hand, to the Rasa revelry on a moonlit night when Radha joins Krishna to lead the dance with the uncanny evocation of the Love Divine, on the other, the Arjuna- Krishna (Nara- Narayana) dialectic of liberation at Kurukshetra. Radha is at the heart of the re-telling of this saga, and projected in a very different manner from the way it has been dealt with in certain schools of post- jayadeva Vaishnavism. Radha, in *Krishna- Geetam*, is truly Adya- Shakti’s descent to collaborate in Krishna’s avatar mission, verily the heart and soul of the flute –call and is an alchemic power, a supreme ministry to bring forth the ‘Love Divine’ and ‘Delight of Existence’. Radha, in the present version, is a Gopi from Himalayan settlement, and once suddenly hearing Krishna’s flute, feels irresistibly drawn to Vrindavan following the direction of the call:

Krishan- Geetam! Delight of Existence!  
It’s adya Shakti’s descent  
as Radha generates unceasingly  
the Flute’s nectarean notes. (Book V, Radha and the Raasa Revels)

Here we have again the glimpses of Aurobindo’s philosophy of Life Divine and Integral yoga in its fullness. Krishna, it is believed, is the Purusha in fullness of descent—no partial or fractional incarnation and Radha, too, is Prakriti’s—Adya Shakti’s—totality of descent to advance, in alliance with Krishna. The narratives of *Sitayana* (1987), *Satisaptakam* (1991) and *Krishan- Geetam* (1994), written in unrhymed quatrains in a close imitation of Sanskrit *anushtup* with a 10- 7, 10- 7 syllabic metre, may be viewed as an epic trilogy deriving their themes from *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and *Srimad Bhagavatam* respectively.

“Whatever Iyengar wrote, a brief review or a large book,” says E. Nageswara Rao, “his writing is characterized by thoroughness, meticulousness, penetrating analysis and a healthy synthesis. His writings bear witness to his vast knowledge of a number of subjects and his profound scholarship. His style reminds us occasionally of Strachey’s pyrotechnic brilliance and Sri Aurobindo’s iridescence (57).” Similarly, K. Krishnamoorthy remarks, “Iyengar’s is a viable and vibrant vocabulary, at once rich and unexceptionable, flowery and fluent. It is reminiscent of many a major poet in English.... How truly he believed that an author projects his quintessential self in his literary work whether it is creative or critical study because the best way of getting to know about an author is simply to lose yourself in his creation whether it is Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* or Subramania Bharati’s *Panchali Saptam*? As Iyengar said in *Meet the Author in Indian Literature*, “An author is not exhausted by his writings. He is in them, and exceeds them too...(77).” Shakespeare is writ large in his plays and poems, and still he eludes our grasp, is it not so with Iyengar?

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