

The Evolution of Man: Studying Sri Aurobindo's Dramatic Oeuvre

Ansh Sharma

Research Scholar

India

kanhaji.ansh@gmail.com

Abstract-

Sri Aurobindo wrote around eleven verse plays, much in the tradition of the Elizabethan poetic plays. Many similarities and equally numbered distinctions may be traced amidst the dramatic output of William Shakespeare and Sri Aurobindo. However, of the eleven plays only five plays are complete, in that they have a five act structure, namely- *Viziers of Bassora*, *Eric*, *Rodogune*, *Perseus: The Deliverer* and *Vasavadutta*. The genealogy of all these plays may be traced to the legends or myths, of the various ancient cultures which populated the world and shaped its history. Irrespective of their different myths of origin, Sri Aurobindo, much like Shakespeare employs these stories only as the raw clay, while he moulds the statue out of it, according to his own vision, that is the Evolution of Man.

An analysis of Sri Aurobindo's plays elucidates the unparalleled range and vision to which his plays bear testimony. The notable feature of Sri Aurobindo's plays is that they portray diverse cultures and nations in different aeons, populated with an array of characters, moods and sentiments.

Sri Aurobindo spent almost all his growing years in England, studying English and other classical literatures and the impact of this reading is discernible in his plays. He seems to be

particularly impressed by the Elizabethan drama and employs its technique in matters of plot construction and characterisation. He is said to have perfected the English blank verse which he deftly displays in the dialogues of his characters. His plays can thus be said to be a unique blend of the Sanskrit and Western philosophical and aesthetic theories as the plot, the climax, the progression and the theme is unmistakably Indian. He seems to have been influenced by the Sanskrit playwrights like Bhasa, Kalidas and Bhavabhuti and all five plays are imbued with the poetry and romance which is similar in spirit and flavour of the distinctive dramatic type which was the signature style of Bhasa, Kalidas and Bhavabhuti, and simultaneously preserve the Aurobindonian undertones. The paper attempts to elucidate the 'Evolution of Man' which Sri Aurobindo mounts through his plays.

Keywords: Sri Aurobindo, Indian Aesthetics, Spiritual Development, Indian Drama, Evolution of Man

An analysis of Sri Aurobindo's plays elucidates the unparalleled range and vision to which his plays bear testimony. The notable feature of Sri Aurobindo's plays is that they portray diverse cultures and nations in different aeons, populated with an array of characters, moods and sentiments. *Perseus the Deliverer* is based on the ancient Greek myth of Perseus while *Vasavadutta* is a love fantasy of ancient India. *Rodogune* is a Syrian romance and *The Viziers of Bassora* is a romantic comedy which brings back the reminiscences of the ancient Persia, under the rule of Haroun al Rashid, while *Eric* is a Scandinavian romance. In Sri Aurobindo's plays characteristics like romance, heroic play, tragedy, comedy, and farce are perfectly employed to give a masterpiece, which ultimately delivers the message of the evolution of man. Sri Aurobindo spent almost all his growing years in England, studying English and other classical

literatures and the impact of this reading is discernible in his plays. He seems to have been influenced by the Sanskrit playwrights like Bhasa, Kalidas and Bhavabhuti.

The Viziers of Bassora, was written by Sri Aurobindo when he was in jail, and is a perfect example that an author's circumstances may not influence his writings as it is the most physically vital of his plays. The play is set in the rule of Haroun- Al- Rashid, who took Islam to the pinnacle of its merits during his Caliphate.

The play depicts the Islamic world which may appear flawed to a modern eye, but was the pinnacle of glory and prosperity in its own times. The Islamic state which decreed that all should abide by the code of conduct as dictated by the Lord and communicated to the humanity by The Prophet. This is a world which has defined glamour, passion, splendour, beauty and sensuousness in altogether novel and much alleviated parameters yet upheld justice as its greatest value. This world evolves from merely physical and material pursuits into one which has much more compassion and regard for human values.

As the title is suggestive- the play is about two Viziers who are in service of Mohammad Bin SulymanAlzyani, who is Haroun's cousin and the King of Bassora. The two Viziers embody the duality of the good and evil inherent in man and how these qualities intrinsic in their natures mould their circumstances and influence their successive generations- forms the plot of the play. AlfazzalIbnSawy- who is the Chief Vizier, is a noble soul and so is his son Nureddene. The evil forces are inherent in the second Vizier Almuene Bin Khakan and his disfigured son Fareed.

Sri Aurobindo anticipates his hopeful vision for the evolution of man into someone better than he already is, through this play. The play recounts the ancient adage of the victory of good over evil, but with a slightly individual approach. It captures the essence of the human nature which has both good and evil in it. The human journey is all about realisation, acceptance and

improvement of the status of self one finds himself in. This transformation and consequent ascension can come about only with the power of true love and not mere passion or desire- is the premise traced through the love of Nureddene and Anice. Nureddene, although essentially a good human being, is given to wayward living and lack of self discipline, at the beginning of the play. However, with the responsibilities that the love of Anice vests in him, his life changes its trajectory and he evolves into a much better person, so much so that the Caliph crowns him as the King of Bassora.

The play showcases open auction of slave girls, in a world which is predominantly and oppressively patriarchal. However, the love of Anice becomes the instrument of transformation in Naruddene, the house of IbnSawny is a household which respects women of all stature is presented in contrast to that of Alfazzal where even the son does not respect his mother, and IbnSawny accepting Naruddene's love for Anice only on the condition that he remain faithful to her forsaking other woman, is representative of the imminent change which shall revolutionise that world to create a better society. Haroun, the Caliph himself accepts the importance of respecting women and keeping them happy, as he says in Act V Scene 7,

All then is well. Anice, you're satisfied?

I never was so scared in all my life

As when you rose against me. (Ghosh 03-04: 183)

The Caliph, who is considered to be the representative of the God himself, is afraid of a woman's rebellion, as Anice herself spells the cause in her entreaties to the Caliph in Act V, Scene 5;

Give back my husband to my arms unhurt

Or I will rise upon the judgment day

Against thee, Caliph HarounAlrasheed,
Demanding him at that eternal throne
Where names are not received, nor earthly pomps
Considered. Then my frail and woman's voice
Shall ring more dreadful in thy mighty hearing
Than doom's own trumpet. Answer my demand. (Ghosh 03-04: 169)

Thus, Sri Aurobindo tries to regulate the representation of a predominantly patriarchal society with flashes of his own understanding and convictions of what is ethically correct.

This is the beauty of Sri Aurobindo's plays that what appears to be a very normal and regular tale superficially, may be justifiably explored and explained on so many symbolic levels. By placing his plays in different places and different epochs, he depicts that the human condition is essentially the same spatio-temporally. Humans have since the dawn of civilization strived only for the evolution into something better and only the power of selfless love that can make it possible for man to do so. He gives us a message that there is always a hope to make this world a better place to live in.

The play, *Eric* was written around 1912-1913, in which, "a revolutionary Nationalist emerges as a prophetic seer, concerned with the idea of human unity" (Kumar 69). Eric becomes revelatory of Sri Aurobindo's change of heart and perception, as he gained the higher realms of consciousness which enabled him to comprehend the fact that the power won by winning over the people is stronger than forcing them into dominion by violent means. Eric seems to have been an allegorical tale of the Gandhian revolution, accomplished solely by non-violent means. The time frame when Sri Aurobindo wrote this play corresponds to those years when Sri

Aurobindo was gradually drawing away from the political scene and retreating into the world of Yoga and psychic development. M.V. Seetaraman says of Eric:

Eric depicts an uplifting and transforming of the Actual towards the Ideal by the education of the fundamental types of the human personality to the perception and realization of the higher and ideal life of completeness, harmony and love. (Kumar 84)

Eric, is a psychological play, for in this almost all the characters undergo a change of heart, which is a direct consequence of an evolution of their psychology. *Eric*, depicts that we as mortal humans have a very limited approach to life. Our psyche and understanding of things is based on our coloured perception of the world, in which our own wishes and hopes are involved. We often fail to see the viewpoint of the other party, and thus miss the whole picture. It is a Herculean task to accept that we have been wrong because it goes against everything that we have always believed in. Our beliefs and prejudices shape our psyche since we begin to comprehend the essence of our own being, so attempting to change those beliefs is like negating our past life and trying to build an altogether new life. This is the problem that Aslaug faces. It is true that Eric becomes a complete man only after he has known the power of love, although he is compassionate and a rightful man.

In his other plays, the heroine acts as an instrument to bring about the psychic development of the hero but this play is an aberration, as in this the power of love elevates Eric, but it transforms Aslaug. The major theme of the play seems to be the suggestion that- love conquers all. The play is more about the personal transformation that the power of love can bring. As Eric says:

‘Tis Love, ‘tis Love fills up the gulfs to Time.

By love we find our kinship with the stars,

The Spacious uses of the sky. God's image

Lives nobly perfect in the soul He made. (Ghosh 03-04: 580)

This is corroborated by K.R. SrinivasaIyengarand he says:

The need for Love, for Love alone is the great solvent of all varieties of evil. (Kumar 90)

Vasavadutta (1957) is the only play of all the complete plays of Sri Aurobindo, which has an Indian theme. In his Author's note to the play Sri Aurobindo writes that,

The fable is taken from Somadeva'sKathasaritsagara (the Ocean of the Rivers of Many Tales) and was always a favourite subject of Indian romance and drama; (Ghosh 03-04: 622)

Sri Aurobindo calls it a 'Dramatic Romance' for it deals with the romance between King VuthsaUdayan, the lately anointed King of Cowsambie and Vasavadutta, the daughter of ChundaMahasegn, the King of Avunthie. The play has been entitled Vasavadutta, after the heroine of the play because it is she who undergoes the transformation after she falls in love with Udayan.

Udayan has known passion and so needs only a proper catalyst that can transform his unbridled passion into pure, selfless love. He encounters that catalyst in proud and power loving Vasavadutta, which makes him a better and evolved person when he is leaving Avunthie, than he was when he had entered it. Vasavadutta on the other hand is a proud, haughty and power loving princess who is involved in her father's conniving to entrap Udayan in her charms. However, against all her plotting and planning, she falls in love with her captive. The transformation of a high, mighty princess into a selfless, devoted woman is due to the power of love.

Sri Aurobindo deals with this theme of love transforming the humans in all his plays, yet the setting and the treatment of the play makes the whole perspective deliver a different message.

This play has an Indian setting and the circumstances which form the plot are a common utterance in the political history of India. Although, the language, the structure and the metres used in the verse dialogues have the shadow of the Elizabethan dramatic romances, yet the progression of events takes an Indian trajectory.

Eric, imprisons his enemy and brings him as a captive, but Udayan lets himself be taken captive. His fearlessness and confidence make Vasavadutta fall in love with him. He is a lion roaring to his full might in the enemies' territory. Udayan manages to win over those who were his enemies and makes them his friends because of his character. In his *Indian English Drama, A Study in Myths*, Nand Kumar talks of the theme of Vasavadutta. He says:

According to Sri Aurobindo an obscure consciousness that responds to aspiration, love, bhakti and surrender experiences a psychic transformation as the veil of ignorance "which covers and conceals the soul" is removed. This brings forward "the soul or psychic being to govern the mind, life and body and turn and open them all fully to the Divine, removing all that is opposed to that turning and opening". (Kumar 64)

A play that is set in a Syria of the later times is the play, *Rodogune* which was published posthumously but written while Sri Aurobindo was in Baroda. It is located in Syria, but this Syria cannot be placed factually in either history or geography but is a product of Sri Aurobindo's fictional imaginings. This is the only tragedy of all the complete plays, in the conventional Aristotelian sense in that the play ends in the death of the hero.

Antiochus being the elder son, was the true heir apparent of the throne, however Cleopatra favours Timocles in order to ensure the continuance of her own power. Antiochus revolts against this injustice and leaves Syria to gather forces in order to fight for his own right.

However, Timocles thirsts not for throne for his temperament has never been the one to bear the kingly duties. Frustrated, that his passion for Rodogune has been averted, he plots to corner Antiochus and murder him, so that he can get Rodogune. But his plans are thwarted when he discovers that Rodogune has departed from her body along with Antiochus.

Nand Kumar in his work *Indian English Drama: A Study in Myths*, says:

In Sri Aurobindo's *Rodogune* almost all the characters are symbolical.

The captive Parthian Rodogune represents the spiritual temperament and is an embodiment of love and purity. Antiochus symbolizes 'rajas'.

Rodogune symbolizing love and purity surrenders to Antiochus (rajas) and rejects Timocles (tamas). In the words of A.K. Sinha, "Timocles suffers death in life while Antiochus lives even in death." (Kumar 69)

The love of Rodogune and Antiochus is contrasted against the desire that Timocles has for her. Timocles has been presented as an alter ego of Antiochus, having all the traits which the latter lacks. As brothers, they both represent the two extremes of human existence. While Antiochus is conscious of his responsibilities as a future king, dedicated towards the welfare of his people, serious in his mien, truthful, loyal and honest, Timocles represents the contrast-he does not want to be the king; he is irresponsible, given to the show of excessive emotion, jealous, has taken on many lovers and falls to the extremes of jealousy where he does not scruple to get his own brother murdered just to have Rodogune. He is not bothered whether she loves him or not, he simply wants to possess her as his own. When this does not happen, he goes mad. Cleopatra is most in love with her self- her wishes, her power and her vanity. Instead of feeling sad, at her husband's demise, she is jubilant that her wishes shall be fulfilled and she would be reunited with her sons.

Rodogune and *Persues the Deliverer* are both set in the land of Syria, but the cultural conditions and the time frames are radically different. While *Perseus* ends on an optimistic note, with the promise of the emergence of a better world *Rodogune* ends with the tragedy of the death of hope of the world. In *Perseus* all the misanthropic forces are vanquished and a new world order is promised by the institution of Iolas as King of Syria and the union of Andromeda and Perseus. Athene with her wisdom would replace the animalistic forces of Poseidon, so the humanity can aspire to evolve into a better society. The rescue of Andromeda from the shackles is also metaphoric of the Humanity as a whole from the dark forces, by one who is evolved enough to lead that world into the higher realms of Consciousness.

Rodogune, apparently ends on a desolate note, because the hero and the heroine are dead just as Romeo and Juliet die in Shakespeare's play. Yet according to the Indian tradition- he makes this mortal death of the leading couple as the beginning of the new journey in the subtle realms of consciousness, so this demise does not translate as the death or the end, but as the liberation of souls from a world which was not fit for such as them. It is indeed the tragedy for the darker forces, because now they shall not be able to rise above their mundane existence, for those who could show them the path towards that goal have perished at their hands. It is hinted that Timocles has lost his sanity and Cleopatra shall commit suicide, because existence would not be possible for them in this emotional void that the deaths of Antiochus and *Rodogune* have created. The liberated souls of Antiochus and *Rodogune* can now embark on their true journey which shall upgrade them to the more subtle realms of existence and nearer the Divine consciousness. This is how Sri Aurobindo sends across another aspect of his poetic philosophy of Man reaching out to become the Superman. This play is a recitation of the kinds of hurdles

and trials that he may encounter in his way, death being one of them, but only if he is able to overcome them and rise above them, can he hope to reach his goal.

Perseus, the Deliverer, is considered to be the most important and the most archetypal play of Sri Aurobindo's vision of humanity. Perseus was commanded by Polydectus to fetch for him the head of Gorgon Medusa. Gorgon Medusa had serpents for her hair, ferocious teeth and a protruding tongue. These features rendered her so ugly a visage that whoever beheld it was petrified with fright. Perseus was assisted in his mission by Athena. When he was flying back to Serophs, with the prize he espied a woman chained to a cliff. He fell in love with her at first sight and descended on the adjacent island to inquire the whole story. She had been offered as a sacrificial offering for Poseidon.

This legend becomes the 'ur-text' for Sri Aurobindo's masterpiece. However, he moulds it to present his own parable of Indian Nationalism. He provides his justification for this poetic liberty at the starting of the play. In a note entitled 'The Legend of Perseus' Sri Aurobindo says:

For here the stage is the human mind of all times: the subject is an incident in its passage from a semi-primitive temperament surviving in a fairly advanced outward civilisation to a brighter intellectualism and humanism- never quite safe against the resurgence of dark or violent life-forces which are always there subdued or subordinated or somnolent in the make-up of civilized man- the first promptings of the deeper and higher psychic and spiritual being which it is his ultimate destiny to become. (Ghosh 03-04: 327-328)

Sri Aurobindo weaves into this legend subtle undercurrents of India's struggle for freedom from a foreign dominion as well as the emergence of humans and a whole civilisation

from the darker worlds of cruelty, greed, avarice, jealousy and ambition into a world which is ruled with wisdom, compassion, forgiveness, piety and justice.

If the play is analyzed for the spiritual meaning it seeks to convey, then Andromeda becomes the symbol of selfless love, unadulterated compassion as well as an instrument that has the potential to carve out a better world. She may represent what David Johnston calls in his article- 'A Psychological Commentary on Sri Aurobindo's Play: *Perseus the Deliverer*', the 'individuated heart-Self.' Both Perseus and Andromeda have the protection and guidance of Athene- the Goddess of Wisdom. This is significant because Athene is the executor of the will of Gods which is to demolish the disintegrating, cruel and evil old world order to create a revolutionized, civilized more humane world. She informs as much to Poseidon, who blinded by his own power over the seas refuses to heed Athene's words.

Perseus the Deliverer, is considered to be the magnum opus of Sri Aurobindo's dramatic works because in this he achieves a complete synthesis of humanly and godly in both humans and the gods- by the evolutionary journey of Perseus and Andromeda, how humans can aspire and become godlike in their own right, while on the other hand even gods possess the failings common to humans- namely jealousy, anger, pride and revenge as displayed by Poseidon.

Perseus becomes a shadow and the mouthpiece of Sri Aurobindo himself, who considered himself to be God- sent for the liberation of Mother India. He wrote as much in his letter to his wife Mrinalinidevi:

I know I have the strength to uplift this fallen race... This is not a new feeling in me, it is not of recent origin. I was born with it... God sent me to earth to accomplish this great mission. (Gupta 77)

The treatment of the subject is ministered with the compassion, piety, faith in essential human goodness and the optimism that it shall ultimately prevail comes from the Indian philosophy of 'chaityapurush'. The notion that pure love devoid of any selfish gratification is the only vital force that can guide the human soul to transcend its mortal limitations to attain higher evolutionary planes.

Although categorizing Sri Aurobindo's plays and limiting them to a particular category is not an easy task and it would not be able to do justice to their richness, yet the common thread of his plays is the expansion and evolution of soul which may be termed as the "Poetics of Soul". This poetics is not only the soul of the construction and treatment of his plays but also of the soul of the readers. As Jhumur Bhattacharya expresses in her interview:

In fact although his plays are not many they are at different stages of the human consciousness and so he does not reject anything. He accepts the man as he is- even the villainy, even the darkness- all that is really mundane- and he recognizes that some of these things have to be done away with if the original cause of the darkness and ignorance, which is in our existence is frozen into our ego. The sense of the separate being, I versus the world, I would do anything for myself. So a human who turns towards the divine becomes the divine. Like the river which falls into the sea, becomes the sea. There is no separation. So the human becomes the divine.

While enlightening about the culture propagated by Sri Aurobindo through his plays and other writings and how it is vital and important in the contemporary times Jhumurji says,

Culture is a projection of your own perception of the past traditions, you receive it and use it to make something new out of it and move forward. He accepts the Indian culture,

but he also talks of the part of greater development of consciousness which is to evolve. So it is not that in order to be truly Indian you have to reject anything else. You just have to find the truth that is presented by India, The Sanatana Dharma – the truth which is eternal and find that it is everywhere. In Sri Aurobindo there is one phrase which helps you everywhere and that is that he is all inclusive, he is not exclusive. He doesn't say do this, reject that. You be whatever you like. Be a Hindu if that is what you like but that doesn't stop you from seeing the truth of everybody else. As it doesn't stop you from recognising that in order to be truly a Hindu, you have to be all embracing. We embrace all thoughts- that is the meaning, the real essential truth of Hinduism. Everything is there. Nothing is rejected even the *nastik* has a place. Everyone has a place. You occupy the place that you want that is the democracy of the spirit. We say Buddha is an Avatar, Christ is an Avatar. Fine, why should you reject? But you select. I find it easier to be closer to this aspect. It is Krishna, Kali, or Sri Aurobindo, I find a certain rapport. Each one finds his own religion; you chose the religion which helps you to have more power. Doesn't matter whether you get appreciation or not, but if you have this satisfaction of having grown up into a better person, it is enough.

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