

# The Political and Philosophical Themes in Sri Aurobindo's *Perseus the Deliverer*

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## Abstract

Sri Aurobindo had a definite purpose in the choice of the Perseus – Andromeda myth for his play 'Perseus the Deliverer'. He was actively engaged in the country's struggle for freedom. *Perseus the Deliverer* is one among the numerous writings in *Bande Mataram* through which he gave clarion call to the people to arise, awake and struggle relentlessly and tirelessly till the shackles of slavery were broken and the Mother India was liberated. After her liberation Sri Aurobindo also wanted India to be reinstated in her glorious role of leading the entire humanity on to the path of spirituality

Keywords- . Bande Mataram, Spirituality, Freedom, Independence, Divine Life

## Introduction

The only play of Sri Aurobindo to appear in his life time was *Perseus the Deliverer*. It was published in 1942. It was serialized originally in *Bande Mataram* from June 30, 1907 to October 13, 1907. It was subsequently revised and included in the *collected Poems and Plays of Sri Aurobindo*, published in 1942.

## Discussion

*Perseus the Deliverer* was written in Sri Aurobindo's stay in Baroda (1893-1906). The Baroda period was a significant part of Sri Aurobindo's life. His writings in *Bande Mataram* came out in 1907, when he quit his job in the Baroda College. Those were days of intense political activity. His goal was to liberate Mother India from slavery. He wanted to educate the Indian people about the need for Independence. In a letter to Joseph Baptista, Sri Aurobindo writes:

I entered into political action and continued it from 1905 to 1910 with one aim and the one alone; to get into the mind of the people a settled will for freedom and the necessity of a struggle to achieve its, in place of the futile ambling methods till then in vogue. (*On Himself*, 329)

In this play, Sri Aurobindo made use of the Greek myth of Perseus. He also made use of stories from the Mahabharata for the same purpose. Dr. Prema Nanda Kumar notes, "Week after week, the *Bande Mataram* articles poured contumely and ridicule on the British rulers. Apart from the Political articles, Sri Aurobindo contributed to the paper poems, like 'Vidula' and 'Baji Prabhau' meant to exhort the Indians to respond to the call of heroism." (16)

Sri Aurobindo had a definite purpose in the choice of the Perseus – Andromeda myth for his play *Perseus the Deliverer*. He was actively engaged in the country's struggle for freedom. Prema Nandakumar states:

But the political situation in India being what it was at the time he (Sri Aurobindo) also knew that his readers would be forging certain similitude and drawing certain conclusions. Andromeda chained to the rocks – Polydaon gloating on his victory – Perseus intervening effectively at the appointed time! Mother India was in Chains –

the forces of oppression and exploitation were apparently on the ascendant – but where was the god-anointed Deliverer? (Bande Mataram, 131)

Sheo Shankar Jaiswal states: Sri Aurobindo, thus, had a firm conviction that for her deliverance India did not need (epheses, who believed in appeasement. He rightly foreshadowed that fiery band of nationalists, with heroic hearts and puissant minds, ready to pursue the goal of independence undaunted and undeterred by perils and determined to wage a relentless' unsparing struggle with the certainty of final victory, could alone deliver good to the country." (58) He wanted to rouse his people from slumber. He wanted them to get an intense longing for freedom. It was with this purpose that Sri Aurobindo chose the Greek myth for his play.

Sri Aurobindo wanted to give a new measuring to the Perseus-Andromeda myth. Professor K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar states:

It was left to Sri Aurobindo to offer the modern world a vivid new rendering of the old myth, retaining all its old beauty and poetry and sense of mystery, but all served up with a modern flavor and relevance and urgency. (160)

Like Sophocles, Enripides, Ovid, Corneille and Kingsley, Sri Aurobindo has given a new meaning to the old myths. He has also taken liberties with the locale, action and spirit of the myth. He changes names, characters and places. As Sheo Shankar Jaiswal notes:

The following minor changes have been made in the play from the original myth:

- i) Location in the myth is Ethiopia; but in the *Perseus the Deliverer* it is changed to Syria.
- ii) In the myth Andromeda is chained to the rocks by the people to be devoured by a sea monster as an atonement for her mother's impiety against the sea-god, Poserdon. Her mother had boasted that the sea-nymphs were not more beautiful than her daughter. Thus she enraged Poseidon. She opposes, in this play, the evil religion which she calls the human

sacrifice to the gods. She is punished due to her opposition to the god who eats the flesh of men.

iii) Phineus is Andromeda's uncle in the myth. In the play, Phineus is King of Tyre, betrothed to Andromeda.

iv) Cassiopea in the myth is against Perseus and works in complicity with Phineus to kill him. But in the play she stands for Perseus as do Iolaus and Andromeda.

v) In the myth Perseus is attracted to Andromeda because of her rare physical charm. In the play he falls in love with her because of her spiritual qualities.

vi) Unlike in the myth, where Perseus is the son of Zeus and Danae, Perseus in the play appears as a Protégé of Pallas Athene. She inspires him. She elevates him to a godly stature.

(*Sri Aurobindo's plays* 61)

In the Sri Aurobindo's play, the emphasis is on the in her World of man's mind.

In Sri Aurobindo's version, the main theme is the evolutionary destiny of man. His growth is spiritual. He rises above the lower self. He manifests the higher divine self.

The choice of the theme of freedom in the play is of great relevance to the then conditions of India. Sri Aurobindo was a great patriot. On his return to India, he wrote articles in the *Induprakash* which were titled 'New Lamps for the Old'. They criticized the then moderate policy of the Congress. He sacrificed the prestigious career of a civil servant, the princely salary and prestige of the Vice Principalship of Baroda. He plunged into the politics of his country. In a letter dated August 30, 1905, he wrote:

... While others look upon their country as an inert piece of matter – a few meadows and fields, forests and hills and rivers – I look upon my country as the Mother I adore Her, I worship Her as the Mother. What would a son do if a demon sat on his mother's breasts and started sacking her blood? Would he quietly sit down to his

dinner, amuse himself with his wife and children, or would he rush out to deliver his mother? (82)

Sheo Shankar Jaiswal states:

*Perseus the Deliverer* is one among the numerous writings in *Bande Mataram* through which he gave clarion call to the people to arise, awake and struggle relentlessly and tirelessly till the shackles of slavery were broken and the Mother India was liberated. After here liberation Sri Aurobindo also wanted India to be reinstated in her glorious role of leading the entire humanity on to the path of spirituality. The play was Sri Aurobindo's response to the direst need of the hour, as in fact, were most of his writings during the period." (65)

The play embodies the theme of deliverance from captivity. Sri Aurobindo felt that a Perseus will emerge to deliver Mother India.

Andromeda, in the play, is chained to a rock to be devoured by sea-monsters. Polydaon gloats in his victory. Chained to the cliffs, Andromeda feels helpless and miserable.

These cruel chains

Weary the arms they keep stiffly out

Against the rough cold jagged stones (157)

Sri Aurobindo symbolically shows the plight of India with demons on her breast and sucking her blood. The British rulers enjoyed like Polydaon acts of cruelty and did injustice to the suffering millions of India. The freedom fighters were subject to torture. Like Andromeda, they rose in revolt against the tyrannical forces.

*Perseus the Deliverer* has another important theme. Sri Aurobindo enunciated his *Integral Yoga* in the play. He believed in the essential divinity of man. This divinity has the publicity of manifesting in the material world. Sri Aurobindo states in *The Life Divine*.

The ascent to the divine Life is the human journey, the work of works, the acceptable sacrifice. This alone is man's real business in the world and the justification of his existence, without which he would be only an insect crawling among ephemeral insects on a speck of surface mind and water which has managed to form itself and the appalling immensities of the physical universe. (42-43)

### Conclusion

*Perseus the Deliverer* enunciates the philosophy of the evolution of consciousness.

When Cepheus, the King of Syria asks Perseus:

Then man to may arise to greater heights  
His being draw nearer to the gods?

(9)

Perseus answers:

Perhaps

But the blind nether forces still have power  
And the ascent is slow and long is Time  
Yet shall Truth grow and harmony increase  
The day shall come when men feel close and one  
Meanwhile one forward step is something gained,  
Still little by little earth must open to heaven  
Till her aim soul awakes into the light

(201)

At the end of play, the dark days of Syria come to an end. Sri Aurobindo suggests that all this happens as a result of divine descent to earth to rescue the forces of good.

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