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MUSINGS OF A SEER-POET: A STUDY OF THEMES IN SRI AUROBINDO'S SONNETS

ABSTRACT

Sri Aurobindo wrote regularly both in prose and poetry in his varied career. As a poet, he displayed immense capability in handling the English language and metre. As a poet he wrote narrative poems, poetic plays, a series of remarkable experiments in quantitative metres, and the monumental 'futurist' epic, *Savitri*. He experimented with almost all forms of poetry and prosody, and there is nothing wrong to call him primarily an 'experimentalist' and a 'modernist'. His later poetry (1937-50) is largely sonnets and poems. During his days of retirement in his *Ashram*, Sri Aurobindo wrote a number of mystical-meditative lyrics published as *Poems Past and Present* (1946) and *Last Poems*. *Last Poems* is mostly a collection of sonnets. Most of the sonnets were written between 1936 and 1944. This paper explores the various themes of these sonnets, in brief.

Keywords: Sonnets, Sri Aurobindo, spirituality, mysticism, seer-poet

INTRODUCTION

Sri Aurobindo's poetry is the produce of flawless metrical craftsmanship. He was a master of Greek, Latin and Sanskrit Literatures. He has given us a scholarly and thought-provoking forty-page essay on Quantitative Metre at the end of his *Collected Poems and Plays* in two volumes.

By definition, Sonnet is used to describe a single emotion, experience or thought. Sri Aurobindo's single emotion and experience or thought during this period was his living in absolute unity with the Divine. His Sonnets, therefore, are the records of various faces of Divine he had been watching day after day. Some of his short and longer poems, and especially the sonnets, have not yet been touched. In volume number five of the *Commemorative Volumes* set brought out by the Sri Aurobindo Trust in 1971, as many as seventy-seven sonnets have been included. These sonnets are characterized by symbolism, transcendentalism and spiritualism.

STUDY OF SONNETS

The fifty and odd sonnets in which Sri Aurobindo expressed his spiritual realisation and, occasionally, his moods of exquisite irony, are noted for their simplicity, directness and intensity of language. Our endeavour is to establish the relevance and importance of the fact that Sri Aurobindo's works represent the development of his thought and experience. The sonnets too are a record of his spiritual adventures in various stages; these express, as for him act should, "the inner spiritual truth, the deeper not obvious reality of things, the joy of God in the world"¹.

Sri Aurobindo considered himself to be a poet and a politician first, and then a yogi. Like Rabindra Nath Tagore, we find the organic coherence of a poet and seer in Sri Aurobindo. Sri Aurobindo is a prophet and seer par excellence. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar has rightly found *multum in parvo* in Sri Aurobindo's multi-faceted personality. "To acknowledge and salute the poet and the master of the 'other harmony' of prose is not, of course, to deny the teacher or the fighter or the patriot, the yogi, the philosopher or the prophetic engineer of life divine."²

The human self merging with Universal self has been describe aptly in *Life-Unity*

"I housed within my heart the life of thines,

All hearts a throb in the world I felt as mine;
I shared the joy that in creation sings,
and drank its sorrow like poignant wine.
One love I shared in a million bosoms expressed”.

[Life Unity]

The Pilgrim of the Night is about the mystic’s fiercest battle with the Inconscient.

“I made an assignation with the Night;
In the abyss was fixed our rendezvous:
In my breast carrying God's deathless light
I came her dark and dangerous heart to woo.

I left the glory of the illumined Mind
And the calm rapture of the divinised soul
And travelled through a vastness dim and blind
To the grey shore where her ignorant waters roll.

I walk by the chill wave through the dull slime
And still that weary journeying knows no end;
Lost is the lustrous godhead beyond Time,
There comes no voice of the celestial Friend,

And yet I know my footprints' track shall be
A pathway towards Immortality”.

[The Pilgrim of the Night]

Aurobindo reaffirms his undoubted faith in the Divine and portrays his soul as a part of God in The Divine Worker:

“I face earth's happenings with an equal soul;
In all are heard Thy steps: Thy unseen feet
Tread Destiny's pathways in my front. Life's whole
Tremendous theorem is Thou complete.

No danger can perturb my spirit's calm:
 My acts are Thine; I do Thy works and pass;
 Failure is cradled on Thy deathless arm,
 Victory is Thy passage mirrored in Fortune's glass.

In this rude combat with the fate of man
 Thy smile within my heart makes all my strength;
 Thy Force in me labours at its grandiose plan,
 Indifferent to the Time-snake's crawling length.

No power can slay my soul; it lives in Thee.
 Thy presence is my immortality."

[The Divine Worker]

Similarly, in *The Divine Hearing* the poet catches a glimpse of that Being and identifies himself with all and all things with himself: "All sounds, all voices have become Thy voice." The poet has felt the divine power which has brought a great change in him: "A secret harmony teals through the blind heart / And all grows beautiful because Thou art."

[*The Divine Hearing*]

The poet feels that this universe is just a tiny spark of that supreme *Brahman* and this supreme Being is present in each of us. The poet realizes the presence of *Brahman* in all and is able to share with the agonies and sorrows of each of the millions of inhabitants therein.

He describes such a state in Cosmic Consciousness where he has "wrapped the wide world in my wider self / And Time and Space my spirit's seeing are." Later on, in the same sonnet he remarks that "All nature is the nursling of my care." This identification can be achieved only in an exalted tranquil state.

"I have wrapped the wide world in my wider self
 And Time and Space my spirit's seeing are.
 I am the god and demon, ghost and elf,

.....

Yet still am one with born and unborn things.”

[Cosmic Consciousness]

The echo of the Eternal silence is reflected in such lines in *The Word of the Silence*: “A bare impersonal hush is now my mind, / A world of sight clear and inimitable, / But now I listen to a greater Word / Born from the mute unseen omniscient Ray.” The effect of such contemplation is expressed thus in the closing couplet of the same sonnet: “All turns from a wideness and unbroken peace / To a tumult of joy in a sea of wild release.”

[The Word of the Silence]

The poet defines his identity in a vision of the Divine in *The Self's Identity*: “A momentless immensity pure and bare, / I stretch to an Eternal everywhere.”

Aurobindo has made a passion of the spiritual life. Poetry, after all, has a mission. Poetry is not merely what is pleasing and moving, but what is inspiring and elevating. In performing his job, the poet turns into seer and reveals to man his eternal self. In other words, the true creator of poetry is the true enjoyer, too.

The sonnets are documentation of Aurobindo's spiritual experiences. The poet's soul has elevated itself to a stage where the descent of the godhead into his being is possible. The “golden light” transports him into a state of perfect bliss. As he says in *The Golden Light*:

“Thy golden Light came down into my brain
 Thy golden Light came down into my throat,
 Thy golden Light came down into my heart:
 Thy golden light came down into my feet:
 My earth is now Thy play field and Thy seat.”

This is an experience unique in itself. The poet's expression make us feel the supernatural experience: “Thy golden Light came down into my brain, / And the grey rooms of mind sun-touched became, / A bright reply to Wisdom's occult plane, / A calm illumination and a flame.”

The sonnets, penned down by Sri Aurobindo reflect the various experiences—mental, intellectual and spiritual—which the poet had been undergoing from time to time. A number of sonnets have been composed in a single day, while at times there is lapse of one, two or even three years. These could have been periods of suspended animation. If Sri Aurobindo had not been composing sonnets during these periods, his mind and thought were not static but were undergoing constant development. It is generally accepted that Sri Aurobindo marked 24 Nov. 1926 as the day of *siddhi*: the descent of Krishna or the Consciousness of the Overmind into the physical. This means that from this moment onwards he had undergone a variety of experiences. It is these adventures and experiences which are dealt with in the sonnets.

Though most of the sonnets by Sri Aurobindo are ‘Shakespearean’ in form with three quatrains and a couplet, a few of them are in ‘Petrarchan’ form also. Immortality is one such example showing transcendence in which ‘Time’ has taken the form of ‘the Eternal's endless year’ and the ‘Space’ has become ‘Infinite’

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that Sri Aurobindo rightly holds an important place among the Sonneteers like Shakespeare, Petrarch and Milton. As a writer of Sonnets, he has carved a niche for himself by lifting the sonnet to supreme spiritual heights of Indian philosophy. The Seer gives us beautiful insights into the evolution of human consciousness, in the context of the entire cosmic manifestation in the sonnet titled The Mother of God:

“A conscious and eternal Power is here
Behind unhappiness and mortal birth
And the error of Thought and blundering trudge of Time.
The Mother of God, his sister and his spouse,
Daughter of his wisdom, of his might the mate,
She has leapt from the Transcendent's secret breast
To build her rainbow worlds of mind and life.
Between the superconscient absolute Light
And the Inconscient's vast unthinking toil
In the rolling and routine of Matter's sleep
And the somnambulist motion of the stars
She forces on the cold unwilling Void
Her adventure of life, the passionate dreams of her lust.

Amid the work of darker Powers she is here
To heal the evils and mistakes of Space
And change the tragedy of the ignorant world
Into a Divine Comedy of joy
And the laughter and the rapture of God's bliss.
The Mother of God is master of our souls;
We are the partners of his birth in Time,
Inheritors we share his eternity. “

[The Mother of God]

Aurobindo's sonnets are expression of his spiritual consciousness “ in which thought sublimates into a translucidity of light and vision, feeling passes beyond itself into sheer spiritual ecstasy and the word rarefies into a pure voice out of the silence.”⁴ Line after line of the sonnets flow “without effort, simply and easily, without a word in excess or any laying on of colour only just the necessary.”⁵

Sri Aurobindo's poetry presents the quintessential essence of his mystic and spiritual experiences.

Conclusion

Most of the poems written between 1937-1950, whatever be their form or structure – Shakespearean Sonnet, Petrarchaen Sonnet – lyric or fragments have a family likeness with regard to their contents (thematically, they deal with Rjayoga, mysticism, divinely yoga-sutras). In them we have exhilarating rhythm patterns, reminiscent of cosmic music, heard only by a Rishi or a yogi. The imagery is cosmic and more poetic, the symbols and mythological references have all contributed to the almost divine song. In sonnet after sonnet, the poet's inquisitiveness, longing, spiritual thirst and restlessness for union with the fountainhead of his being create heart-haunting feel and novelty. All the sonnets are as many musical chords of a symphony.

References

¹ Rameshwar Gupta, *Eternity in Words* (Bombay: Chetna Prakashan, 1969), p. 43

² K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English*, p. 144

³ Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri* (Letters on Savitri), p.811

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

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