

Sri Aurobindo As a Dramatist: A Critical Exploration

Dr. Pinki Kumari



Assistant Professor & Head, Department of English, Women's College, Samastipur, L.N.M. University, Darbhanga, Bihar, India.

Sri Aurobindo has frequently been mentioned as among the most significant modern Indian philosophers, poets, and thinkers, and he did not confine himself to poetry or philosophy, as he also entered the fields of drama. His plays combine both the elements of spirituality and the classical form binding myth, history, and philosophy together. He always represents the conflict between human restraint and Godliness. Although his plays are not often staged, there is genuine interest in the fate of humanity and development of awareness. In this paper, a close look at the dramatic output of Sri Aurobindo will be made, and the ways in which his plays reflect his vision of life and literature at large. It identifies his symbolism, blending of western and Indian cultures and his aim to create a theatre of ideas that goes beyond entertainment to create spiritual awakening.

Keywords: Sri Aurobindo, Indian drama, Symbolism, Spirituality, Theatre of ideas, Cultural synthesis, Evolution of consciousness.

Sri Aurobindo is a poet, philosopher, nationalist and a spiritual guide in Indian literature. His poetry and philosophy work is generally regarded as a great achievement, but his role as a dramatist is not so popular although it is also crucial. His plays are not scripts to be read and performed, but aren't the boats of thought, imagination and spiritual insight. Drawing upon the Indian myths, history, and classical traditions, he transformed drama into an instrument that may tell profound truths about the life of people and their fate. At the same time, he absorbed influences from Western drama, especially the Elizabethan and Greek traditions, to give his works a universal appeal. In his dramatic vision, the stage becomes a meeting ground of the human and the divine, where characters struggle with inner conflicts and seek higher meaning. This paper introduces Sri Aurobindo's dramatic achievement and sets the ground for a critical exploration of his plays as a fusion of philosophy, and

spirituality. We know that in comparison with the British tradition of drama, Indian English dramas are not numerous in quantity but in the quality or in the presentation of dramatic technique they certainly merit our attention. The plays of Sri Aurobindo are dramatic and very poetic. His handling of blank verse recalls Marlowe and Shakespeare. This great poet wrote dramas mostly between 1891 and 1916. Today Sri Aurobindo is known to the world for his five great dramas —Perseus, the Deliverer, Vasavadutta, Rodgune, The Viziers of Bassora and Eric. About his plays, Dr. A.N. Prasad observes:

“Love and music ring the note of almost all the plays of Sri Aurobindo. in this regard we can easily see the influence of Shakespeare in the presentation of romantic theme and to some extent, Sri Aurobindo's presentation of love and romance even excels Shakespeare. So far the lyrical lilt and rhythm of the blank verse is concerned, he is very close to Shelley and Tennyson.” (Prasad, A.N., 7)

The play is about a young hero, Perseus, who fights against evil and saves people from fear

and oppression. Sri Aurobindo uses this old Greek story to show a bigger idea: that courage, faith, and the help of higher powers can free people from tyranny. In plain terms, the theme is about freedom, bravery, and the victory of good over evil. The philosophy behind the play is that we are not that helpless before fate. We can alter our destiny in case we are courageous and believe in Godly guidance. Perseus represents the spirit of emancipation- in the same way India was struggling to obtain independence under the rule of foreign power during the Aurobindo era. One of the lessons taught in the play is that struggle and sacrifice are some of the steps that lead to a higher and freer life.

Sri Aurobindo is a mixture of myth and symbolism as far as dramatic techniques are concerned. He picks up the Greek myth and reinvents it Shakespearean fashion, with great speeches and soliloquies. The characters are not mere fictional persons; they represent the subjects at a larger level, Perseus freedom, Acrisius tyranny and the gods who are the guiding forces. The myth is elevated to a message of spiritual and political freedom with the play abounding with grandeur, poetic expressions, and symbolic connotation. The story of Perseus the Deliverer is the one of hero who overcame evil with the help of gods and courage. It is based on the philosophy that destiny can be rewritten with courage and belief, and its style of drama is a mixture of myth, symbolism and rich and poetic dialogue to accentuate the struggle of freedom and truth.

The philosophy of Sri Aurobindo in Perseus the Deliverer is the under-current in the story.

He transforms the ancient Greek myth into an image of the human freedom and spiritual awakening. To him, fate is not an irrevocable obligation; it is a problem that can be conquered with courage, wisdom and the assistance of some deity. Under the guidance of Athene, Perseus turns out to be the vision of a soul which is not afraid to struggle against fear and tyranny, showing that we can be free in case our will is on its side. The play resembles the sentiment of this Aurobindo that struggle and sacrifice are required in the journey of mankind. Like how Perseus was able to defeat Medusa and liberate people, Aurobindo understood the struggle against the colonial rule in India as a bigger spiritual mission. Freedom is not merely a political one, it is the way to a divine life on the Earth. According to the drama, instead of despair, courage and faith will help to destroy oppression and ignorance. Thus, the myth reflects the vision of Aurobindo: fate is changeable, humans are supposed to overcome the fear and become free when the spirit collaborates with the divine.

In the case of the Sri Aurobindo, K.R.S. Iyengar remarks:

There is nothing like him in the modern Indian literature, nor even in English literature does he not have his own share of exclusive glories. But Aurobindo is not merely a writer who has chance to write English; he is a true English writer, just like George Moore Laurence Binyon or a W.B. Yeats.” (Iyengar,144)

The scene setting in the play, Epic by Sri Aurobindo, is clearly the Norse legend, and the plot revolves around a young hero struggling with the two-fold tribulation of fate and love as he goes through the conflict. Looking at Eric

fighting off the pressurizing forces that are in the process of chaining him, I observe a great demonstration of how bravery and inner determination can lead us through danger and skepticism. It is more than just another adventure play; the play is an intelligent reflection on the perennial conflict between human will and fate which dictates its inescapability. The main theme is the theme of destiny versus freedom. The book shows us that, despite what fate may seem to be, we are able to rise above it in the face of courage, devotion, and greater principles. The play shows us the need to stand firm when fearing and oppressed, as it glorifies the liberation spirit that springs up when we choose courage over hopelessness. The dramatic hand of Aurobindo in the work of *Epic* is a combination of mythic elements and bold symbolism a common trait in the rest of his work. He resorts to high, lyrical language and protracted, thought-provoking conversations that give the conversation a philosophical weight. Characters do not appear as individuals, but as allegoric fragments: Eric is the embodiment of freedom, the enemy side is the embodiment of oppression or destiny, and the goddess embodies the wisdom of the world. The play is stylistically reminiscent of Elizabethan drama with a mixture of grandiose oratory and theatrical action and the meditative contemplation.

On a philosophical level, it is possible to note that the idea of the character of the name of Aurobindo, which is reflected in the name of Eric, is the belief that human life is not completely dependent on fate. He

demonstrates that our free will - with the assistance of God - can alter the lines of destiny. The play suggests that struggle and sacrifice are necessary for true liberation, and that freedom is both an outward victory and an inward spiritual achievement. In simple words, Eric teaches that man is not a slave to destiny; with bravery, love, and divine help, he can rise above limitations and move toward a higher life.

The play, *Eric* deals the theme of human unity, the power of love, realization and surrender. It shows Sri Aurobindo's journey from *shastra-tej* (Sword-power) to *Brahma-tej* (divine power). It shows the eternal power of love that wins everything. The play dramatizes what S. T. Coleridge observes in his famous poem "Love":

"All thoughts all passions all delights
Whatever stir this mortal frame
Are all but ministers of Love
And feed their sacred flame."
(Coleridge, 171)

Like William Shakespeare, Sri Aurobindo has borrowed the plot of his various plays from history, myths and legends of his country and abroad. What matters most in his plays is his own stamp of originality, poetic creativity and craftsmanship which make the historical plays a fine piece of art and literature covering almost all the poetic tools of dramatic art and craftsmanship. In his play, *Eric*, Sri Aurobindo very beautifully portrays the theme of truthfulness, love and ideals of heroism to conquer hatred, contempt and darkness of life. The play *Eric* opens with a song or music which reminds us of the various romantic plays of Shakespeare full of music and songs. Aslaug, the heroine, sings a song:

“Love is the hoop of the gods
Hearts to combine
Iron is broken, the sword
Sleeps in the grave of its lord
Love is divine.”

(Eric,¹)

Sri Aurobindo's plays together reveal his larger vision of life, freedom, and the destiny of humanity. Through Greek, Norse, and Indian legends, he shows that myths are not just old stories but living symbols of human struggle and spiritual awakening. Both Perseus the Deliverer and Eric present main characters facing tyranny, fear and destiny with a basic idea that man is not helpless in the hands of fate. Aurobindo describes bravery, self-sacrifice, and divine guidance as factors which help make even the most challenging circumstances turn us in the direction of liberation, both social and self.

These are reminiscent of the opinion held by Aurobindo that history and myth are directed by a higher power, and that the chosen ones are used as the instruments of the divine will. It is in his high diction and the symbolic figures he uses that brings a clear emphasis that all wars whether it be with monsters, monarchs or inner voices in humanity reflect the mind in its struggle to attain freedom. He looks at things much higher than just political emancipation; the vision of his mind is the high freedom when the mankind lifts above the fear and ignorance to achieve the divine existence on the planet.

In his plays, Aurobindo establishes a point that humanity could overcome fate by his bravery and faith. He assumes that myths contain inexhaustible truths regarding liberation, whereas the ultimate purpose of life goes

beyond the earthly successes, it is the awakening of the spirit to the Godlike goal.

Another of the biggest works by Aurobindo is Vasavadutta, which is based on an ancient Indian story of King Udayana and Princess Vasavadutta. In this adaptation, the story is a mixture of love and political intrigue and depicts how love can unify realms of a kingdom by loyalty and bravery. The overall argument is that love is enough to overcome the political divisions and be used as a symbol of cohesion. Here the style of writing adopted by Aurobindo is grandiose and lyrical mixing the idioms rigor of Sanskrit drama and the fertility of Shakespearean theatre. The conversations are voluminous, full of esoteric colouring, and the characters often seem to be symbols of larger things like duty, sacrifice, and freedom. It is a balance between a romantic and philosophical approach to production, a fresh take on a well-known legend as a national spirit and cultural pride. The last scenes emphasize the combination of romance and philosophy, and the old legend turns into an incredible song of national pride and cultural heritage.

The same story is recounted in Bhasas Svapnavasavadattam and given a new twist. The whole affair is dedicated more to lamenting and being lonely. Udayana is deceived that Vasavadatta is dead to be able to imprison another princess to other causes such as politics. Excitement and passions, visions and intriguing twists are the order of the day in the play which explains why love is painful and politics are very smart.

When we compare the two, Bhasa's play is more emotional and tragic, while Aurobindo's

play is more philosophical and uplifting. Bhasa highlights the sadness of separation and the tension between love and politics, but Aurobindo uses the same legend to show how love can unite kingdoms and symbolize freedom. In simple words, Bhasa gives us the dream of Vasavadatta filled with sorrow, while Aurobindo gives us the romance of Vasavadutta filled with hope and unity.

The play has a close similarity with Othello by Shakespeare. The hero, Udayan, is very credulous and poetic like Othello. He thinks his greatest enemy Gopalaca as most faithful friend:

“Thou art some great one surely of this earth
Who com’st to me to live guest, Comrade,
friend.” (Vasavadutta, 10)

These lines are very close to several such lines of Othello who considers the dishonest Iago to be the most honest man in the play: “I know, Iago/Thy honesty and love...” (Othello,134). In a dialogue between Gopalaca and Vuthsa (or realism and romance) Gopalaca, though, reveals his identity saying that he is the son of Udayan’s most dangerous enemy, yet he doesn’t aware the king of his future critical junctures. Rather he takes his statement very lightly and replies:

And therefore, welcome more to Vuthsa’s
heart.
Foremen! They are our playmates in the fight.
And should be dear as friends who share our
hours of closeness and desire. (Vasavadutta
,11)

Thus, Udayan is so sensitive and poetic in his attitude that he fails to understand the evil design of Gopalaca. Though he is warned by Yougundharayan his minister, and even by

Gopalaca, his enemy, his romantic frame of mind never pays heed to the voice of truth.

Sri Aurobindo’s play Rodogune is a tragic story set in ancient Syria. It tells how two brothers, Nicanor and Timocles, both fall in love with the princess Rodogune. Their love turns into rivalry, and because politics and power are also involved, the struggle ends in sorrow and destruction. Unlike Aurobindo’s other plays that often end with hope and freedom, this one ends in tragedy. The theme of the play is the clash between love, ambition, and fate. It shows that when love is mixed with the desire for power, it can bring ruin instead of happiness. The way in which aurobindo presents this play is reminiscent of the Shakespearean tragedies. He heats up the rhetoric, falling on huge, poetic phrases and protracted orations, which strike to the heart. We have the profound and intense glimpse into the characters, and the drama develops not only by the inner storm that the characters face, but also by whatever is occurring on stage.

It is not the philosophy of pointless melancholy in Rodogune. In the case of Aurobindo, suffering and grief may purge the soul and bring out some truths. He believed that fate and free will are hanging around each other - destiny prepares the scene, however, it is our decisions which determine the outcome. In tragedy, even, there is a lesson: love is the best thing, but when it is twisted by ambition or egotism, it may ruin people, not raise them. To put it in simple terms, Rodogune is a tragic love story in which passion and power get out of control. Its subject remains on the destructive side of love in mingling with ambition, its style is noble and Shakespearean,

and its philosophy tells that tragedy is important, that it instructs the soul by misery.

Sri Aurobindo found a niche in the English Indian written drama since he was among the first to combine poetic dramas with Indian themes, classical mythological and spiritual philosophy all encased in Western drama styles. His plays are not books, but cultural relocations that ensued Indian English drama with its voice. Drama was a constituent of his greater Indian Renaissance. In his view, literature was to amuse, uplift, teach and open the eyes. His productions such as *Perseus the Deliverer*, *Eric*, *Vasavadutta* and *Rodogune* are based on Greek, Norse and Indian myths but reshaped to incorporate his thoughts regarding freedom, fate and spiritual development. That way, he provided Indian English drama an international face and at the same time remained in touch with Indian thought.

It also seems that the topics of his plays have never stopped revolving around the conflict between fate and free will, the conflict between love and power, and the ultimate triumph of the human soul when it is directed by divine wisdom. This is why his play is not just a retelling of a history or a myth, but it is a symbolic examination of India struggling against the colonial power and trying to find its identity. Technically, Aurobindo is as grandiose and Elizabethan as the Sanskrit tradition. It is a high, poetic, philosophical language-- Shakespeare and the Sanskrit. He also adds myth and allegory which echo classical Indian drama, in which the characters are symbolic larger entities such as love,

tyranny, wisdom or destiny. This is an East-West fusion that makes his plays sound so Indian English or so.

Philosophically, Aurobindo has considered drama as a spiritual truth ride. He emphasizes that even in tragedy, a suffering will clean the soul and will push it even nearer to the divine realization, as is the case with *Rodogune*. It is not just an artistic undertaking but also a spiritual excursion and it is based on his vision of a grand scheme of humanity entering a divine life on earth.

The role that Aurobindo plays in the Indian drama in English is a pioneer. In my view, he was not writing commercial stage plays to the people but rather he had created these poetic dramas, which were instead about profound reading, thought and admiration of the intellectual weight of the said drama. It means that they were not instant hits on the stage, but they have gained a permanent literary and philosophical value. Subsequent dramatists such as Girish Karnad and Vijay Tendulkar moved towards social realism and live performance, but still the role of Aurobindo is crucial as the first significant effort to provide the Indian drama in English with spiritual and cultural basis.

Looking at the role, that Sri Aurobindo played, it becomes obvious that he established his own niche in the realm since he was one of the first to combine the Indian themes, classical myths, and spiritual philosophy with the Western dramatic traditions. His plays are not merely works of literature but cultural interventions that contributed to the creation of a cultural identity of the Indian drama in English. I regard him as a component of the Indian

Renaissance project in general, which believed that literature ought not only to entertain but also to uplift, educate, and open the soul. In his works such as *Perseus the Deliverer*, *Eric*, *Vasavadutta* and *Rodogune* he uses the Greek, Norse and Indian legends but reinvents them to reflect his thoughts of freedom, destiny and spiritual development. In that regard, he expanded the range of Indian drama in English to be both internationally accessible and yet rooted in the Indian thinking.

The thematic issues in the works of Aurobindo are always about the tussle between destiny and free will, the struggle between love and power and the eventual triumph of the human spirit through the help of God. These themes define the struggle of India to attain cultural identities as I read between the lines to represent a symbolic India, in its struggle with colonial rule even beyond the retelling of historical and mythological events.

His plays, in technique are like a mix of Elizabethan magnificence and the richness of Sanskrit tradition. It is high, poetic, philosophic, and is sometimes compared to the richness of Shakespeare. Meanwhile, he applies myth and allegory in a manner reminiscent of the classical Indian drama, with the protagonists representing strong forces, in which case love, tyranny, wisdom, destiny, etc. are the voices of the East-West mixture of his work in Indian English literature.

Aurobindo also approached drama as a spiritual truth. Even in the time of tragedy, such as in the case of *Rodogune*, he points out that pain cleans the soul and helps it to be in closer contact with the divine realization. Personally, these plays to me are not only a

work of art but of spirituality also; it is part of his broader vision of the evolution of man to godly life on earth.

The point about the innovative nature of Aurobindo is repeated here, although I believe that the point is underlined to stress that his poetic plays were supposed to be read, rather than to be a mass entertainment product, which made them timeless literary and philosophical work.

The *Viziers of Bassora* by Sri Aurobindo is one of the most demanding plays of the author since it is a mixture of romance, adventure, and philosophy. The play is written in English and has an Arabian feel to it and this demonstrates his ability to transform the legend and fantasy into a more profound truth regarding life and fate. The story is set in Bassora, a city and is based on love, power, betrayal, etc., which makes it sound more like an oriental romance with kings, viziers, lovers spread in intrigue. However, at a deeper level, Aurobindo makes use of the play to raise serious questions regarding the freedom of human beings, the will of God, and the purpose of the destiny.

The play competes thematically with human desire with higher guidance. They are motivated by ambitions, passion and love, and their activities are always faced with the test of fate. I understood this saying that real freedom does not lie in self-serving aspiration but in identifying with a greater fact. This reflects his greater philosophy that the life of human beings is a journey of spiritual realization.

Aurobindo adapts the richness of Elizabethan drama and the exoticism of the Arabian legend stylistically. The language is highly and

poetically elevated, the speech is lengthy, full of symbolic imagery. The play is certainly not meant as an entertainment fast-track stage play but as a contemplative read. Characters are described not just as people but also as representatives of bigger powers, love, ambition, wisdom, destiny.

The Viziers of Bassora also shows how Aurobindo felt that there was some purpose of God in life. No matter how man can be lost in passion or strife, there is still a law above him that guides the course of events. I consider the play to be implying that suffering and struggle would not be wasted, that they are part of the path of the soul to the truth.

In short, The Viziers of Bassora is a romance and an adventure play which is set in an Arabian background, yet the real message behind it is the aspect of fate, freedom and the quest of soul after higher truth, a great example of how Sri Aurobindo employed the play as a means of expressing his vision towards life and spirituality.

The poetic truth and aesthetic beauty are well blended in the plays of Sri Aurobindo in general. They are not mere collections of history, myths, legends, and philosophy; nor are they mere works of art and literature, but they are exemplary works, replete with structure, design, form, and technique.

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