

Reliving the Ancient Indian Aesthetics: The Case of Sri Aurobindo

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Abstract—Sri Aurobindo, the Sage of Puducherry, did a great deal to revive and revitalize the ancient Vedic tradition of Spirituality and Aesthetics. His insights into the Vedas are to be found in his book *The Secret of the Veda*. Sri Aurobindo's insights into the Vedic Aesthetics are articulated in his book *The Future Poetry* and in his *Letters on Poetry and Literature and Art*. Sri Aurobindo is also preoccupied with problems of aesthesis even in his creative writings. His poem "The Word of the Silence", for example, records the "experience of the Purna Yogi who listens in tranquilly intense wide ecstasy to the Supreme Word with his purified and transformed human mind in complete wakeful awareness". *Savitri* Book V Canto i, is an outstanding example of *rasa* in *Savitri*. All the elements which lead to aesthetic delight are to be found here.

The key term in Sanskrit literary criticism, the word which for Abhinavagupta sums up the whole of the critical literature, is '*rasa*'. An aphorism of Bharata shows how the creation of *rasa* "comes from a combination of *vibhavas*, *anubhavas* and *vyabhicharibhava*". Sri Aurobindo's work can be appreciated from the *rasa* point of view. This paper aims to study the *rasas* developed in the different works of Sri Aurobindo.

Keywords—Appreciation, Indian-aesthetics, Love, *Rasa*, Spirituality.

I. INTRODUCTION

SRI Aurobindo, the Sage of Puducherry, did a great deal to revive and revitalize the ancient Vedic tradition of Spirituality and Aesthetics. His insights into the Vedas are to be found in his book *The Secret of the Veda*. Sri Aurobindo's insights into the Vedic Aesthetics are articulated in his book *The Future Poetry* and in his *Letters on Poetry and Literature and Art*. Sri Aurobindo is also preoccupied with problems of aesthesis even in his creative writings.

His poem "The Word of the Silence", for example, records the "experience of the Purna Yogi who listens in tranquilly intense wide ecstasy to the Supreme Word with his purified and transformed human mind in complete wakeful awareness".¹

A bare impersonal hush is now my mind,
A world of sight clear and inimitable,
A volume of silence by a Godhead signed,

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A greatness pure of thought, virgin of will.

Once on its pages Ignorance could write
In a scribble of intellect the blind guess of Time
And cast gleam-messages of ephemeral light,
A food for souls that wander on Nature's rim.
But now I listen to a greater Word
Born from the mute unseen omniscient ray:
The voice that only Silence' ear has heard
Leaps missioned form an eternal glory of Day.
All turns from a wideness and unbroken peace
To a tumult of joy in a sea of wide release.²

This kind of reliving and revitalizing the Vedic insight into the Word of the Silence, *Anahata Nada*, is evident in some of the finest passages in *Savitri*.

The key term in Sanskrit literary criticism, the word which for Abhinavagupta sums up the whole of the critical literature, is '*rasa*'. An aphorism of Bharata shows how the creation of *rasa* "comes from a combination of *vibhavas*, *anubhavas* and *vyabhicharibhavas*"³ Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri* can be appreciated from the *rasa* point of view. The *vibhavas* (sources), belong to the characters represented in a work of art. The *alambanavibhavas* (primary sources) are *Savitri* and *Satyavan*. The *uddipanavibhava* (setting) is projected in *Savitri* in Book V, Canto i which describes the "soft and delicate air" of the forest and a "world of free and green delight". There white cranes, peacocks and parrots "jeweled soil and tree".⁴ There earth with its music, blooms riot of scents and hues is in love with Heaven. The *anubhavas* (in which are included the more intimate *sattivika-bhavas*) also belong to the characters and are the physical indices of love (or more simply "actions"⁵ as Bharata himself calls them) trembling, sweating and so on. These are the essential elements of the preliminary stage.

Book V Canto i, is an outstanding example of *rasa* in *Savitri*. All the elements which lead to aesthetic delight are to be found here. The entire atmosphere of the forest is charged. We are told that the place and time for the meeting of *Satyavan* and *Savitri* is pre-determined, though it seems to be brought about by blind chance. The entire canto performs the function of *uddipanavibhava*. The physical beauty of the lovers – *Satyavan* and *Savitri* adds to the grandeur and charm of the *uddipana-vibhava*. They are also the primary

source (*alambana-vibhava*) of *Sringara rasa*. The *anubhava* are the emotion or reactions of the main characters Satyavan and Savitri. For instance, Sri Aurobindo shows in the following lines how Savitri's heart passionately and romantically reacted to Satyavan during her first meeting with him:

For suddenly her heart looked out at him,
The passionate seeing used though cannot match
And knew one nearer than its own close strings.⁶

Satyavan too feels "the enchantment of her liquid voice" and haunting miracle of a perfect face"; "Gaze met close gaze and clung in "sight's embrace".⁷

The *sthayibhava* (*rati* in this case) is a state of mind which because it is more deeply felt dominates all other emotions. It belongs to both the characters and to the spectators. The difference is this: once the character experiences the *sthayibhava*, he has reached the height of emotion. But the reader can go further, and in a sense deeper. For when 'love' is awakened in him, it is not like the love that the original character felt. The readers do not fall in love with Savitri. This *sthayibhava* – *rati* – is transformed (*Parnata*) into an extrawordly state (*alaukikavastha*), and this is what is called 'rasa'.

"Delight is the soul of existence and Beauty the intense impression, the concentrated form of delight".⁸ "Beauty like Love is an expression, a form of Ananda, created by Ananda, and composed of Ananda."⁹ Sri Aurobindo's Midas-touch spiritualizes everything he comes into contact with. This is true of Sri Aurobindo's treatment of love in *Savitri*. Love manifests itself in two forms either it can be *agape* (divine love) which consists of a marriage of two souls or *eros* which consists of a contact between two bodies. "Love is the hoop of gods/hearts to combine;/When love desires love, love is born."¹⁰ Sri Aurobindo refers to love as "the harmony of kindred spirits tuning together on the strings of body and mind, for which music all life was born".¹¹ In Sri Aurobindo sublime love manifests itself in the spiritual union between Satyavan and Savitri. Even the most erotic form of love is lifted by Sri Aurobindo to the highest spiritual plane of consciousness. Savitri and Satyavan are both human and divine. Both *eros* and *agape* find their expression in *Savitri* as well as Sri Aurobindo's poems and plays.

By resorting to the ancient exploration of the three *gunas* and the inner self, Sri Aurobindo arrived at his own psychology of the human personality which he applied to characters in his plays. He depicts the education of various characters endowed with diverse and even basically different and opposed orientation of the energies of life".¹² For Sri Aurobindo, "the whole world is pervaded, guided and acted upon by the Divine Force; a tiny element of this Divine Force is at the very core of the human soul, and the aim of the Divine in

creating this human soul is to see that the human being grows into an exact image of the Divine, the All-Soul. This is the destiny of the human being and a fiat of the Supreme has gone forth towards this end".¹³ "Bearing this fully in mind, in his play *The Viziers of Bassora* the contrast between dark and bright natures is clearly worked out by Sri Aurobindo in his depiction of the wild youths (Nureddene and Fareed), the old Viziers. (Ibn Sawy and Almune) and the rulers (Haroun and Alzayni)".¹⁴ Drama must project through the actions and interactions of characters a profound vision of life. "Behind the conflict of characters in each play, the author insightfully senses a clash of forces and behind it again an atmosphere of opposed values in which Gods preside over virtues as much as asuric beings inspire evil. Thus, he demonstrates how the presiding deity in each play inspires its positive values: Olympian Zeus guiding the tangled world of *Rodogune*, the Islamic insistence on the acceptance of and submission to the Will of Allah in *The Viziers of Bassora*, Pallas Athene inspiring Andromeda and others through her instrument Perseus in *Perseus the Deliverer*, Mother Lakshmi in the hearts of all the characters in *Vasavdatta*, and Odin, Thor, and Freya inspiring Power, Wisdom and Love in *Eric*".¹⁵

II. CONCLUSION

Finally, Sri Aurobindo derives inspiration from the ancient Indian aesthetic thought in his critical pronouncements on and his creative reliving of a sublime subject, namely the impact of a great literary work on the readers and the audience alike. The Rajayogic *Samyama*, which consists of the last three stages in Patanjali's *Ashtanga Yoga*: *Dharana* (concentration), *Dhyana* (meditation) and *Samadhi* (identity)¹⁶ is lived out by Sri Aurobindo's characters in his creative works and by readers and spectators in the process of reading or witnessing a play.

A modicum of spiritual purification takes place in both the Aurobindonian characters and the Aurobindonian readers as a result of the aesthetically sublime vision projected by Sri Aurobindo's plays. M.V. SeetaRaman has demonstrated how the characters in Sri Aurobindo's tragedy converted into a divine comedy *Rodogune* "who have even a little of the sublime vision, *Svalpamapyasa dharmasya*, go through life with an assured self-possession and calmness. *Rodogune* with her inborn psychic temperament of 'Sweetness and Light', Antiochus with the poise of the inner Vital Purusha and Eremite with his occult and spiritual personality partake of this view in varying intensity and amplitude".¹⁷ They show a remarkable freedom from the turmoil of life in this world and a serenity of temper. But all the other are imprisoned in their egoistic desires and so feel the agony and travail of their lives. "The sensitive spectator of the play sees all, undergoes all by imaginative identification with the

life (individual and collective) in the drama. He experiences with Cleopatra, Phayllus and their similars on the same theme of Egoism. But he breathes simultaneously in 'the ampler ether', the 'diviner air of the Spiritual, Psychic and Subliminal with Eremite, Rodogune and Antiochus.'¹⁸ And the result is a strange alchemy-purification of his consciousness, *citta suddhi*.¹⁹ He feels 'the touch of tears in mortal things' but perceives also "the Divine Master shaping the human flute and making it perfect to breathe through it 'melodies eternally new'. To him is the Peace Eternal, *Santih sasvat*."²⁰

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