

SRI AUROBINDO ON SHAKESPEARE

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ABSTRACT

*In this essay, Sri Aurobindo's criticism of Shakespeare has been considered, using mainly his *The Future Poetry* as the primary source. The present essay endeavours to foreground the effort on the part of Sri Aurobindo, patriot turned prophet, to 'Indianise' Shakespeare in a special way. By delving into the psychology of burgeoning nationalism and spiritual revivalism in general and Sri Aurobindo's conversion to mysticism and his philosophy of integral yoga and life divine in particular the ideological implications of such a critical effort to 'Indianise' Shakespeare has been sought to be investigated. Sri Aurobindo elaborated on Shakespeare's insistence on internal action with reference to the ancient Indian distinction between several strata or levels of universal being and brought in the two names used by the ancient rishis to define the objective and subjective aspects of this being: Virat and Hiranyagarbha. Aurobindo has effectively dismantled the traditional conception of criticism as an exercise devoted to the objective decoding of the meaning supposedly immanent in the text and has attempted to respond creatively to the subtle nuances of Shakespeare's creations.*

KEYWORDS: *Sri Aurobindo, Ideology, Indianise, Impressionistic Criticism, Spirituality*

INTRODUCTION

Ashis Nandy's exploration of the ambiguous psychology of the colonized subject in *Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (1983) has shown how the sense of insecurity, loss and anguish occasioned by his early estrangement from his motherland drove Sri Aurobindo to seek solace in mysticism and spiritual practices. Reared up in a foreign country, alienated from any nourishing contact with his native culture, living under the strict instructions of a domineering Anglophile father, Aurobindo complained of being persistently haunted by the sense of an all-enveloping darkness, which may be diagnosed as a symptom of a condition of exile, uprootedness, cultural inferiority and hollowness bred by his uneasy interaction with an alien culture. Such a tormented mental state naturally made this sensitive scholar turn inward to seek in a spiritual pursuit a refuge and an escape from the plaguing doubts, fears, anxieties and helplessness all that bedeviled his worldly existence. It may be concluded from this that for Sri Aurobindo spirituality emerged as a means of cultural self-assertion, as a Utopian world to which the ego could revert to continue its quest for power and self-fulfilment all of which had been frustrated on the intractable mundane plane. Nietzsche in his *Genealogy of Morals* perceptively explained the emergence of the inner life in man as a reaction formation against the inimical external world that thwarts man's fulfilment through the realization of will to power:

All instincts that do not expend themselves outwardly turn inward. This is what I call internalization of man. It is by means of this that man first acquired what has come to be known as his "soul". The whole of inner experience, which was as thin as it would be if stretched tight between two membranes, expanded. It acquired depth, breadth and height- to the same extent that outward expenditure was curtailed (Nietzsche 119).

In the postmodern era, the word spirituality is often denigrated as a form of ‘essentialism’ that operates at best as a distraction from history and at worst as a justification for pernicious hierarchies of race, gender and class perpetuating the injustices and iniquities that prevail in human societies. But such denunciations of spirituality have overlooked spirituality’s investment in otherness and have failed to recognize that spirituality purports to be the experience and knowledge of what is other and is ultimate and the sense of identity and ‘mission’ that may arise from or be vested in that experience. Spirituality involves ideas of emancipation and an alternative world that have real political potential. Ewan Fernie in the introduction to his edited volume *Spiritual Shakespeares* emphasizes this subversive and emancipatory dimension of spirituality and writes:

In spite of the long-standing critical prejudice against ‘essentialism’, specifically spiritual alterity is aesthetically and theoretically interesting because it configured not just as totally different from ordinary life but also as ultimately significant and real. Spirituality affords a credible alternative, or rather a range of such alternatives. It has a special power to break the illusion of what all-too-often is taken to be ‘this world’s eternity’ (2 *Henry VI* 2.4.91). The conviction that an alternative world is more desirable as well as somehow more profoundly real than this one can motivate a hermit-like withdrawal from the world as it is, but it can also inspire positive revolutionary change (Fernie 4).

Now these reflections on the political implications and potential of spirituality gain weight, force and importance if they are applied to a scrutiny of the Aurobindonian brand of spiritual practice. The realization of the self, the basis of the traditional yoga of knowledge, Aurobindo admits, was ‘as much the aim’ of his yoga ‘as of any other’ (qt. in Heehs, *Sri Aurobindo* 95). But self-realization was not the sole aim of Aurobindo’s yoga. ‘The object sought after’, he wrote in a letter of 1935, was not ‘an individual achievement of divine realization for the sake of the individual, but something to be gained for the earth-consciousness’ (qt. in Heehs, *Sri Aurobindo* 96). In most of the traditional systems of yoga, the self-realized, enlightened individual aspires to depart ‘out of the world and life into Heaven or Nirvana’. Sri Aurobindo repudiated this as the necessary issue of yogic practice. ‘A distinct and central object of’ his yoga’, he asserted, was ‘a change of life and existence’ (qt. in Heehs 96). This would be achieved by ‘bringing in’ a new power of consciousness which he defined as ‘the Supramental’. To attain this power and to make it ‘active directly in earth-nature’, he spent more than four decades ‘hewing out a road’ in uncharted regions. It was with this in mind that he declared: ‘Our yoga is not a retreading of old walks, but a spiritual adventure’ (Aurobindo, *On Himself* 109). K. N. Panikkar observes that in Colonial India ‘there was a shift of emphasis from otherworldliness and supernaturalism to the problems of worldly existence in religious thought’. Panikkar further contends:

The religious protest and reform movements during the pre-colonial period beginning with Buddhism and going on to the heterodox sects in the eighteenth century were invariably concerned with the ways and means of salvation. In contrast religious reform in colonial India was almost indifferent to this earlier preoccupation. More important, even those who assigned a dominant role to religion, such as Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Vivekananda, were not indifferent to the needs of material existence over religious demands (Panikkar 66).

Sri Aurobindo’s spiritual practice too belonged to this tradition and it defined spirituality in terms of the improvement and upliftment of the material existence.

K. D. Sethna in his monograph *Sri Aurobindo on Shakespeare* has summed up Sri Aurobindo’s radically different approach to spirituality and has discovered an affinity between Aurobindo and Shakespeare in this respect:

Sri Aurobindo is that extraordinary type of yogi whose aim is to reach up to the superhuman, the divine, in order to strike back upon life— strike back not with a lash of life urging man to renounce earth by a mighty mass-movement towards Nirvana, but with a sort of super-Prospero's staff so as to awaken man to the possibilities of a Divine drama on the stage of the world. Sri Aurobindo would recreate human life. And in that ideal he has certain general affinities with his favourite Shakespeare (Sethna, *Aurobindo on Shakespeare* 25).

What Sethna emphasizes here is the uniqueness of Aurobindo's spiritual practice which unlike all other spiritual philosophies and practices, does not preach absolute renunciation of the world, but rather aspires to transform the life on the mundane plane into a 'Divine drama'. Aurobindo the seer and literary critic seems to have been aware of the spiritual dimensions of Shakespearean creations for he discovered in the bard's poetic creativity a spiritual vision that instead of holding a faithful mirror up to nature transforms the actual conditions of human existence and recreates them in the light of eternity. For Aurobindo writes in another context:

The poet's greatest work is to open to us new realms of vision, new realms of being, our own and the world's and he does this even when he is dealing with the actual things. Homer with all his epic vigour of outward presentation does not show us the heroes and deeds before Troy in their actuality as they really were to the normal vision of men, but much rather as they were or might have been to the vision of gods. Shakespeare's greatness lies not in his reproduction of actual human events or men as they appear to us buttoned and cloaked in his life others of his time would have done that as well, if with less radiant force of genius, yet with more of the realistic crude colour or humdrum drab of daily truth, but in his bringing out in his characters and themes of things essential, intimate, eternal, universal in man and nature and Fate on which the outward features are borne as fringe and robe and which belong to all time but are least obvious to the moments experienced: when we do see them life presents to us another face and becomes something deeper than its actual present mask (Aurobindo, *The Future Poetry* 324).

What is evident from Aurobindo's observations is that he does not subscribe to the mimetic theory of art which defines artistic activity as the imitation of reality as it is. For Aurobindo the excellence of Shakespeare lies in the dramatist's extraordinary ability to bring out the eternal from the temporal, recreate the actual in terms of the ideal and the Universal. Therefore it is reasonable to conclude that in his aesthetic philosophy Aurobindo was inclined to the Romantic theory of art which denounced servile imitation of the reality as it is and valorized the expression of a transcendental vision of the artist and reproduction of the actual conditions of existence in terms of that creative ideal. What Aurobindo has here achieved is a reconciliation of this fundamental tenet of Romantic poetics with his own spiritual philosophy. The Divine life on the earth that Aurobindo conceptualized is in another way conceived by gifted poets like Shakespeare who has the power to reproduce the actual in terms of the ideal or in other words to bring out the ideal potentials from the actual conditions of human existence.

Whatever may be the political implications of Aurobindo's spiritual exercises; his yogic vision of life cast an indelible impression upon his creative and critical negotiations with literature. Aurobindo may be recognized as the first Indian critic who ventured to incorporate Shakespeare's works in an interpretative framework, a critical paradigm constructed on the basis of a mystical perception and concomitant psycho-spiritual formulation which may be regarded as essentially Indian. Sri Aurobindo, himself a poet of rare genius, endowed with an extraordinarily profound vision, reacted against the cool, detached, dispassionate language of analytical and investigative critical exegesis that marks the western

tradition, and embodied his critical explorations in a rhapsodic language that exudes poetic appeal. Analytical reason, the much trumpeted legacy of the Enlightenment, shutting its eyes to the “light of Nature”, pursues specialist paths with the assistance of artificial lights and fails in the lofty effort to reach the highest truth. As Ernst Cassirer explained in his book *The Philosophy of Enlightenment*:

The philosophy of the eighteenth century is not content to look upon analysis as the great intellectual tool of mathematico-physical knowledge; eighteenth century thought sees analysis rather as the necessary and indispensable instrument of all thinking in general...However much individual thinkers and schools differ in their results, they agree in this epistemological premise (Cassirer 12).

The oriental attitude to the subject is at least arguably different: “In neither India, nor China” writes William Barret in his *Irrational Man*, “nor in the philosophies that these civilizations produced, was truth located in the intellect. On the contrary the Indian and Chinese sages insisted on the very opposite, namely, that man does not attain to truth so long as he remains locked up in his intellect” (qt. in Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English* 172). As Sri Aurobindo succinctly put it: “Reason was the helper, Reason is the bar” (qt. in Iyengar 172). While not rejecting reason it is still necessary to surpass it if we wish to see ourselves in relation to Being. Tapan Raychaudhuri in his essay ‘The Pursuit of Reason in nineteenth century Bengal’ has traced the outburst of passionate religiosity in nineteenth century Bengal to a shift of emphasis from reason to emotion in the socio-political culture:

The accumulated frustrations and humiliations of the colonial experience were no doubt one major factor behind the new emotionalism. Rational discourse was an inadequate incentive for the patriotic fervour. (Raychaudhuri, 63)

Aurobindo too, it can be reasonably assumed, was alive to the dichotomy of western Reason and Indian emotionalism and for him spirituality became an effective and alternative strategy, an ideological tool to counter and challenge the superiority of the western worldview which was based on the Enlightenment legacy of rationality.

Since for Aurobindo “all life is yoga”, the element of spirituality permeated all his intellectual, critical and creative exercises and the critical study of literature too was conceived in terms of a spiritual voyage into the heart of the transcendental truth, the achievement of which elevates human life to a supra-mundane level. Aurobindo protested against the scientifically-oriented critical methodology which inspired a mechanical dissection of the works of art by reducing aesthetic creations to abstract rational formulae and systems. Aurobindo denounced as reductive critical endeavours that under the influence of psychoanalytic researches ventured to trace the genesis of a work of art back to the complex chemistry of the human body and the human psyche. In a sonnet composed on the Shakespearean model, “A dream of Surreal Science”, he ridicules the scientific perception that all poetry or spirituality is merely a matter of body’s chemistry:

One dreamed and saw a gland write Hamlet, drink

At the mermaid, capture immortality;

A committee of hormones on the Aegean’s brink

Composed the Iliad and the Odyssey (qt. in Sethna, *Aurobindo on Shakespeare* 3).

Instead of subscribing to such critical ingenuity Aurobindo firmly clung to his belief that the original impetus of any great creation comes from within, from a mystery inscrutable that does not yield to rational comprehension. In Aurobindo's creative response to the poetic creations of Shakespeare the focus is consistently kept on the interiority of the poetic experience and the inwardness of its originary conception. While the execution and embodiment of the elusive but certainly not insubstantial poetic vision conceived by the poet requires the participation of the outer mind and other external instruments, the inspiration remains invariably internal. Such a critical perception involves in fact a subtle undermining of the very conception of criticism as a rational activity dedicated to the disinterested, objective decoding of the essence of literary creations; it is a deliberate blurring of the artificial boundary drawn between the creative and the critical functions. Aurobindo's critical explorations by acknowledging criticism's inability to penetrate into the ultimate mystery of poetic creation implicitly proposes a combination of the creative and critical approaches to the literary artefact.

While elaborating on his conception of "overhead poetry" Aurobindo warns against a superficially analytical reading of such poetic productions which manages to capture only the surface mental meaning. In spite of granting that technical perfection or flawlessness often affords aesthetic pleasure, Aurobindo maintains that "over mind touch" does not consist in an understanding of the technical aspects of literary creation, but it emerges "in the undertones and overtones of the rhythmic cry and a language which carries in it a great depth or height or width of spiritual vision, feeling or experience. But all that has to be felt, not analyzable" (Aurobindo, *Letters on Poetry* 77). Aurobindo draws upon Hamlet's soliloquy to point out the inadequacies of the conventional critical intellect in encountering effectively the "overheard poetry":

"The mere critical intellect not touched by a rarer sight can do little here. What might be called the Johnsonian critical method has obviously little or no place in this field—the method which expects a precise logical order in thoughts and language and pecks at all that departs from a matter of fact or a strict and rational ideative coherence of a sober and restrained classical taste...But also this method is useless in dealing with any kind of romantic poetry. What would the Johnsonian critic say to Shakespeare's famous lines,

Or take up arms against a sea of troubles

And by opposing end them?

He would say, "What a mixture of metaphors and jumble of ideas! Only a lunatic could take up arms against the sea!" Shakespeare knew very well what he was doing! He saw the mixture as well as any critic could and he accepted it because it brought home, with an inspired force which a neater language could not have had, the exact feeling and the idea that he wanted to bring out (Aurobindo, *Savitri*, Letters 844-5).

'Still more scared would the Johnsonian be', Aurobindo continues, 'by any occult or mystic poetry. The Veda, for instance, uses with what seems like a deliberate recklessness the mixture, at least the association of disparate images, of things not associated together in the material world which in Shakespeare is only an occasional departure...'(Aurobindo, *Savitri*, Letters 844-5).

What is important to note here is that Sri Aurobindo while drawing his reader's attention to the limitations of a Johnsonian critic who is governed by his logical expectations and presuppositions in confronting the baffling reality of the literary text, also engages in subverting the idea of criticism as a detached, rational, objective activity capable of translating

the magic of poetic vision into terms of intelligible everyday reality. Aurobindo thus attempts to establish and buttress through his critical activities, a conception of art as an autonomous and independent exercise and by rendering criticism itself creative, implicitly advances the theory that no essential difference exists between creation and criticism. However preposterous the assumption that criticism is an 'autotelic activity' (Eliot, *Selected Essays* 24) may seem to the T.S. Eliot of "The Function of Criticism" Aurobindo can find a sympathetic defender of his view in Gilbert, the speaker in Oscar Wilde's dialogue "The critic as Artist", who affirms "Criticism is in fact both creative and independent...The critic occupies the same relation to the work of art that he criticizes as the artist does to the visible world of form and colour or the unseen world of passion and of thought" (Wilde 966). This view is clearly antithetical to the view of criticism as complementary to creative writing, aiming at objectivity, striving to see the object as it really is, as Matthew Arnold urged. Criticism, Wilde's Gilbert contends, is in its essence purely subjective, and seeks to reveal its own secret and not the secret of another "(Wilde 967). Aurobindo almost echoes the idea when he asserts that "all criticism of poetry is bound to have a strong subjective element in it...all is relative here, Art and Beauty also, and our view of things and appreciation of them depends on the consciousness which views and appreciates" (Aurobindo, *Letters on Poetry, Literature and Art* 181).

Aurobindo's subjective reception of Shakespeare becomes more evident if one considers the way he elaborated his account of Shakespeare's insistence on internal action with reference to the ancient Indian distinction between several strata and levels of Universal Being and by bringing in the two names used by the Rishis for the objective and subjective aspects of this Being: Virat and Hiranyagarbha respectively. As Aurobindo judges it:

Shakespeare's is not a drama of mere externalized action, for it lives from within and more deeply than our external life. This is not Virat, the seer and the creator of gross forms, but Hiranyagarbha, the luminous mind of dreams, looking through those form to see his own images behind them (Aurobindo, *The Future Poetry* 80).

Then Aurobindo mentions the Vedic sage Viswamitra whom Indian tradition credits with creating a new heaven and earth in his sacred wrath against the curbs imposed by God Indra. Sri Aurobindo continues:

More than any other poet Shakespeare has accomplished mentally the legendary feat of the impetuous sage Viswamitra", his power of vision has created a Shakespearean world of its own, and it is, in spite of its realistic elements, a romantic world in the very true sense of the word, a world of the wonder and free power of life and not its mere external realities, where what is here dulled and hampered finds a greater enlarged and intense breath of living, an ultra-natural play of beauty, curiosity and amplitude (Aurobindo, *The Future Poetry* 80).

Objections may be raised by critics who are obsessively preoccupied with the idea of criticism as subordinate and complementary to creation that such an association of Shakespeare with Viswamitra is misleading since the English bard is lacking in that very spirituality which distinguishes the Vedic sage. But what Aurobindo accomplishes here is a dismantling of the traditional conception of criticism as an intellectual exercise devoted to the revelation of the one and only meaning inherent in a text and he therefore comes somewhat close to critics such as Roland Barthes who much later suggested in an essay entitled "Criticism as language" (1963) that:

The task of criticism... does not consist in "discovering" the work of the author under consideration something "hidden" or "profound" or "secret" which has so far escaped notice...but only in fitting together the language of the day and the language of the author...if there is such a thing as critical proof it lies in the in the ability to discover the work under consideration but on the contrary to cover it as completely with one's own language (Barthes 127-128).

Aurobindo, as a critic of Shakespeare indeed proved his commendable competence in covering the work of Shakespeare as completely as possible with the language of the spiritual philosophy that he propounded and promulgated. Indeed as David Lodge in his article “*Literary Criticism and Literary Creation*” reminds us:

Criticism as the expression of subjective response is of course an essentially romantic idea and implies a romantic theory of literary creation as self-expression. It is often associated with the lyrical and impressionistic, musing-in-the-library style of critical discourse which I. A. Richards and F. R. Leavis, and the American New Critics, sought to discredit and expunge from academic criticism from the 1920s to the 1950s. But more recently the idea that there is no essential difference between creation and criticism has been given a new academic respectability, and a new sophistication, under the aegis of post-structuralism, and especially the theory of deconstruction, which questions the very distinction between subjective and objective (Lodge 145).

In *The Human Cycle* Sri Aurobindo offered a critical account of the evolution of aesthetic criticism from antiquity to the present times and displayed his aversion to a rationalistic formulation of abstract principles and norms in order to appreciate particular literary artefacts.

In its earliest stages the appreciation of beauty is instinctive, natural, inborn response of the aesthetic sensitiveness of the soul which does not attempt to give any account of itself to the thinking intelligence. When the rational intelligence applies itself to this task, it is not satisfied with recording faithfully the nature of the response and the thing it has felt, but it attempts to analyze, to lay down what is necessary in order to create a just aesthetic gratification, it prepares a grammar of technique, an artistic law, and canon of construction, a sort of mechanical rule of process for the creation of beauty, a fixed code or Shastra. This brings in the long reign of academic criticism, superficial, technical, artificial, governed by the false idea that technique of which alone critical reason can give an entirely adequate account, is the most important part of creation and that to every art there can correspond an exhaustive science which will tell us how the thing is done and give us the whole secret and process of its doing. A time comes when the creator of beauty revolts and declares the charter of his own freedom, generally in the shape of a new law or principle of creation, and this freedom once vindicated begins to widen itself and to carry with it the critical reason out of all its familiar bounds. A more developed appreciation emerges which begins to seek for new principles of criticism, to search for the soul of the work itself and explain the form in relation to the soul or to study the creator himself or the spirit, nature and ideas of the age he lived in and so to arrive at a right understanding of his work. (Aurobindo, *The Human Cycle* 133).

Aurobindo’s disapproval of rationalistic formulations of abstract concepts in order to appreciate a particular literary text and his emphasis on a suprarational, intuitive understanding of a literary text is somewhat akin to the phenomenological critic Hans Georg Gadamer’s defence of non-theoretical understanding. Against so called ‘theoreticism’ or the seemingly obvious but actually problematic assumption that understanding anything implies our having an implicit or explicit theory of what is being understood, Gadamer stresses the way in which Heidegger’s work reveals the essentially pre-reflective non-theoretical nature of human understanding. Heidegger had argued against the whole tendency of Western thought since the Greeks to valorize theoretical understanding as the only true mode of knowledge. His analysis of the nature of everyday human existence [Dasein – literally ‘being there’] homes in on what actually happens in the most ordinary experiences in order to demonstrate that our basic forms of knowledge are non-conceptual. In other words, most understanding is not the self-conscious and logically consistent deployment of clear systematic concepts of things. Western

thought and common sense tend to assume that our pre-reflective everyday understanding of things, precisely because it cannot be completely formalized, is somehow inadequate or merely irrational, needing to be justified by redescription in purely theoretical terms as soon as possible. Against the scientific ideal of theoretical knowledge as the subsumption of individual entities under general laws, Gadamer aligns Hermeneutics with that traditional defence of the humanities as offering a non-reductive knowledge of particulars and singularities.

However, it is important to note that what appears to be Aurobindo's subjective evaluation and reading of Shakespeare is actually motivated by the critic's assimilation of certain nineteenth century ideas and is conditioned by his conscious espousal of, or unconscious submission to, certain critical ideologies. For the purpose of illustration, we may take Sri Aurobindo's comparative assessment of Elizabethan and Sanskrit dramatic literature and specially his comparative estimate of the merits of Shakespeare and Kalidasa. In his essay 'Sanskrit Drama', Sri Aurobindo offers a comparative evaluation of the Sanskrit and the Elizabethan drama, and while pointing out the essential difference in temperament and spirit between them, castigates the European critics who underestimate the Indian achievement and cry up the superiority of European literature:

The Elizabethan drama was a great popular literature which aimed at a vigorous and realistic presentation of life and character such as would please a mixed and not very critical audience; it had therefore the strength and weakness of great popular literature, its strength was an abounding vigour in passion and action, and an unequalled grasp upon life; its weakness a crude violence, imperfection and bungling in workmanship combined with a tendency to exaggerations, horrors and monstrosities. The Hindu drama, on the contrary, was written by men of accomplished culture for an educated, often a courtly audience and with an eye on an elaborate and well-understood system of poetics (Aurobindo 73).

Here in spite of acknowledging the greatness and popularity of the Elizabethan drama and appreciating the vigorous and realistic representation of life that is found in it, Sri Aurobindo does not hesitate to indicate the crude violence, imperfect craftsmanship and tendency to exaggeration as the shortcomings of Elizabethan literature. The Hindu drama according to him is more refined and sophisticated than Elizabethan literature, as the former was composed by gifted men of culture for a polished audience while the latter addressed and catered to a mixed audience. Aurobindo here not only hints at a difference in temperament and disposition between the ancient Hindu and the European people but also indicates that the Hindu culture possessed an elaborate system of aesthetics. Aurobindo further defines and analyzes the cardinal principle, the quintessence of Hindu poetics. He writes:

The vital law governing Hindu poetics is that it does not seek to represent life and character primarily or for their own sake; its aim is fundamentally aesthetic, by the delicate and harmonious rendering of passion to awaken the aesthetic sense of the onlooker and gratify it by moving or subtly observed pictures of human feeling (Aurobindo 74).

Aurobindo here actually suggests a distinction between the mimetic and expressive theories of art and maintains that the Hindu poetics instead of relying on the mimetic reproduction of reality as it is for its own sake puts into practice the expressive theory of art, by rendering harmonious expression of passion aesthetically gratifying to the audience. Aurobindo's valorization of the drama that gives aesthetic expression to passion over and above the drama that represents life and character for its own sake, reminds one of a similar assessment made by the great orientalist scholar Sir William Jones. Jones in an essay appended to a volume of translations of oriental poetry had argued 'that the finest parts of poetry, musick, and painting, are expressive of passions the inferior parts being descriptive of natural objects' (qt. in Beardsley, *Aesthetics* 248).

Aurobindo further refers to the 'Divine tenderness' of Hindu nature which according to him would have been repelled by the very idea of deriving aesthetic pleasure from the horrible sufferings of such protagonists of European drama as Oedipus, Macbeth or Othello. As Aurobindo put it:

To the Hindu it would have seemed savage and inhuman spirit that could take any aesthetic pleasure in the sufferings of an Oedipus or a Duchess of Malfi or in the tragedy of a Macbeth or Othello. Partly this arose from the divine tenderness of the Hindu nature, always noble, forbearing and gentle and at that time saturated with the sweet and gracious pity and purity which flowed from the soul of Buddha... The Hindu mind therefore shrank from violence, horror and physical tragedy, the Elizabethan stock-in-trade (Aurobindo 74).

Highlighting the gentleness, nobility and tenderness of the Hindu nature Aurobindo takes to task the European scholars and their Indian followers who without keeping in mind the essential difference in the temperament of the Indians and the Europeans underestimate the cultural achievements of the Hindu civilization and unfairly attribute the alleged lack of character in the Hindu drama to the deficiency of inventive power in the Indian people. Aurobindo writes:

When therefore English scholars, fed on the exceedingly strong and often raw meat of the Elizabethans, assert that there are no characters in the Hindu drama, when they attribute this deficiency to the feebleness of inventive power which leads "Asiatic poetry to concentrate itself on glowing description and imagery, seeking by excess of ornament to conceal poverty of substance, when even their Indian pupils perverted from good taste and blinded to fine discrimination by a love of the striking and a habit of gross forms and pronounced colours due to the too exclusive study of English poetry, repeat and reinforce their criticisms, the lover of Kalidasa and his peers need not be alarmed; he need not banish from his imagination the gracious company with which it is peopled as a gilded and soulless list of names. For this dicta spring from prejudice and the echo of a prejudice; they are evidence not of a more vigorous critical mind but of a restricted critical sympathy. Certainly if we expect a Beautiful White Devil or a Jew of Malta from the Hindu dramatist, we shall be disappointed; he deals not in these splendid or horrible masks. If we come to him for a Lear or a Macbeth, we shall go away discontented; for these also are sublimities which belong to cruder civilizations and more barbarous national types; in worst crimes and deepest suffering as well as in happiness and virtue, the Aryan was more civilized and temperate, less crudely enormous than the hard, earthy and material African peoples whom in Europe he only half moralized (Aurobindo 73-74).

Peter Heehs' observation in the introduction to his edited volume *Nationalism, Religion and Beyond* throws light upon the ideological motivations behind such comparative critical evaluations made by Sri Aurobindo:

By the time Aurobindo began his studies, the European fascination with things Indian had been replaced by a businesslike project of knowledge-gathering or 'knowledge-production'. Even the most sympathetic orientalist developed a patronizing attitude towards the culture of a country that, whatever its past achievements, had become a colony of Britain. When Aurobindo wrote about Indian literature and art, he often criticized the attitude of European scholars who were incapable of judging Indian culture on its own merits. Countering their allegations that Indian works could not be compared with those of Greece and Rome-or if they could, were derivative of them – he asserted the essential superiority of Indian culture. Europe's achievements were in the material sphere; India's greatness lay in its spirituality. This line of argument had been current since the 1870s, Dayananda Saraswati, Rajnarain Bose and other figures in what historians call the Hindu revival movement championed Indian philosophy, Indian literature and Indian art...In his own writings on art, as in his writings on literature and philosophy, Aurobindo similarly affirmed the essential spirituality of Indian culture (Heehs, *Nationalism* 5).

Of course, the cultural nationalism of the nineteenth century *bhadralok*, based on the stereotypes ‘material West’ and ‘spiritual East’, was a very important aspect of the nationalist movement. Partha Chatterjee in his book *The Nation and Its Fragments* (1997) has observed:

The material is the domain of the “outside”, of the economy and of state craft, of science and technology, a domain where the West had proved its superiority and the East had succumbed. In this domain, then, Western superiority had to be acknowledged and its accomplishments carefully studied and replicated. The spiritual, on the other hand, is the “inner” domain bearing the “essential” marks of cultural identity. The greater one’s success in imitating Western skills in the material domain, therefore, the greater the need to preserve the distinctiveness of one’s spiritual culture (Chatterjee, *The Nation* 6).

From all these critical expositions of the contemporary socio-cultural ethos it is evident that Sri Aurobindo was inspired by the nationalist zeal to cry up the spiritual superiority of India to the West and as we have earlier noted his critical negotiations with Shakespeare has been influenced and fashioned by his allegiance to such nationalist ideology, for in Shakespeare’s creations Aurobindo has sought an inwardness, and an essential spirituality, qualities which define an Indian worldview.

In his writings which emphasize the essential spirituality of Indian culture, Aurobindo often alludes to India’s “soul” or “spirit”. As Peter Heehs reminds us:

This was his application of an idea that had arisen earlier among European Romantic thinkers: the idea of the *Volksgeist* or nation-soul. During most of the eighteenth century the predominant critical attitude in Europe was classicism. Literary and artistic ideas based on Greek and Roman models were thought to be universally valid. This attitude was challenged by early romantic critics, who insisted on the value of regional particularities. Herder, influenced by the folk arts of Latvia, Schlegel, stimulated by Indian philosophy and literature and other intellectuals of the early nineteenth century put forward the idea that each nation or region had its own soul or spirit which found expression in its poetry, art, and so forth (Heehs, *Nationalism* 5).

Aurobindo in his *The Future Poetry* has summed up this idea of the nation soul:

Generally, every nation or people has or develops a spirit in its being, a special soul-form of the human all-soul and a law of its nature which determines the lines and turns of its evolution...All its self-expression is in conformity with them. And its poetry art and thought are the expression of this self and of the greater possibilities of its self to which it moves. The individual poet and its poetry are part of its movement. Not that they are limited by the present temperament and outward forms of the national mind; they may exceed them...But still the roots of his personality are there in its spirit and even his variation and revolt are an attempt to bring out something that is latent and suppressed or at least something which is trying to surge up from the secret all-soul in to the soul-form of the nation (Aurobindo, *The Future Poetry* 58-59).

But in spite of such insistence on the nation-soul, Aurobindo’s literary criticism transcends all the cultural barriers and national differences and upholds the ideal of essential human unity. In 1918 Sri Aurobindo thus wrote:

The spirit in man has one aim before it in all mankind; but different continents or peoples approach it from different sides, with different formulations and in differing spirit...Not recognizing the underlying unity of the ultimate divine motive, they give battle to each other and claim that theirs alone is the way for mankind. The one real and perfect civilization is the one in which they happen to be born, all the rest must perish or go under (qt. in Heehs, *Nationalism* 17)

Nowhere is this ideal of human unity given a complete as well as a powerful expression than in Aurobindo's postulation of the kinship between Shakespeare and Kalidasa and it is here that Aurobindo indirectly repudiates the claims of the historical school of criticism and embraces a universalist aesthetics. Penetrating through the variations stemming "from national difference, the caste of the civilization, the cultural atmosphere, the individual idiosyncrasy", Sri Aurobindo is able to recognize in Kalidasa and Shakespeare "some fundamental likeness of spirit". He remarks:

Elizabethan poetry was the work of the life-spirit in a new, raw and vigorous people not yet tamed by a restraining and formative culture, a people with the crude tendencies of the occidental mind rioting almost in the exuberance of a state of nature. The poetry of the classical Sanskrit writers was the work of Asiatic minds, scholars, court-poets in an age of immense intellectual development and an excessive almost over-cultivated refinement but still that too was poetry of the life spirit. In spite of a broad gulf of difference we yet find an extraordinary basic kinship between these two very widely separated great ages of poetry, though there was never any possibility of contact between that earlier oriental and this later occidental work,- the dramas of Kalidasa and some of the dramatic romances of Shakespeare....This kinship arises from the likeness of essential motive and psychological basic type and emerges and asserts itself in spite of the enormous cultural division (*The Future Poetry* 159-60).

Thus does Sri Aurobindo acknowledge the greatneses of both Shakespeare and Kalidasa, discovering a common ground shared by both these geniuses. There is undoubtedly a liberal humanist tendency in such critical formulations for it tacitly subscribes to a conception of human nature as essentially unchanging and the idea that the 'same passions, emotions and even situations are seen again and again throughout human history'(Barry 18). But Aurobindo's recognition of the merits and poetic achievements of Shakespeare and Kalidasa as equally great and similar in essence has deeper psychological motivation than the critic's submission to the aesthetic ideology of Liberal Humanism. The roots of such a critical estimate seem to lie in the ambiguous cultural situation that Aurobindo found himself in. Ashis Nandy has given a thought-provoking explanation of Sri Aurobindo's situation in his *Intimate Enemy*:

Aurobindo symbolized a more universal response to the splits which colonialism induced. He after all, did not have to disown the West within him to become his version of an Indian. To the end of his life Western culture remained a vehicle of his creative self-expression and he never thought the West to be outside the reach of God's grace... While Aurobindo belonged to the tradition of the most deeply reactive of the Indian responses to colonialism—the one which partly drew inspiration from Bankimchandra and Vivekananda—he always had, like Bankimchandra and Vivekananda, a genuine place for the West within Indian civilization... Aurobindo was above all a victim who had fashioned out of his victimhood a new meaning for suffering and a new model of defiance. As a victim, he protected—and had to protect—his humanity and moral sanity more carefully because, while the colonial system only saw him as an object, he could not see the colonizers as mere objects. As a part of his struggle for survival, the west remained for Indian victims like Aurobindo an internal human reality, in love as well as hate, in identification as well as in counter-identification.(Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy* 85, 86, 87).

In his *The Renaissance in India*, Aurobindo defined the course of coloniality in terms of a triadic scheme- that of an unqualified admiration of the culture of the colonizer by the colonized people, a phase of conscious reaction against and rejection of Western values and the time of adjustment and compromise or hybridism.:

The first step was the reception of the European contact, a radical reconsideration of many of the prominent elements and some revolutionary denial of the very principles of the old culture. The second was a reaction of the Indian spirit upon the European influence, sometimes with a total denial of what it offered and a stressing both of the essential and the strict letter of the national past, which yet masked a movement of assimilation. The third, only now beginning or recently begun, is rather a process of new creation in which the spiritual power of the Indian mind remains supreme, recovers its truths, accepts whatever it finds sound or true, useful or inevitable of the modern idea and form, but so transmutes and Indianizes it, so absorbs and so transforms it entirely into itself that its foreign character disappears and it becomes another harmonious element in the characteristic working of the ancient goddess, the Shakti of India mastering and taking possession of the modern influence no longer possessed or overcome by it (Aurobindo, *The Renaissance* 17).

Aurobindo's response to Shakespeare belongs to the third phase of the colonial encounter in which the greatness of Shakespeare is acknowledged, approached from an Indian spiritual perspective and thus transmuted and assimilated into the Indian cultural tradition. To postulate the very possibility of comparing Shakespeare with Kalidasa is a part of such a process of cultural assimilation and synthesis.

Aurobindo's appreciation and reception of Shakespeare may be seen as an ideological strategy that the newly educated native elites of the colony devised and employed in order to mask their political ineffectuality and plead for a new social prestige and recognition. Obviously such enunciations as that Shakespeare's appeal is universal and that the enlightened critical mind of the intelligentsia transcends all barriers of time and place to appreciate what is great in all cultures in spite of recognizing the specific, particular traits of each culture, had certain political advantages. Whatever may be the role of Shakespeare in the imperialist project; his creations transcend the bourns of language, class, nation and culture: such views and perceptions were widely prevalent among the native intellectuals of Aurobindo's contemporary times. It is because of such ideological premises that Sri Aurobindo described Shakespeare's world as 'romantic...in the very sense of the world of the wonder and free power of life and not its mere externalities' (Aurobindo, *The Future Poetry* 80).

Seen from a postcolonial perspective, Aurobindo seems to have subscribed to the creed of Universalism which Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin define as:

The assumption that there are irreducible features of human life and experience that exist beyond the constitutive effects of local cultural conditions. Universalism offers a hegemonic view of existence by which the experiences, values and expectations of a dominant culture are held to be true for all humanity. For this reason, it is a crucial feature of imperial hegemony, because its assumption (or assertion) of a common humanity- its failure to acknowledge or value cultural difference- underlies the promulgation of imperial discourse for the 'advancement' or 'improvement' of the colonized, goals that thus mask the extensive and multifaceted exploitation of the colony (Ashcroft et al, *Key Concepts* 235).

Bill Ashcroft et al Further Continue

One of the most persistent examples of this phenomenon occurs in English literature, where the value or 'greatness' of a writer's work is proven by the extent to which it depicts the 'universal human condition'. By this means, the link between the universal and Eurocentric, and in particular the link between universality and the canon of texts that represents English literature, remains intact as an implicit feature of the discourse wherever it is taught. It was the power of this discourse to present the English subject as both attractive and universal that rendered it such an effective tool of socio-political control in India in the nineteenth century...'(Ashcroft et al, *Key Concepts* 235).

The eminent postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha contends that the effect of such Universalism upon the reading practice is not only that it produces some immanent, universal meaning of the text, but it also constructs the reader as a site where all conflict is resolved, a reading subject who is unable to recognize how it might itself be inextricably enmeshed, ideologically involved in the historical conflicts it encounters in the text:

Universalism does not merely end with a view of immanent 'spiritual' meaning produced in the text. It also interpellates for its reading a subject positioned at the point where conflict and difference resolves and all ideology ends. It is not that the Transcendental subject cannot see historical conflict or colonial difference as mimetic structures or themes in the text. What it cannot conceive, is how it is itself structured ideologically and discursively in relation to those processes of signification which do not then allow for the possibility of whole or universal meanings (qt. in Ashcroft et al, *Key Concepts* 236).

Therefore the ideology of universalism that motivates, conditions and informs Sri Aurobindo's negotiations with Shakespeare not only projects, represents the Bard and his creations as universal human subject, but also constructs the reader, Aurobindo himself, as the universal 'cultured' reader, removed from any consideration of the material conditions of the local and present experience of colonization and exploitation.

Perhaps it is this ideology of universalism that inspired Aurobindo to react against the historical method of interpreting Shakespeare's creations according to the theory of man and his milieu. Aurobindo drives all the biographical and historical accounts of the specific events and conditions of Shakespeare's life and time out of the domain of what he calls the 'appreciation' of his works. Instead of concentrating on what is historical and therefore temporal and transient he attends to what transcends history and is eternal, the creation of Shakespeare the poet. Sri Aurobindo writes:

The individuality of Shakespeare as expressed in his recorded actions and his relations to his contemporaries is a matter of history and has nothing to do with appreciation of his poetry. It may interest me as a study of human character and intellect but I have no concern with it when I am reading the *Hamlet* or even when I am reading the *Sonnets*; on the contrary, it may often come between me and the genuine revelation of the poet in his work, for actions seldom reveal more than the outer, bodily and sensational man while his word takes us within to the mind and the reason, the receiving and the selecting part of him which are his truer self. (Aurobindo, *Kalidasa* 13-14).

Two things are particularly to be noted here. One, that Aurobindo does not consider the individuality of Shakespeare at all important in his study of Shakespeare's creations which according to him is not confined to the individual man in Shakespeare, but which reveals the truer self of the creator, the essential self which as a closer study of Aurobindo's observations reveals, is implied to be universal. Secondly, Aurobindo here distinguishes between the sensational man attached to the external world of action and the inner man of mind and reason, the truer self of man, which is not tied to the world of actions but which transcends the time and place. Aurobindo's critical observations here are conditioned by and expressed in terms of an essentially Indian spiritual perception. In *The Bhagavad Gita*, Lord Krishna explains to Arjuna the distinction between the true self of man who does not act and is not tainted by action and the body that is the doer or agent of all actions. Krishna asserts:

Having no beginning and possessing no gunas, this supreme and imperishable self ... neither acts nor is stained by action even while dwelling in the body (Nikhilananda, *The Bhagavad Gita* 302).

Action therefore belongs to the body and the material world, while the indwelling soul or spirit of man is beyond all actions and an assumption of such a distinction between the body and the soul seems to have inspired Aurobindo's reading of Shakespeare. That the Hindu spiritual conception is present behind Aurobindo's critical observations is made further explicit by Aurobindo's invocation of the Hindu phraseology. Aurobindo writes:

It may be a historical fact that Shakespeare when he sat down to write these poems intended to use the affected language of conventional and fulsome flattery... but after all it was only the bodily and sensational case of that huge spirit which so intended, – the food-sheath and the life-sheath of him, to use Hindu phraseology; but the mind, the soul which was the real Shakespeare felt, as he wrote, every phase of the passion he was expressing to the very utmost, felt precisely those exultations, chills of jealousy and disappointment, noble affections, dark and unholy fires, and because he felt them, he was able to express them that the world still listens and is moved (Aurobindo, *Kalidasa* 13-14).

Here Aurobindo insists on considering the soul of Shakespeare as the real creator of his works. It is the soul that feels the passions and also gives expression to these passions and the expression of such passions 'still' moves the world. The "still" definitely indicates the timeless and transcendental appeal of Shakespearean creations and by implication the soul that feels and expresses such passions that have the quality of moving people of all times seems to possess a universal character. Thus in Aurobindo's reflections on the timeless appeal of Shakespearean creations, the liberal humanist idea of Universality acquires an Indian dimension and significance.

An evaluation of Sri Aurobindo as a critic of Shakespeare therefore must take into account the essential Indianness of his vision and critical perception. Even when Aurobindo subscribes to the aesthetic and cultural ideology of the West he gives his critical observations a typically Indian twist. The validity of C. D. Narasimhaiah's claim that Aurobindo was the inaugurator of modern Indian Criticism is thus established beyond any doubt or question. While evaluating the merits of Aurobindo's *The Future Poetry* Narasimhaiah writes:

[The] work has enough clues, directions, reinforcements and disagreements on poets, poems and reputations which might well have inaugurated an Indian School of criticism in the twenties and thirties of the 20th century (Narasimhaiah, *English Studies in India* 99).

Whether the tradition of Shakespeare criticism that Aurobindo set was carried on by his successors is a different question altogether, but the contribution of Aurobindo to Shakespeare criticism in Bengal consists in not only an originality of critical approach but an effort to read and evaluate Shakespeare from an Indian perspective. As the foregoing critical discussion shows, the literary critic in Aurobindo did not resort to a servile imitation of any western critical methodology, be it psychoanalytical or the historical approach. A vision constructed on his understanding and assimilation of Indian spirituality informed and inspired Aurobindo's critical negotiations with Shakespeare and prompted this critic to locate the English Bard in a framework of Indian ideas and concepts.

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