

The Use of Prose in the Poetic Plays of Sri Aurobindo

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Language in a poetic drama arises out of the interaction between character and situation “as a spark arises when flint strikes steel and like the spark, its function is light, illumination” (Schreiber 71). Sometimes, this interaction of character and situation sparks off prose in a poetic drama. In some of Sri Aurobindo’s poetic plays one finds a quick shift from verse to prose as in the plays of Shakespeare and such a shift is dramatically very effective. It often brings about a quick and complete change in atmosphere and at other times it distinguishes prosaic characters from poetic ones. The shift sometimes traces the influence of one character over another and the influence of a compelling situation upon a character.

In *Perseus the Deliverer* the grand poetry of the prologue is immediately followed by banter in prose in Act 1 Scene I. The mighty world of the Gods and their cosmic struggle is presented in the prologue in reverberating poetry. The next scene brings us down to the familiar work-a-day world of Syria with the witty Diomedes and matter-of-fact Ciraes exchanging views about work, weather and palace gossip. Here is a sample of Diomedes’s prose:

You should warn him beforehand that your heart is in your paunch hidden under twenty pounds of fat (CP 12).

What a different world it is from the world presented in the prologue where Pallas Athene says:

Me the omnipotent
Made from His being to lead and discipline
The immortal spirit of man. (CP 6)

The world of the prologue seems far away and the world of Diomedes and Circeas feels very familiar. This is because verse is instrumental for creating a distance, but prose, to quote Steiner “is a leveler and gets very close to its object” (242). In *The Viziers of Bassora* the bustle of the slave market with its bidding and bargaining presents the gross world of commerce and prose is the language of this commercial world:

Why Sir, I protest! Three thousand pieces! Look at her! Allah be good to me! You shall not find her equal from China to Frangistan. Seven thousand, say I (CP 4).

Contrast the exquisite poetry which marks the world of the happy lovers:

You, my surpassing jewel, on my neck
Closer to me than my own heartbeats (CP 609).

Characters can be prosaic or poetic and they carry the necessary vibrations into the atmosphere. At Bagdad, the highly poetic and romantic exchange of lovers is interrupted by Ibrahim who is the most prosaic and earthly character in *The Viziers of Bassora*. Once Ibrahim enters, Nureddene and Anice Aljalice who have been speaking verse switch over to prose, but the minute Ibrahim leaves to fetch wine, the lovers swing back to verse. Andromeda in *Perseus the Deliverer* has a poetic aura about her and its impact is felt the moment she makes her entry. Diomedes who has been discussing palace news with Praxilla in prose, suddenly breaks into poetry as she sees Andromeda walking into the room. The moment Andromeda makes her exit, the dialogue loses its elevation and comes down to the plane of prose. This shift is also maintained in his *The Hero and the Nymph* which is a translation of Kalidasa’s *Vikramorvasie*. Manavaka, the King’s jester speaks verse with the king but in his exchanges with Nipunka the queen’s maid, he speaks prose. (2.1)

Such a switch not only suggests the influence of one character over another but also brings out the influence of situation on character. In

The Prince of Edur all the girls in the women's apartment of Edur's palace are pelting wit in prose and the target is the prospective suitor for Comol's hand. Just then the message about trip to Dongurh is conveyed and Comol suddenly switches over to poetry. The change immediately suggests to us that the pastoral Dongurh is a suitable place for love and romance. We no longer worry about the safety of the princess. Cireas in *Perseus the Deliverer* speaks prose in all the scenes except one. During the course of a crisp prose dialogue with Diomedes, he suddenly shifts to poetry on seeing the 'Phoenician Galley' caught in surf. He finds the scene of shipwreck truly magnificent and so will it be to a product of a barbaric civilization.

Prose is the natural idiom of the comic characters of lowlife like Harkoos and Kareem in *Viziers of Bassora*. The language of these characters reveal their realistic and amoral attitude to life. Nuredenne is facing a financial crisis and his servant Harkoos comes back with the report that all his master's "friends" have failed him. One friend Ghaneem "Has broken his leg for the present and cannot see anyone for a long fortnight". Another "has gone into the country—upstairs". Of yet another he says, "Every time I mentioned money, he drowned the subject in tears" (CP 645). Kareem the fisherman is, likewise matter of fact in his speech. The great Caliph Haroun Al Rasheed who wants to go disguised, exchanges his royal robes for Kareem's filthy gabardine. The Caliph says,

Woe to thee fellow! What's this filthiness
Thou callest a garment

to which Kareem replies,

O Sir, when you have worn it ten days, the filth will come easy to you and, as one may say, natural. And 'tis honest filth; it will keep you warm in winter. (CP 693)

The language of other characters drawn from low life like Cireas and Perissus in *Perseus the Deliverer* or Canaca in *The Prince of Edur* likewise reveal their matter of fact and amoral attitude to life.

Also characters excelling in wit and common sense express themselves only in prose. Nirmol Cumary in *The Prince of Edur* breathes wit and common sense and her prose is a reflection of her sensible and matter-of-fact attitude to life. His playful comments on the Scythian custom of marriage are worth quoting:

He carries a knout in his hand with which he will touch up the bride during the ceremony as a promise of what she may expect hereafter. (CP 749)

Thanks to her, the women's apartment of Edur's palace scintillates with laughter. "Realism wit and common sense make up the quintessence of comedy and the characteristic idiom of comedy is prose" (4), says Milton Crane about Shakespeare's use of prose in his plays and the same can be said of the use of prose in Sri Aurobindo. One sees this quintessence of comedy in the verbal fencing of a witty couple like Basil and Brigeda in *The Maid in the Mill*. Poetry would have marred the sharp wit and crisp repartees of Brigeda who is described by Basil as the 'feminine mercury'.

Sometimes a character is not just prosaic but positively antipoetic. The antipoetic also has its place in a poetic drama because it contributes to multiplicity of focus. Kodal in *The Prince of Edur* is a case in point. The Princess who is a 'Rose of Rajasthan' and 'glorious virgin' to the chivalric hero, is only 'a runaway Rajpootny' for Kodal and the beautiful palanquin only a 'dog-box'! Also the speeches of Cireas in *Perseus the Deliverer* present a new angle of looking at the mighty Poseidon. To Cireas the

dreadful god is only 'the blue-haired bogey'. His language is sacrilegious and rendered in casual prose:

I would leave his unwashed back to itch for a fortnight. But these gods are kittle cattle to joke with. They have too many spare monsters about there stables trained to snap up the offenders for a light breakfast (*CP* 12)

His language is a striking contrast to the grand and awesome epithets the others use in connection with Poseidon and human sacrifice.

"The specific virtue of prose is that it is judicial" (60) observes Middleton Murry. "Where the appeal is to the judgment there the vehicle is prose" (Murry 60-61). This is true not only of a writer appealing to the faculty of reason in the readers but also of one character appealing to reason in other characters. Perissus in *Perseus the Deliverer* appeals to reason by his matter-of-fact ideas and the vehicle he employs is prose. In the following passage he cautions the priest and populace against foolhardiness: Would you have us spitted upon Chaldean sword? ... We have no weapons (*CP* 113). Therops on the other hand is a demagogue who aims at fanning the passions and emotions of the rabble and the language he employs is poetry and high rhetoric:

But thou, O ill-stared Syria, two worst evils

Hast harboured in a single wickedness. (*CP* 119)

The contrast between appeal to passion and reason is thus brought out by the use of poetry and prose.

Not all prose in a poetic drama is alike. It is dramatic prose and therefore different from other forms of literary prose. Here the dramatist takes care to give a variety of prose styles to give thrust to character and situation. Both Basil and Brigida are witty and both speak prose. But there is a marked difference in their styles. Brigida's is sharper and Basil's is more conceited. The prose style of Nirmol is rooted in humor

and common sense. There is bombast in Perissus's prose especially when he tries to impress the new hero Perseus:

Perseus thou has slaughtered yonder Paleozoic ichthyosaurus; wilt thou suffer me to chop this neyozoan? (*CP* 190).

All that he asks is permission to kill Phineus as Perseus has already killed the sea-monster!

Mention must be made of plays where Sri Aurobindo does not make use of prose. One does not find prose in Sri Aurobindo's tragedy *Rodogune* and the romances *Vasavadutta* and *Eric*. Possibly Sri Aurobindo shut out prose in *Rodogune* because there is no place for comic relief in the play. As with the Greek tragedy a solemnity marks the Aurobindonian tragic world and prose would be out of place in such a world. Speaking of verse, Steiner says that it "is the prime divider between the world of high tragedy and that of ordinary existence....The royal and heroic characters whom the gods honour with their vengeance are set higher than we are in the chain of being and their style of utterance must reflect this elevation"(241). The magnitude and high seriousness of *Rodogune* renders the use of prose redundant.

Prose does not touch the world of the romances either. The plots of romances like *Eric* and *Vasavadutta* unfold the working out of a divine principle and the protagonists are elite agents of such actions. One does not find in these plays the vulgar and comic characters of lowlife. "Where men speak verse they are not prone to catching colds or suffering from indigestion" says Steiner explaining how in a verse play the characters are relieved from complications of material need (243). The gluttonous Canaca has to think of the next meal and the disgruntled Cireas awaits a jackpot. Such characters have no counterparts in *Eric* and *Vasavadutta* and this is perhaps the reason why the dramatist had dispensed with the services of prose making poetry the exclusive medium.

But in other plays including the fragments the dramatic prose is used by Sri Aurobindo with remarkable dexterity to suit the requirements of mood, character or situation. The alternate use of prose and verse serves to establish dramatic contrast. It contrasts the gross world from the grand one, the frivolous world from the world of high seriousness. And it certainly contrasts earthly characters from the elevated ones. Sri Aurobindo's wielding of prose and verse with equal ease no doubt shows him a master of language to whose touch both modes are equally pliant. But what is more significant is the fact that it brings out his calibre as a poetic dramatist - a dramatist who can trace the inner workings of a character in a given situation through the medium of language.

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