

## Sri Aurobindo and the Indian Critical Tradition

- Vivek Kumar Dwivedi

Sri Aurobindo did not address himself to a number of questions that are generally associated with literary theory. In spite of the fact that he took some of his ideas and critical terms from Arnold, Coleridge and Keats, a number of his critical speculations and concerns relate him to a spiritualist or mystic rather than to a literary critic. The first question that comes to mind is why did Sri Aurobindo write the kind of literary theory that he did? Difficult though it is to arrive at an answer, I will make an attempt to do that because in the answer lies the key to some vital aspects of Indian literary theory. Sri Aurobindo happens to be the Indian in whom there was the desire, and its accompanying anxiety, to express what to him seems to have been the Indian point of view on matters of culture and life. This point of view was not the narrow vision of a sectarian poet, or the stunted worldview of a polemical strategist. Nor, on the other hand, was it merely the creed of one who was merely a patriotic nationalist battling against the injustice of a vast colonial empire; there were other Indians, sometimes much greater in stature than Sri Aurobindo, sacrificing their lives in the process of achieving that end. Then, what was it that drove Sri Aurobindo to write *The Future Poetry*, a work that first appeared in parts, published in *Arya* between 1917 and 1920?

The answer to this question seems to lie in a medley of speculations. The first of these was that Sri Aurobindo, who had a pride in his sense of belonging to India and its culture, was conscious of the lack of a living Indian critical tradition. He did see, no doubt, that India had a glorious ancient past in literary aesthetics, a past that matched up to if it did not excel the ancient past of Greece. But that tradition had come to a point of saturation and Sri Aurobindo's critical mind informed him that the classical fixity of this tradition was limiting it from accommodating contemporary human experience<sup>1</sup>. The human mind has always come up with newer ways of expressing itself and, what is more, it has found newer ways of judging the words, images and metaphors of others. That there had been a rather long lull in the Indian's discovery of these newer ways of judging and creating seems to have troubled Sri Aurobindo. This second anxiety that Sri Aurobindo probably experienced seems to have been largely a result of the British

---

<sup>1</sup> The feeling that Sanskrit Poetics cannot accommodate contemporary experience has been shared by several recent authors. An interesting article on this aspect of Sanskrit Poetics can be seen in Basavraj Naikar, "Need for Adaptation of Sanskrit Poetics", *Dialogue: A Journal Devoted to Literary Appreciation* (Vol. III, Number ii, December 2007), pp. 24-38.

rule in India. The British Empire brought along with it the rich English language, which made certain sensitive Indians realise that the critical tradition in the West was neither dead nor confined by classical fixity. They seem to have become conscious of a difference between their Indian “Self” and the Western “Other” in regard to the critical dimension. Sri Aurobindo was conscious of the fact that Indians were deficient in criticism. His very first sentence of *The Future Poetry* describes this feeling:

It is not often that we see published in India literary criticism which is of the first order, at once discerning and suggestive, criticism that forces us both to see and think (Aurobindo 3).

This anxiety, in my assessment was one of the key factors for the creation of Sri Aurobindo’s literary and critical theory.

However, it wasn’t just this anxiety that gave birth to Sri Aurobindo’s theories of literature. There was a feeling of anti-imperialism that gave impetus to his critical expression. He had read and delighted in his study of British and other literatures. His soul had revelled in the Humanism of Western literature, philosophies and critical systems. He found that his own country’s critical and literary situation was different to the West’s. Being the patriotic Indian that Sri Aurobindo was, he wanted to write something that could fill the gap that was emerging between the East and the West. He did not want the West to believe that the ancient glorious past of his country had given place to a kind of critical and literary vacuum. He seems to have written in a spirit of defiance, as it were; a spirit that said, “You are not that great, even though you are our masters, and we are not that low even if we are just men!” He spoke to his countrymen in one breadth, trying to show their lack in the critical dimension, and very soon he spoke to the British showing them that they were not perfect. The lure of British and other literatures made him conscious that in these literatures lay something valuable for his countrymen to read and experience. However, from his essays on British Poetry one can see that he does not, on the face of it, show an admiration for it. On the contrary, he tries to reveal wherein its shortcomings lie. This is the spirit in which he wrote his literary theories. He wrote about where the weakness in the British poet resided. About the writings of the Victorian poet, for instance, Sri Aurobindo says:

. . . whether we compare it with the inspirations from which it turned or with the inspiration which followed or replaced it, it is a depression, not a height, and without being either faultily faultless or splendidly null, as epochs of a too self-satisfied intellectual enlightenment tend to appear to be in the eyes of the more deeply thinking ages, it fails to satisfy, unlike the Roman Augustan, the French grand century or

even in its own kind the English Augustan. It leaves the impression of a too cramped fullness and a too level curiosity. It is a descent into a comfortable and pretty hollow or a well-cultured flatness between high, wild or beautiful mountain ranges behind and in front of a great confused beginning of cliff and seashore, sands and rocks and breakers and magic of hills and sea horizons. There is much in this work to admire, something here and there to stimulate, but only a little that lifts off the feet and carries to the summits of the poetic enthusiasm (Aurobindo 148).

The anti-British attitude pervades Sri Aurobindo's literary criticism and in passage after passage it can be perceived. In the following passage, that shows defiance toward the British claims to superiority, Aurobindo has already shown the weakness in Byron when he begins to talk of Browning and Pope:

Browning's language rises from the robust cheerfulness of temperament, it does not touch the deeper fountain-heads of truth in us; an opposite temperament may well smile at it as vigorous optimistic fustian. Pope's actually falsifies by its poetical inadequacy that great truth of the Gita's teaching, the truth of divine equality, because he has not seen and therefore cannot make us see; his significant images of the truth are, like his perception of it, intellectual and rhetorical, not poetic figures (Aurobindo 29).

Aurobindo did not reject the British wholesale. He was a critic and he couldn't have done that in order to be true to his critical sensibility. He did see the greatness in a British author, like Shakespeare, and in some other British poets. He, as Narasimhaiah points out, decided to become a link between what was good in the British tradition and in his own country's (Narasimhaiah 96-97).

The nationalist in Sri Aurobindo often pointed out the limitations of the West and the strengths of India:

In Rome, always a little blunt of perception in the aesthetic mind, her two greatest poets fell a victim to this unhappy conception, with results which are a lesson and a warning to all posterity. . . . [I]n both [Lucretius and Virgil] the general substance is lifeless matter which has floated to us on the stream of Time, saved only by the beauty of its setting. India and perhaps India alone, managed to turn this kind of philosophic attempt into a philosophic success, in the Gita, in the Upanishads and some minor works modelled upon them [Emphasis mine] (Aurobindo 35).

Manoj Das informs us that behind Sri Aurobindo's anti-British pronouncements was his disenchanted father.

Dr. Ghose had grown somewhat bitter with the British attitude to Indians. He used to mail to his sons clippings from an Indian newspaper carrying the reports of the maltreatment of Indians by Englishmen and in his letters he denounced the British Government in India as heartless. When Sri Aurobindo was merely eleven he had already received strongly the impression that a period of general upheaval and great revolutionary changes was coming in the world and he himself was destined to play a part in it (Das 13).

When a young man is in a defying mood and believes that he has a major role to play in changing the situation, he is likely to write as Aurobindo did. He studied the Western mind and discovered that it was governed much more by considerations of a material and colonial nature than by the spiritual or divine. Hence he began to write as an Indian who could teach the West about the joys of the spirit, about inner light and an enlightenment that was far different to what the West considered it to be. The subjective, mystical and inward looking theories of Sri Aurobindo seem to have emerged as a result of his refusal to accept what the West expected him to, even though at an objective level, he did admire certain aspects of the West. It is the contention of this paper that Sri Aurobindo's criticism of poetry and his theories of literature are written due to his anti-imperial bearings and therefore are different to the theories and criticism of those who did not write with such considerations. I do not claim that everything that Sri Aurobindo wrote as criticism was of the highest order. But I do say that most of what he wrote was written in a spirit of defiance and opposition to Britain, the colonising nation. In this spirit he attempted to pull down a great deal of what Britain prided in. He emphasises on the failures of some of the most distinguished English poets:

If Wordsworth and Byron failed by an excess of the alloy of untransmuted intellect in their work, two other poets of the time, Blake and Coleridge, miss the highest greatness they might otherwise have attained by an opposite defect, by want of the gravity and enduring substance which force of thought gives to the poetical inspiration (Aurobindo 138).

In a later part of this paper, I have shown that John Middleton Murry also wrote like Sri Aurobindo very soon after Aurobindo did. Murry contributed to a journal called *The Aryan Path*, a name that is strikingly like the one Aurobindo contributed to – *Arya*. Murry had begun to be impressed much by Eastern philosophies and once said that if D. H. Lawrence had travelled up to India, instead of just going up to Burma, he would have been one of the greatest writers of all times. Further, Murry

believed that “Lawrence never expressed his full genius because he denied his spirituality” (Cassavant 27-28).

This paper attempts to suggest that Sri Aurobindo’s anti-imperialism is directly related with his subjective and spiritual theories. In the later part of this paper few extracts from Sri Aurobindo’s essays have been given to show the subjectivity, the mysticism, and the refusal to adhere to outward and superficial criteria in his theories which is an Indian way of looking at things. If the West (particularly the British) believed in the intellect, in objectivity and in outward realities, forms of perceptivity that were easily verifiable, Sri Aurobindo strove to speak of the soul, of inner realities and of mystical concepts.

In his anti-imperial drive he seems to have laid emphasis on the “inlook” as he called it, in opposition to the outward reality that the West relied on. This inward movement of Sri Aurobindo’s mind did make him Indian, because it was on the authority of Indian scriptures like the Gita and the Upanishads that he advanced his thought. He could sense, and rightly so, that the West would value the Orient only if it stood for things that the West lacked in. He could anticipate what very few Indians before him could, that India stood for an inner knowledge, a mystical vision that promised peace and joy for anyone who approached it. E. M. Forster has brought us face to face with this Indian experience in his *A Passage to India* in which Mrs Moore and Adela Quested visit India to discover this inner peace, this harmony. Sri Aurobindo could have been responsible to an extent at least in helping Forster to make his plot for this novel because he had written about Indian mystical criticism a decade or more before this novel.

Whether or not Sri Aurobindo’s thought lay behind Forster’s conception of the Indian experience, the point remains that he was able to perceive the value of Indian experience for the Westerner. Forster’s novel only goes to prove that the Westerner would be drawn towards such Indian mystical experience. Thus it may be surmised that Sri Aurobindo’s critical insight, of foregrounding inner experience, was a valuable contribution made by him. It helped not only the Indian educated in English to know about Indian thought but also the Westerner who would like to know of it.

For anyone who does not value Sri Aurobindo’s subjective criticism and literary theory, it is necessary to realise that after the English Romantics of the nineteenth century, there was a significant number of English and American critics who found romanticism, mysticism and subjectivity highly valuable in literary theory and critical practice. J. Middleton Murry, G. Wilson Knight, Harold Bloom, and Geoffrey Hartman are some of the names of Western theorists who valued inner

experience. No wonder, some of the conclusions drawn by Sri Aurobindo were echoed by some of these later critics.

For instance, Sri Aurobindo said of Shakespeare that he was “the largest name in English poetry” (Aurobindo 191), and that “Shakespeare stands out alone . . . in all English literature as the one great and genuine dramatic poet. . . . [H]is contemporaries resemble him only in externals; they resemble him in outward form and crude materials, but not the inner dramatic method by which he transformed and gave them quite other meaning and value” (Aurobindo 78). Sri Aurobindo can stand up and talk of Shakespeare’s limitations, something that few critics have done (Aurobindo 79). Sri Aurobindo later says that the claim to Shakespeare’s being the greatest could be challenged but the fact that he was the greatest dramatic poet could not be (Aurobindo 79-80). Sri Aurobindo singles out Shakespeare for his “intuitive” use of language. He says, “Shakespeare’s rapid seizing of the intuitive inevitable word and the disclosing turn of phrase which admits us at once to a direct vision of the thing he shows us . . .” (Aurobindo 185). And then again, “The language of Shakespeare is a unique and wonderful thing; it has everywhere the royalty of the sovereign intuitive mind looking into and not merely at life . . .” (Aurobindo 185).

Murry, Knight and Bloom have spoken time and again about the supremacy of Shakespeare in the literary world, as have so many others before and after them have done. But Harold Bloom’s more recent work reiterates, may be unconsciously, much of what Sri Aurobindo has said of Shakespeare. Like Sri Aurobindo, Bloom suggests that Shakespeare is the greatest; he is at the centre of the canon (Bloom 45-75). Bloom goes on to say, “Coming after Shakespeare who wrote the best prose and the best poetry in the Western tradition, is a complex destiny . . .” (Bloom 10). Apart from that Bloom says something strikingly similar to Aurobindo when he considers Shakespeare to be the greatest in “cognitive acuity, linguistic energy, and power of invention” (Bloom 46).

The purpose of this paper is not to trace the critical achievement of Sri Aurobindo<sup>2</sup>. This task has already been performed by other scholars . The main aim of this paper is to foreground Sri Aurobindo as an Indian critic and theorist who tried to establish an Indian critical tradition that was capable of informing the West of areas ignored by it. This paper also seeks to show that Sri Aurobindo was one of those critics who imbibed the Coleridgian, Keatsian and Arnoldian traits of the British critical

---

<sup>2</sup> See for instance: (a) K. D. Verma, “Sri Aurobindo as a Critic”, *Indian Literary Criticism in English: Critics, Texts, Issues* ed. P. K. Rajan (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2004), pp. 17-47, (b) Manoj Das, “Poetry and Aesthetics of the Future”, *Sri Aurobindo* (Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1972), pp. 66-70, (c) R. K. Singh, “Sri Aurobindo’s Poetics”, *Indian Response to Literary Theories* ed. R.S. Pathak (New Delhi: Creative Books, 1996), pp. 211-228.

tradition and carried it forward with dexterity so that later theorists and critics, both Western and Indian, could pick them up and use them as their own. The fact that Sri Aurobindo insisted on writing as an Indian, with his roots in the ancient past of his country, seems to be one of the reasons for Sri Aurobindo's theoretical ideas not getting sufficient recognition initially. In this paper the Indianness of Sri Aurobindo will be highlighted. It is this Indianness that makes him a pioneer critic.

But Aurobindo's Indianness could also have led to the West's not responding very positively to his ideas. Post-colonial thought has demonstrated that the West has tended to decide what it would accept in final terms, treating the East as though it were inert matter and hence not worthy enough to deserve a life of its own.

Matthew Arnold is one of those rare English critics whose humanistic and cultural ideas have scarcely been surpassed. Fortunately, he has not been ignored by critics and theorists coming after him. In the age of Derrida, Foucault and Lacan it may seem unfashionable and unnecessary to pay attention to such early critical ideas as Arnold's, but it was the views represented by critics like Arnold along with Coleridge, Keats and Eliot that the post-structuralists largely stood against. The Western philosophical tradition that grew out of Rousseau, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Husserl, etc. and from which the English critical tradition emerged and to which it must have contributed, however indirectly, must be connected with or opposed to the humanistic strain of thought that Arnold upheld.

For Matthew Arnold the future of poetry was immense (Arnold 11) because it based everything on ideas rather than on facts (which are the bases of science). Hence poetry had a tremendous future for Arnold and would even serve as a substitute for religion (Arnold 11). In Sri Aurobindo's criticism there is reference to "The Future Poetry" which is the title of his treatise on poetic theory. The bringing together of poetry and the future seems to be something Aurobindo learnt from Arnold. "Future" and "Poetry" are words that Arnold puts into the very first sentence of his essay, "The Study of Poetry", quoting from his own earlier writing:

The future of poetry is immense, because in poetry, where it is worthy of its high destinies, our race, as time goes on, will find an ever surer and surer stay. There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, nor a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve. Our religion has materialised itself in the fact, in the supposed fact; it has attached its emotion to the fact, and now the fact is failing it. But for poetry the idea is everything; the rest is a world of illusion, of divine illusion.

Poetry attaches its emotion to the idea; the idea is the fact. The strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry (Arnold 11).

Sri Aurobindo's critical ideas come not only from Matthew Arnold, to whom he owes much, but also from the British Romantics. He imbibed literary ideas from the British literary world, of the nineteenth and earlier centuries, to complement and complete his own theory of poetry and then gave back to it what he considered necessary to complement and complete the knowledge of the West.

A very significant feature of Sri Aurobindo's criticism is that in it there is the co-existence of a spiritual and romantic strain. The influence of Matthew Arnold on Sri Aurobindo is obvious. But this influence can be traced back to writings of earlier romantic poet-critics like Keats and Coleridge. For Sri Aurobindo "beauty" and "truth" are criteria with great relevance. To scholars of our times, such criteria are somewhat vague. But for Sri Aurobindo these are valid criteria deserving our serious attention. Coleridge-like, Sri Aurobindo also speaks about the relevance of the imagination in the creative process. He speaks with a sense of authority as though what he says is the final truth. This could be a result of his study of Sanskrit poetics and otherwise spiritual concerns which often grapple with a sense of right and wrong and sometimes deal in absolutes.

Sri Aurobindo seems to have taken certain literary concepts from Coleridge. The passage that follows contains echoes from Coleridge:

The poet has in him a double personality, a double instrument of his response to life and existence. There is in him the normal man absorbed in mere living who thinks and feels and acts like others, and there is the seer of things, the supernormal man, the super-soul or delight-soul in touch with the impersonal and eternal fountains of joy and beauty who creates from that source and transmutes by its alchemy all experience into a form of the spirit's Ananda. It is easy for him, if the demand of his genius is not constant or if he is not held back by a natural fineness of the poetic conscience, to subject this deeper and greater power to the lower and general demand and put it at the service of his superficial mental experience. He has then to rely on the charm and beauty of word and form to save the externality of his substance. But the genius in him, when he is faithful to it, knows that this is not his high way of perfection nor the thing his spirit gave him to do; it is a spiritual transmutation of the substance got by sinking the mental and vital interests in a deeper soul experience which brings the inevitable word



and the supreme form and the unanalysable rhythm. The poet is then something more than a maker of beautiful word and phrase, a favoured child of the fancy and imagination, a careful fashioner of idea and utterance or an effective poetic thinker, moralist, dramatist or storyteller; he becomes a spokesman of the eternal spirit of beauty and delight and shares that highest creative and self-expressive rapture which is close to the original ecstasy that made existence, the divine Ananda (Aurobindo 260).

It could be a concern of the post-colonial critic today to investigate reasons for why the Western critic becomes well known and the Indian, who anticipates him, less known. It cannot be denied that Sri Aurobindo's contribution to literary criticism was phenomenal and needs greater attention. One of the few Indians who worked hard in this direction is C. D. Narasimhaiah. In pointing out Sri Aurobindo Indian and spiritual kind of criticism, Narasimhaiah has made following points.

Sri Aurobindo's criticism as well as his theory is based on certain key words such as spirituality, intuition, inner-self, soul-movement, inlook, etc.

Sri Aurobindo believes that poetry finds its own form; the form is not imposed on it. The poet remains conscious of the technique of art, but in the heat of creation the "intellectual sense of it" is relegated to secondary position even he may omit it altogether. He says something that can be considered close to the romantic position on the subject:

. . . then the perfection of his sound-movement and style come entirely as the spontaneous form of his soul: that utters itself in an inspired rhythm and innate, a revealed word, . . (Aurobindo 13).

This is very similar to the view of the romantic theorist for whom poetic expression is as a soul-utterance. J. Middleton Murry, for instance, says:

To know a work of literature is to know the man who created it, and who created it in order that his soul should be known. Knowledge of a work of literature which stops short of that may be a profound, an inspiring, a bewildering knowledge, but it is not the real knowledge. The writer's soul is that which moves our souls. That is the truth which, in my belief, must be accepted; when that is accepted we can advance towards some understanding of the mystery why the words of the poet are his soul, and why the greater the poet the more completely are his words his soul (Murry 3).

C. D. Narasimhaiah's belief that Aurobindo, like William Wordsworth and T. S. Eliot, wrote criticism in order to justify or commend his kind of poetry (Narasimhaiah 88) could also be true. But it seems more likely that, as Narasimhaiah himself has said, may be unconsciously, that Aurobindo began a critical tradition, and I believe that he did this in a spirit of defiance to the British.

In conclusion it can be said that Sri Aurobindo's literary theory was unique because it was a result of his anti-imperialist stance. This anti-imperialism made him acquire a critical attitude that would shun anything merely British. Thus whereas he imbibed some part of his understanding of poetry from British poets and critics, he made a conscious effort to oppose and sometimes even belittle them. In the process he found his anchor in ancient Indian critical theory on which he superimposed his own understanding of the nature and function of literature. He thus began a tradition of Indian literary theorists in English – a tradition that looked at the West both in approbation and in disagreement.

### Works Cited

Arnold, Matthew. *Essays in Criticism, Second Series*. New York: Chelsea House, 1983. (First published London: St. Martin's Press, 1888.)

Aurobindo, Sri. *The Future Poetry*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1997. (First published in *Arya*, 1917-1920.)

Bloom, Harold. "Shakespeare, Center of the Canon", *The Western Canon: The Books and Schools of the Ages*. New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1994.

Cassavant, Sharron Greer. *John Middleton Murry: The Critic as Moralist*. Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1982.

Das, Manoj. *Sri Aurobindo*. Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1972.

Murry, J. Middleton. *Keats and Shakespeare: A Study of Keats' Poetic Life from 1816 to 1820*. London: OUP, 1925.

Narasimhaiah, C. D. *The Function of Criticism in India at the Present Time: Essays in Indian Response to Literature*. Mysore: Central Institute of Foreign Languages, 1986.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism. Western Conceptions of the Orient*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995. (First published London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978.)

Singh, R. K. "Sri Aurobindo's Poetics", *Indian Response to Literary Theories*, ed. R.S. Pathak, New Delhi: Creative Books, 1996.

Verma, K. D. "Sri Aurobindo as a Critic", *Indian Literary Criticism in English: Critics, Texts, Issues* ed. P. K. Rajan, Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2004.

**Vivek Kumar Dwivedi**

Professor of English

University of Allahabad, India