

Sri Aurobindo's *Rodogune*: A New Aesthetics of Tragedy

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1

Sri Aurobindo is best known as a spiritual leader. He is also known, and admired by a few as a poet, but there are not too many aware of the fact that he has written more than 50,000 lines of lyric, narrative, drama and epic. As a prolific writer, he deserves serious critical attention that could ultimately establish the literary relevance of this huge body of writing. Unfortunately, his stature as either poet or literary critic is yet to be properly endorsed. There is no reason whatsoever to dump 50,000 lines of creative work into darkness. Sri Aurobindo's literary identity needs further examination and exploration. The present discourse, in a critical study of Sri Aurobindo's play *Rodogune*, seeks to identify the original voice of a significant playwright. Prema Nandakumar, one of the more perceptive critics of Sri Aurobindo, in her article 'Sri Aurobindo the Dramatist' (1974) correctly observes that drama is another 'facet of a Diamond' yet to be discovered, suggesting the general ignorance about this area of his creativity. Sri Aurobindo's treatment of the genre is remarkable for his capacity for characterization and construction of situations that carry the action forward.

Sri Aurobindo is one of the major Indian writers in English from the nineteenth century, carrying on into the twentieth. The first phase of his literary career is predominantly lyrical, with his drama bearing the unmistakable imprint of a poetic genius. S. S. Kulkarni, in *The Plays of Sri Aurobindo: A study*, finds him essentially a lyrical poet, who sought in this specific genre yet another extension of his creative personality. In his plays he seeks to expand man's egotistic drive into 'the multiplicity of humanity'

Initially Sri Aurobindo's upbringing was totally westernized, having lived in English society that shaped his creative sensibility. From his infancy he was isolated from the Indian milieu. But he had developed a peculiar aptitude for languages, an intense passion for poetry, and an extraordinary interest in history and romance. Endowed with an unusual sensibility, he started expressing himself from his boyhood. His poetic abilities developed further after he joined King's College, Cambridge, where the academic atmosphere nurtured him.

As a classical scholar in England Sri Aurobindo came to know the Greek and Latin dramatists closely, even as he was fascinated by Shakespeare and the Elizabethans. He also mastered Sanskrit and entered the realm of the dramatic works of Bhasa, Kalidasa, Bhavabhuti and the rest. He translated Kalidasa's *Vikramorvasiyam* into English blank verse as *The*

Hero and the Nymph, following the model of Elizabethan romantic comedy. While in poetry he followed classical metres, in drama, however, he took liberties to express the manifold play of life. As Sri Aurobindo put it, '... he [Kalidasa] might almost be described as an Elizabethan predating by a thousand years at least the Elizabethans' — suggesting another aesthetic dimension that is not too often observed in the Sanskrit literary tradition. Sri Aurobindo's plays may be characterized as Victorian by chronology but Elizabethan in spirit, with a distinctive Indianness reflecting the specificity of a culture.

Sri Aurobindo borrows his plots and characters from history, legends and mythology and recasts them into significant dramatic forms like Shakespeare and the contemporary British poets. He deliberately follows a pattern to 'maintain the scheme of countrywise situations' for his plays. He wrote eleven verse dramas. Five of them — *The Viziers of Bassora*, *Rodogune*, *Perseus the Deliverer*, *Eric* and *Vasavadutta* — are complete five-act plays; but *The Witch of Ilni*, *Achab and Esachaddon*, *The Maid in the Mill*, *The House of Brut*, *The Birth of Sin* and *Prince of Edur* are incomplete. *The Viziers of Bassora* is set in ninth century Iraq. *Rodogune* is set in the Syria of ancient Greek history. The Syria of Greek mythology is used in *Perseus the Deliverer*. *Eric* recreates ancient Norway. *Vasavadutta* takes place in India nearly a century after the Mahabharata war. He wrote five dialogues in prose which are rather conversations and not plays. Four of the complete plays are comedies and only one, *Rodogune*, is a tragedy.

The *Viziers of Bassora* (written in the Baroda period) goes to *The Arabian Nights* for its theme and the main plot is based on the story 'Nur Al-Din Ali and the Damsel Anice Al-Jalis' but the source material has been considerably modified and a few subplots have been introduced. The main dramatic conflict centres round the virtuous Vizier Alfazzal Ibn Sawy and the Vizier Almune bin Khakan, suggesting the presence of an ethical issue. The story of Haroun Al-Rasheed, the dispenser of absolute justice, provides the author an opportunity to set a just/correct direction for human progress. Undoubtedly, the tale of Bassora unfolds an archaic reality with playful grandeur, but the underlying complexity brings in several moral issues tearing apart the delightful appearance of the story line. The question of justice slowly rises above the revelry, with politics defined as a game of power. Bassora offers a contrast to Bagdad as the seat of culture; Alzayni contrasts with Haroun as the ruler; Ibn Sawy and Almune contradict each other. There is difference between Balkis and Anice as slavegirls. As lover, Ajebe presents a different picture than Nureddene. The device of contrast reflects a specific value system, viz. good governance against bad governance, incorporating history as a frame of reference, and thus focuses on an interpretation/meaning of life.

Sri Aurobindo's only tragedy *Rodogune* (1906) is indebted to Corneille to a great extent, but it has also modified the source material to suit the temperament of the dramatist. A tender voice of wisdom has been incorporated in the tragic world of the play offering a new aesthetics which can be located in the wisdom of the East. The French play is full of horror and violence. Sri Aurobindo eliminates from the story of Cleopatra not only the crudities but also the unnecessary violence which is discussed elaborately later.

In *Perseus the Deliverer* (1906–07), Sri Aurobindo recreates the ancient Greek legend of Perseus. The legend, the dramatist claims, ‘is made the nucleus round which there could grow the scenes of a romantic story of human temperament and life impulses on the Elizabethan model. The country in which the action is located is a Syria of romance not of history . . . The subject in an incident in its passage from a semi-primitive temperament . . . to a brighter intellectualism and humanism . . .’

The claim sets the tone of the entire play. Sri Aurobindo wrote this play during the period of his political activity and its publication history is marked by the uncertainties of that era. How to inspire people into action had been the crucial agenda of the time, and the dramatist constructed his own text deviating sharply from the source material. In the legend no significance has been attributed to Andromeda’s personality or action. Sri Aurobindo’s Andromeda aspires for a new dawn. She initiates the process of transformation by preparing her country to welcome the advent of the saviour who advocates light and wisdom. Andromeda’s sacrifice and Perseus’s heroic fight together generate a tremendous energy, ensuring the victory of a more civilized order over the untamed brutal evil power, represented by Poseidon. The play has a clear direction with the assertion of an evolving civilizational pattern with man as ‘soul of time’ and hence change, changing and in the process ‘changing’ his gods—to ‘live in larger light.’

Eric (1912 / 1913), set in ancient Scandinavia, brings out the qualities of the Viking culture. Sri Aurobindo recreates the world of the Norse sagas—the hard life along the cold fjords, the battle for survival in a pre-agricultural economy, and the bitter political intrigues and drives for power that they gave rise to. The play opens with Eric, ‘the monarch of a thousand Vikings,’ at the crest of his power, riven by the stirrings of doubt about the continuing efficacy of his rule by the sword. With a touch of destiny, Aslaug and Hertha, disguised as dancing girls, appear singing the glory of love. Eric gives them shelter, hoping to find out how he can use love as the mysterious other strength that has eluded him. But, ironically, the plot shows the two young women to be agents of the rebellious Swegn seeking Eric’s death. In the course of the very first day of their stay in Eric’s palace, Aslaug is overpowered by her love for Eric. In the encounter between the two, there is a clash of two strong wills, with deeper and hidden emotions struggling to surface. In the play love acts as the ‘hoof of the gods/ Hearts to combine’ and ultimately, it changes the destiny of Eric, Swegn and Aslaug, transforming the destiny of Norway too. Structurally, the dramatist compresses his source materials deftly and selects the most important actions and situations to emphasize the focal point. With the combination of love and force Eric succeeds in restoring unity, but acknowledges that it is his love for Aslaug that has given him this new political vision.

Vasavadutta (1915) is Sri Aurobindo’s last complete play and was composed in Pondicherry after he had settled there. The theme explores the development of love between Prince Udayan and Princess Vasavadutta. In this play also, the playwright borrows the materials from Sanskrit literature and deviates from the source to construct his own text. It follows the storyline of Somadeva’s *Kathasaritsagara*, one of the most popular Sanskrit

classics. The dramatist emphasizes the importance of individual love which can play a major role in the unification process of two hostile kingdoms. It unites the hero and heroine along with their parents, creating possibility and space for a new order. The centre of interest of the play is power / empire. The action takes place a century after the Mahabharata war. The play resembles *Eric* in its philosophical tone which highlights transformation through love. Each of Sri Aurobindo's complete plays expresses meaning / philosophy consistent with its theme.

One wonders if Sri Aurobindo's retreat from playwriting was a spiritual choice or an artistic one—a withdrawal from the battleground of senses and emotions, desires and passions into the tranquility of meditation, or a decision that stemmed from an artist's feeling that he had exhausted the genre.

2

Rodogune happens to be the only tragedy written by Sri Aurobindo. As a tragedy, it addresses the problem/nature of evil/defiance in a manner rare in Sri Aurobindo's plays. Sri Aurobindo wrote the first version of the play in Baroda between 31 January and 14 February 1906, before his departure to Calcutta. In May 1908 the notebooks containing his fair copy of *Rodogune*, like the notebook containing *The Viziers of Bassora*, were seized by the police when Sri Aurobindo was arrested. Fortunately, the other notebooks remaining in his possession contained much of the penultimate draft of the 1906 version. Basing himself on these passages, he was able to reconstruct the play in Pondicherry around 1912. This version was published initially in the *Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual* and separately in 1958. The Baroda version, recovered in 1952, is now considered an early draft.¹

Tragedy as a form has a special relevance in a complex time with failures and complex possibilities haunting life at every point. The particularly modern dimension of tragedy lies in man's restless drive to break free from various forms of confinement. An almost innate faith in democracy leads men and women to feel all the more strongly and bitterly the sense of being confined and limited. Here begins the real story of the human spirit that presses incessantly at the limit; and we admire with awe the dynamic passion of life that marches forward to the tragic realization. In the theatre of the absurd we come across the antihero: a person who is petty, ignominious, ineffectual, and even passive. The tramps Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*, or the blind and paralyzed old man Human in *Endgame*, do not manifest largeness, power or heroism against the onslaught of fate. Still, there exists a clear and logical bond between the hero of tradition as formulated by Aristotle and the antihero of the present time. Both aspire to cross the limited bounds of life; both struggle against the inevitability of fate/circumstances. Antiochus in *Rodogune* advocates high spirit/vision/dream, whereas the antihero's stubborn anticipation can be identified with a resignation, which, in essence, is an eager and long waiting for a new voyage that would tear down

the darkness of night. Tragedy incorporates in its philosophy an element of transformation, always bearing the possibility of risk that may lead to total collapse/disaster. Sri Aurobindo's sensitive mind grasps the essence of tragedy. In *Rodogune*, he creates his own rhythm with a lyrical pace which is slow, serene and introvert in comparison to Greek or Shakespearean tragedies. The entire play centres round plot; the action and characterization steering clear of any violent jerk, with a brooding sadness pervading the atmosphere. While Aristotle envisages a catharsis of emotion, in Sri Aurobindo we can identify the indomitable spirit of human endeavour/pursuit, bursting out of the dramatic structure that seems to collapse at the given limits. Death/despair/ennui is the outcome of the whole process but struggle/transformation/dream is the driving force that really moves the course of action.

The term tragedy, generally, means a dramatic representation of serious and important actions which eventuate in a disastrous conclusion for the protagonist. A change in fortune from happiness to misery occurs because of the hero's 'hamartia' or his error of judgement. One common form of 'hamartia' in Greek tragedies is 'hubris' or pride. An arrogant self-confidence leads the protagonist to defy a divine warning or an existing moral law. In *Rodogune*, the fate of Antiochus changes from happiness to misery as he ignores the advice of the Eremite who warns him not to go back to Antioch. He had made an error of judgement when he determined to defend the 'native' throne. 'Hubris' as well as error of judgement lead him to final disaster. He fails to measure the depth of Cleopatra's as well as Phayllus's stratagems. The Eremite condemns Antiochus for his arrogance and defiance of the gods:

Break then, thou hill
Unsatisfied with thy own height. The gods
Care not if thou resist or if thou yield.
They do their work with mortals. To the Vast
Whence thou, O ravening, strong and hungry lion,
Overleaping cam'st the iron bars of Time,
Return! Thou hast thy tamers.

Medieval tragedies are often the story of a person of high stature who is driven from prosperity to wretchedness by an unpredictable turn of the wheel of fortune. The Elizabethan playwrights developed the model of a five-act play with a complex plot using an elaborate and formal style of dialogue. The model initially developed by the English playwrights was that of the revenge tragedy or the tragedy of blood as it derives from Seneca's favourite materials of murder, revenge, mutilation, carnage, etc., and it is very different from *Rodogune's* tragic world which is seeped in a lyrical sadness. In *Rodogune*, the playwright follows the basic paradigm as formulated by Aristotle. At the same time he uses the organized five-act form with complex plot and a refined style of dialogue following the Elizabethan model. It is obvious that Sri Aurobindo manipulates the form of tragedy in a way which suits his mood and culture, asserting an independent voice and perception. Even after fratricidal civil war remorse can be felt in Timocles.

Brother, brother,
 We did not dream that all would end like this.
 When in the dawn or set we roamed at will
 Playing together in Egyptian gardens.
 Or in the orchards of great Ptolemy
 Walked with our arms around each other's necks
 Twin-hearted. But now unto eternity
 We are divided. I must live for ever
 Unfriended, solitary in the shades . . .

The eighteenth century writers popularized the bourgeois or domestic tragedy of the aspiration and defeat of the middle/lower class protagonist/antihero who suffers a commonplace or domestic disaster. The tragic seriousness of Arthur Miller's *The Death of a Salesman* emerges from the aspirations of an ordinary man set against the false values of a commercial society. The Aristotelian social backdrop vanishes with the change of time, but the seriousness of tragedy still remains. The text of *Rodogune* is radically different from 'terrible catastrophe' or 'revenge tragedy': neither does Sri Aurobindo present the world of 'bourgeois/ domestic' tragedy in *Rodogune*. A rippling note of tenderness emanates from Rodogune, Antiochus and even from Cleopatra. This particular tone in Aurobindo's tragedy reflects a different culture; and gives the well-established classical European form a distinctive cultural reorientation.

Structurally, in *Rodogune*, Sri Aurobindo follows the Elizabethan model without the device of comic relief. He maintains the unities of action but introduces a subplot to achieve the intended result which Aristotle could not conceive. To create a tragic ambience several dramatic devices like irony, suspense etc. have been integrated in the structure resulting in catastrophe/death/disaster. The skilful arrangement of plot, character and action intensifies the tragic tone of the play providing it with a flawless structure. The inner sensibility of an author gets expressed through the theme/meaning of a text. The profundity of an alert artist cannot grow in a void; even the philosophy of nothingness reflects a particular social and cultural mould. In *Rodogune* the playwright offers a mature design bearing the imprint of a specific culture. He seems to believe that 'there can be dramatic creation of the greatest kind without a solution in death, sorrow, overwhelming calamity or the tragic return of Karma . . . ' It certainly reflects his deep regard for and understanding of Sanskrit literature. The Indian tradition has never favoured tragedy: Bhasa's *Urubhanga* is the sole exception. In *Hindu Drama* Sri Aurobindo underscores the cultural factor involved.

The Hindu mind shrank not only from violence, horror and physical tragedy, the Elizabethan stock-in-trade, but even from the tragic in moral problems which attracted the Greek mind; still less could it have consented to occupy itself with the problems of disease, neurosis and spiritual mediocology generally which are the staple of modern drama and fiction. An atmosphere of romantic beauty, a high urbanity and a gracious equipoise of the feelings, a perpetual confidence in the sunshine and flowers are the essential spirit of a Hindu play; pity and terror are used to awaken the feelings, but not to lacerate them,

and the drama must close on the note of joy and peace; the clouds are only admitted to make more beautiful the glad sunlight from which all came and into which all must melt away.²

'A perpetual confidence in the sunshine and flowers' appears to be a lyrical exuberance but reflects a deeper sensibility. In this respect a parallel can be drawn with Rabindranath who also weaves several patterns in his plays internalizing the specific Indian ethos/milieu/culture. The play *Post Office* deals with the concept of death where Amal, the adolescent protagonist, takes his final departure. An intense sadness engulfs the reality, a murmur of mourning rings in the air. But it never attempts to evoke fear and pity. A solitude of stillness unfolds a different kind of reality that slowly pierces the heart. A slow poetic rhythm emerges. The Indian mind is receptive to this experience. Nandini, the protagonist of *Red Oleanders*, declares war against the brutal system that accumulates wealth and faceless power. Bursting out of coldness and shadow she sings the song of light and sunshine. The system of darkness takes its revenge by killing her lover, Ranjan. Salim Al-Din, the renowned Bangladeshi playwright, has correctly identified the slow pace in Tagore's drama which he categorically refuses to measure against the Elizabethan speed and swiftness. The action-oriented swiftness in Elizabethan drama, offering physical tragedy, creates a pace which is alien to Indian taste. He, further, comments that the slow dramatic tone derives from the tradition of Sanskrit literature, Vaishnav Padabali, Mangal Kavya and of folk literature. In the midst of disaster, Nandini speaks in a voice that advocates 'a perpetual confidence in the sunshine and flowers'. Antiochus, the tragic hero in *Rodogune*, aspires to conquer a vast territory but speaks in a slow and dreamy voice. The playwright, very skilfully, blends the romantic longing of the hero in the same passage, reducing the aggressiveness of the conqueror's vision. Undoubtedly, in *Rodogune*, the wheel of fortune turns violently and creates an abyss, crushing Antiochus who however retains till the end the spirit of defiance intact. In effect, both hero and antihero generate a tremendous motion, initiating the potential of transformation. Both in Sri Aurobindo and Rabindranath the motion is associated with a tender rhythm which is qualitatively different from the Greek and the Shakespearean ethos. The strength as well as the originality of the play *Rodogune* lie with the quiet tenor of the composition. In the play we even come across a reference to incest which can never be equated with *Oedipus Rex*. The entire temperament of the text is set to a chord that bears the imprint of a culture that reads a synthesis within and beyond the tensions.

The author borrows the story of Cleopatra from the works of Appian, a Roman lawyer-historian. For historical materials he is also indebted to Justin and Josephus, but his indebtedness to the great French dramatist Corneille is irrefutable. Sri Aurobindo eliminates unnecessary violence in the play without diluting the meaning of the text. Sri Aurobindo shows neither the cruelty of Cleopatra the mother killing her own son, nor the cruelty of her own son, poisoning his mother to death. He introduces a subplot and villainy is attributed to Phayllus and Cleone. Ambition in Cleopatra has not been denied. But the hatred changes

with the passage of time into compassion and motherly love. The brooding wings of fate overshadow the lives of Cleopatra, Antiochus, Rodogune and even of Temodes. All of them respond to it in a voice that vibrates with the experience of human suffering and evolution. To elaborate the law governing Hindu poetics Sri Aurobindo comments:

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 discontented; for these also are sublimities which belong to cruder civilizations and more barbarous national types; in worst crimes and utmost sufferings as well as happpines and virtue. The Aryan was more civilized and temperate. If he seeks a *Pere Goriot* or a *Madame Bovary*, he will still fail in his quest; . . . Hindu Art would have shrunk from poisoning the moral atmosphere of the soul by elaborate studies of depravity.³

Sri Aurobindo highlights the refined and temperate nature of Indian receptivity. With *Rodogune*, Sri Aurobindo spells out a different tragic mode—growing out of the Elizabethan idiom, but moving out into a more open spiritual space, which can be related in a way to the first modernist stirrings in Europe around the same time, seeking a meditative Eastern culture in Buddhism, in Japan—and in India. The continuous disruptions of the linear narrative splitting the middle and the end apart would not allow the reader a ‘logical’, predetermined reading, but would go on offering spaces for brooding speculation and uncertainties and doubts.

3

Act I, Scene I commences in a mood heavy with suspense. The impending death of the king Antiochus builds up a suffocating atmosphere offering secret choices to the various characters of the play, loaded with ambition. Except the twin princes most of the important characters are introduced in Scene I, exposing the central issue of the play. An immense pressure of lust/ambition is lurking behind, impregnating the space with possibilities. Different layers of tension—emotional, familial and political—are presented. Through each and every utterance and gesture, the characters seek to challenge the rule of fate. Cleopatra, impatient with joy at the prospect of her exiled twin sons returning to Syria, has been warned by Eunice not to indulge memories of hatred against the departed king as it does not suit the caprices of the gods. Cleopatra thunders out:

Will the Furies stir
Because I hated grim Antiochus?
When I have slain my kin, then let them wake.
The man who's dead was nothing to my heart.
My husband was Nicanor, my beautiful

High-hearted lord with his bright auburn hair
 And open face . . .
 But for Antiochus.
 That gloomy, sullen and forbidding soul,
 Harsh-featured, hard of heart, rough mud of camps
 And marches, —

The ruthless monarch has marched forward leaving behind a torn, wounded heart. Cleopatra is separated both from her 'little babes' and beloved husband from political machination. Standing on the brink of an abyss she dares to raise her voice of protest against destiny. The voice carries in it the distinctive royal pride and ambition. From the opening scene Sri Aurobindo's Cleopatra suggests the presence of several layers negating the possibility of a linear development of future action. She dreams of a world where grief can never be born. The sweet footsteps of the twins would change the world. The touch of motherly tenderness transforms the source material.

One of the central characters, Rodogune, modelled on Cassandra (in *Agamemnon*) is the visionary slave committed to philosophical detachment. She firmly believes that Nature and Fate do all. Throughout the play her twilight soul makes unexpected predictions in a low but clear voice. In a crucial moment in Act V she comments in an unassuming voice to Eunice: 'There is some awful presence in this room.' She represents a different culture as against the Greco-Roman culture. Cleone states :

She is a twilight soul, not Frank, not Greek,
 Some Magian's daughter full of midnight spells.
 I think she is a changeling from the dead.
 I hate the sorceress.

The clash of cultures provides another dimension to the crisis in the play. This particular setting for power games threatening to burst into violence makes the design of tragedy more complicated; and there lies Sri Aurobindo's originality. Cleone, very overtly, voices her hatred and racial contempt, whereas Eunice, pleading for mercy and reconciliation, offers a different moral standard. The moral and political setting is further complicated with the entry of Phayllus, the Chancellor, who enters into a conspiracy with his sister Cleone. Phayllus instigates her to use even sexuality to influence and control whoever is chosen king from the twins. Lust for power builds up an unnatural bond between Phayllus and Cleone. He observes that the twins have been groomed in Africa, a land of midnight spells, devoid of a 'civilized' value system. The hungry, young and African cubs are lasciviously impulsive. But good governance needs cold calculation and a civilized code of conduct. Phayllus comments:

In Egypt they have other needs than ours.
 There lust's almost as open as feasting is;

Science and poetry and learned tastes
 Are not confined to books, but life's an art.
 There are faint mysteries, there are lurid pomps;
 Strong philtres pass and covert drugs. Desire
 Is married to fulfilment, pain's enjoyed
 And love sometimes procures his prey for death
 He'll want those strange and vivid colours here.

With an intolerant voice, the seat of culture condemns the socio-cultural set-up in Africa, in terms that reflect the arrogant voice of imperialism. These are the subtle twists and turns. The future king can be swayed with 'vivid colours' and Cleone would be instrumental to that project. A system of cold sophistication has been set against the impulsive/natural value system. To create the tragic ambience the playwright does not act in accordance with a specified standard, he rather assumes an authentic position in the context of clashing cultures.

In Act I, Scene 2 we confront Antiochus, the aspiring hero. A sensitive young mind rejects a narrow vision of life. He sets a noble and royal goal for himself, arrogantly rejecting his mother's care and love. He is indifferent to the caprices of the gods. He nurtures the imperial dream and concludes that his brother Timocles does not opt for the 'iron burden of a crown'. Two contrasting political/royal philosophies are offered in the play. He says:

O Philoctetes, all this happy night
 I could not sleep; for proud dreams came to me.
 In which I sat on Syria's puissant throne,
 Or marched through Parthia with the iron pomps
 Of war resounding in my train . . .
 Restored once more the Syrian monarchy.

A powerful project has been drawn in bold strokes. It is Antiochus's conjecture that the arms of friends would guard Timocles's 'fine monarchy of cheerful mind.' The simple categorization between 'fine monarchy' and 'iron burden of a crown' suggests the presence of a one-track mind which is susceptible to error. Two contrasting ideals sharpen the suspense over the choice of king. Antiochus, determined to thrive, ignores the impending threat of fate/circumstances. Timocles, on the other hand, matures the dream of his mother whom he has missed in the solitary night in Egypt. His appearance is like a glow of light. Antiochus bears a royal nature and a kingly form that seem to have a definite divine purpose. The two princes differ sharply in their choices/moods/concepts.

A high dramatic tension is created in Act 1, Scene 3 when the mother meets the twins after a long separation. She is eager to meet her sons even as she toys with the prospects of a power game. With the help of a submissive Rodogune she wants to exercise her control over the newly appointed king. She offers Rodogune a 'happier fetter' than everlasting serfhood. She makes a quick assessment of the situation and interacts with Rodogune in a language reflecting shrewd calculation:

After so many cruel, black and pitiless years
 Shall not the days to come conspire for joy?
 The queen shall be my slave, a mind that's trained
 To watch for orders, one without a party
 In Syria, with no will to take my son from me
 Or steal my sovereign station.

Rodogune is left with no choice in an alien land. She would be instrumental to the power game plotted by Cleopatra who waits to 'conspire for joy'. Timocles responds with spontaneous joy, the moment he faces Cleopatra. He seeks the mother of his dream and she fulfils it. Intoxication of power makes Antiochus a distant man. He informs Cleopatra:

You are for me the thought of motherhood.
 A noble thing and sacred. This I love.

He barely relates to a mother as concept, to a 'thought' of a mother. It is a rude shock to Cleopatra's plan to marry Rodogune off to her choice of the new king. Rodogune, the 'Magian's daughter', stands out of the emotional politics of Cleopatra and the strategic manipulation of Cleone who would provoke a violent clash of interests at the earliest opportunity. Rodogune's sensibility to slavery and freedom carries an ethical dimension. The tortured soul of a rejected mother raises a terrible voice. Cleopatra screams against the tyranny of Fate:

If I thought that,
 I would transgress all laws yet known or made
 And dare Heaven's utmost anger. Gods who mock me
 I will not suffer to all time your wrongs.

Through dispassionate calculation Antiochus estranges his own mother. He arrogantly refuses to understand human psychology. Cleopatra fails miserably to snatch her share in the power game, even as she plots silently, bringing tension to the surface. Along with the exposition of characters, Act I initiates the crisis of the play, keeping dramatic suspense intact.

Act II, Scene 1, the Rising Act, commences with the subplot involving Phayllus and Cleone who jointly conspire the fratricidal civil war in Syria that ultimately provides them the opportunity to usurp power. Act I provides us the clue to enter the labyrinth of crisis, whereas the following actions in the Rising Act highlight the network and strategy of the power game as it is the main agenda of the play. Phayllus opens up the scene setting a specific tone that suggests the presence of cold determination in his attitude rooted in a corrupt moral system. He blatantly expresses his dream to Cleone:

Worry the conscience of the Queen to death
 Like the good bitch thou art. If this goes well,
 I may sit unobserved on Syria's throne.

The only task left to Cleone is to tackle the Queen's conscience. If it can be dissolved Phayllus would sit on Syria's throne silently. Cleone, on the other hand, cherishes the idea of personal vendetta as she has an impulsive bent or mind which Phayllus does not approve of. To snatch power is a political decision to Phayllus. Sri Aurobindo introduces sexuality as a major component in the political scheme.

Phayllus is keen to use it at the grossest animal level—as lust. Phayllus's authoritative male voice can be heard when he demystifies Rodogune's charm and twilight soul with 'men's phrases':

Yet were they all
Born from one mother Nature. What if she wears
The quick barbarian's robe called modesty?
There is a woman always in the end,
Behind that shimmering. Pluck the robe't will fall;
Then is she Nature's still.

A socialization of patriarchal ideology can be identified through the entire fabric of the utterance. But Sri Aurobindo's women characters are mostly assertive and they raise clear and distinctive voices of their own. In the ensuing combat Cleone demands a more equal status with little success. Timocles enters into the matter in a more subtle manner as he falls in love with Rodogune. It adds another dimension of complexity to the tragic plot as both the princes feel an intense passion for the same girl.

Act II, Scenes 2 and 3 deal with a new power structure that barely emerges. It can also be felt that love and emotional urges are drawn into the power game. Phayllus wants to enter into a deal with Rodogune who in spite of long servitude keeps her spirit nobler than her Grecian lords. Phayllus offers:

By my help
You can advance your foot to Syria's throne;
His bed's the staircase and you shall ascend,
Nor will I rest till you are seated there.

Keeping power always in focus Phayllus aggressively transgresses the private domain of Rodogune. She simply needs no empire to save her 'high-throned heart' and seeks 'no help beyond what Ormuzd gives'. To Phayllus, Cleopatra, or to Antiochus, power is not an abstract notion but a system that rules over their nature and virtually determines the future course of their actions in the play. Eunice who understands Rodogune better, also secretly nurtures the hope to take part in the power game by manipulating Rodogune.

Antiochus's love for Rodogune has been set against the frustrated romance of Timocles, generating a bitter tension between the brothers. The temperamental differences between Antiochus, who is more assertive and demanding, and Timocles, who is more passionate

and yet ultimately diffident, lead the dramatic action towards the climax. These are the factors provoking/determining the roles of the other characters in the play. In Act II, Scene 4 we see the first encounter between the twin royal brothers. To Timocles, Antiochus reveals a warlike sprit and loftiness without any resonance of tender passion. It comes as a shock when he realizes the depth of Antiochus's passion for Rodogune who comes as a part of the royal package and he is uncompromising in his claim. An aggressive thrust for power commingled with romantic longing makes the plot complicated. We can trace a dimension of arrogance in his utterance.

I need no human voice to make me anything
Who am king by birth and nature. Who else should reign
In Syria? Thoughtst thou thy light and shallow head
Was meant to wear a crown?

Pride, defiance and passion provide a large a larger-than-life, mythical stature to Antiochus, preparing us for future disaster. He further states:

Thou shalt have
My sword across thy heart-strings first. She is
The Kingdom's prize and with the Kingdom mine

A bloody feud starts between the two princes over Syria's throne. Rodogune becomes instrumental in inflaming the fire of hatred in spite of her 'pure and shrouded soul.' After an initial resistance Timocles gives up as Rodogune turns him down. He prefers to show respect to her private choice and does not force himself upon her. Phayllus, who stands to gain from the conflict of the brothers, still instigates Timocles with little success. He suggests to Timocles not to surrender to the pressure, but to besiege Rodogune with 'grace' and 'force'. But Timocles, a broken heart, drifting in the tempest, cannot construct any intelligible plan/project for himself

Act II, Scene 5 is a very crucial one creating a high tension drama with precision and speed. The brevity of composition of this scene is remarkably mature. It unfolds not horror but a tangled condition of the human mind which is essentially responsible for a tragic atmosphere. Once Cleopatra realizes that she will have no control on Antiochus, she searches for an alternative solution. The existing system would not allow Timocles to be the future king as he was the younger one. But Cleopatra understands the shrewd logic of life where truth can be mended through manipulation. Mentho, the Egyptian nurse, was the only witness to the birth of the twins. Cleopatra makes a last effort to make Mentho testify to the precedence of Timocles. Sri Aurobindo gives Mentho an uncompromising truthfulness set against the intrigues of the Greco-Roman Europeans. She interprets the meaning of truth but Cleopatra contradicts. Wound and deprivation drive Cleopatra to the brink of self-deception. She frantically wants to embrace a feeling of 'brief happiness' in this terrible and indifferent

world. But Mentho warns that she would not get happiness as happiness cannot spring from wicked roots.

In Act III we reach the climax of the play. The wheel of fortune takes a violent turn, leaving Antiochus in the midst of chaos. The future course of action gets complicated with the possibility of fratricidal civil war as the choice of king still remains a mystery. The emotional politics of Cleopatra stand out against the royal politics of Syria, and emotive pressure aims to vitiate the existing moral standards of the country. Still in this act Cleopatra, upholding peace and reconciliation, warns against the futility of war and imperialism in a striking voice:

Joy has been buried in the blood drenched sands.
Vain blood, vain weeping! . . .
Nations that conquer widest, perish first,
Sapped by the hate of an uneasy world.
Then they are wisest victors who in time
Knowing the limits of their prosperous fate
Avoid the violence of Heaven. Syrians,
After loud battles I have founded glorious peace.

Again it is not a total villainy or terrible revenge; a down-to-earth human face emerges from an unfathomable depth. Antiochus hates to accept a 'woman's peace' and rejects the proposal. Cleopatra, with slightest provocation, declares the precedence of Timocles. She preaches peace but her decision accelerates the possibility of conflict between the royal princes. Antiochus chooses another expansionist adventure to consolidate his political power. He, virtually, carries away Rodogune and Eunice, leaving Timocles, still enamoured of Rodogune, in utter despair. His share in life and power has been snatched. He cries out:

Why should he always have the things I prize?
What is his friendship but a selfish need
Of souls to unbosom himself to, who will share,
Mirror and serve his greatness? . . .

From his very childhood he is aware of Providence's choice. In despair, Timocles falls back on Cleone. The Eremite appears as 'the appointed voice' and warns Antiochus that he will never be King. Antiochus challenges his fate. Sri Aurobindo seems to suggest the emergence of a moral resistance to the expansionism of Antiochus. But the inevitable cannot be avoided as it comes from the nature that Antiochus has been born with.

Act IV, the Falling Act, starts with Cleopatra's loneliness and of 'God's spaces' which have been set against another loneliness, that of Timocles. He finds solace in his revels with Cleone. Cleopatra fails in her personal game as well as in the power game. She cannot stand the rejection. She complains:

Cleone keeps him still, the rosy harlot
 Who rules him now. She is grown a queen and reigns
 Insulting me in my own place.

Timocles can feel the bitter tension and his rage against Antiochus. He can identify his destructive urge that would lead him to kill Antiochus. He whispers:

Oh, it is hell.
 The thought is hell! At midnight in the silence
 I wake in warm Cleone's rosy clasp
 To think of thee embraced: then in my blood
 A fratricidal horror works. Let it not be.
 You gods! Let me die first, let him be king.
 O mother, do not let us quarrel any more:
 Forgive me and forget.

The mood of tragedy envelopes the atmosphere without physical violence or horror expressing 'the essential spirit of Hindu play' as envisaged by the playwright. The frustrated Timocles plunges into sensual self-indulgence and Cleone's sexual charms. Phayllus is clever enough to see that in all this Timocles is really doing 'violence' to his own nature. But after a certain point he breaks out of this carnival in contempt against himself and Cleone alike and turns everyone out. Antiochus has come to the end of his victorious march, and faces Antioch with a small remnant of his army.

Sri Aurobindo's nationalism comes through in Antiochus's firm avowal of his quest for the *native* crown with *native* swords. Antiochus's hopes are dashed to the ground with the death of his loyal general. He is also informed that Phrases, King of Parthia and Rodogune's father, is approaching Syria. Assured of the loyalty of Rodogune and Eunice, but unsure of his own fate, Antiochus in a long soliloquy thinks over the futility of his choice. He seeks a spiritual release from the monotonous demands of human life. Still he takes a final common stand with his brother, Timocles, against the Parthian aggressor. Antiochus chooses Antioch as his fate against the advice of his friends, who however swear to 'follow always'. Sri Aurobindo takes care to demonstrate in Antiochus the emergence of a hero, choosing the reactions/responses of the others to inscribe it, yet such heroism is bound to fail. Antiochus spells out his defiance against fate:

Break me. I see you can, O gods. But you break
 A body, not this soul, for that belongs, I feel,
 To other masters. It is settled then.

In Act V the denouement or conclusion is the necessary or probable result of the preceding action. The last Act presents the various incidents in which the conflict called forth by the initiating action in the play is resolved. The play's plot is solely manipulated by the

villain, Phayllus. Even the sin of fratricide is planned by Phayllus who gets it executed through Theras, one of the Syrian captains. Phayllus, the crafty manipulator-politician, has been modelled on the Shakespearean Edmund, Iago and Gloucester. He is in charge of the situation in this scene. Step by step, provocation by provocation, instigation by instigation, he forces Timocles to order the 'execution' of Antiochus. Timocles is obsessed with Rodogune whom he still hopes to win. Phayllus, very cunningly, builds his strategy on this weakness. Antiochus has already grown into a patriot as he determines to protect Syria. In this scene he shows an even more human face as he re-envisages his relationship with his mother. But in his self-searching, he is haunted by the fear of a divine punishment—'when, when will the gods strike?'—touching on the supremacy of a divine will. The irony lies in Phayllus's utterly evil machinations, and the supposed Divine Will works hand in hand to achieve a common end.

The play ends with the deaths of both Antiochus and Rodogune. The arch villain Phayllus is also dismissed. Timocles' abdication of authority completes the circle. The ending has shades of several Shakespearean endings, particularly of *Hamlet* and *King Lear*—with the same evocation of the necessity for the continuance of the state and a restoration of the lost order. At the end the audience/reader is left with an overwhelming sense of the futility of a lust for power that violates and denies the natural bonds that tie brother to brother and children to their mother. There is also the suggestion that once the power drive disrupts the normal process of familial growth, it sets in motion a sinister force that corrupts and pollutes the familial ties at every point. Ultimately, there is the moral concern for the family and its sheltering/nurturing culture, endangered by political ambition.

NOTES

1. *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, Volume 4, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, 1998, p. 1002.
2. *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, Volume I, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, 2003, p. 192.
3. *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, Volume I, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, 2003, pp. 192–93.