Chapter I

Introduction

Sri Aurobindo's Dramatic Genius

Writing about Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's versatile genius, Sri Aurobindo said:

Bankim, the greatest of novelists, had the versatility developed to its highest expression. Scholar, poet, essayist, novelist, philosopher, lawyer, critic, official, philologist, and religious innovator, the whole world seemed to be shut up in his single brain.¹

"The whole world shut up in [one] single brain"—the words are at least as true, if not more, of Sri Aurobindo himself. He was a journalist, revolutionary nationalist, poet, prose-writer, critic, dramatist, philosopher, Yogi, seer, and what not? This variegated expression of his innate abilities, the rich variety of subjects encompassed in his tremendous mass of writings, comprising as many as thirty volumes of fairly big size, and the multifaridity of interest evinced in them suggest 'God's plenty' in Sri Aurobindo's creative world. His was a life replete with ceaseless activities, scholarly and academic, political and literary and, above all, yogic and spiritual. As such he is described variously as the fiery evangelist of Nationalism, the interpreter of Veda, the Vyasa of the inner life, the

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2. Birth Centenary Library Vols., thirty in number, will hereafter be referred to as B.C.L. Vols.
poet-seer, the Columbus of Supermind and so on. However, as Prof. Iyengar points out, the nationalist, the Yogi, the philosopher, the poet and the rest "are indeed all of a piece: or rather, it is the same diamond — the Immortal Diamond — with different facets turned to our gaze at different times."

The man of letters in excelsis is an important aspect of the multi-faceted personality of Sri Aurobindo. His massive literary corpus, as impressive in quality, makes his greatness in the field of literature self-evident. However, the imprimatur of august bodies like The Times Literary Supplement has also come forth in his case:

"Of all modern Indian writers, Aurobindo — successively poet, critic, scholar, thinker, nationalist, humanist — is the most significant and perhaps the most interesting."²

He is a poet in the splendid tradition of the Vedic and Upanishadic poet-seers whose contributions to the fields of poetry, philosophy and Yoga are equally enormous. Due to their 'vividly worded vision'³ and 'expressively rhythmmed emotions'⁴, his poetic creations acquire a unique resemblance with the hoary Indian poetry of the Vedic and

4. Idem.
Upanishadic age, heralding at the same time in the world a new golden age of what he calls 'overhead poetry'. But if Savitri is among the prettiest flowers in the garden of poetry, The Life Divine (his magnum opus), The Future Poetry, The Synthesis of Yoga, The Human Cycle, The ideal of Human Unity are some other masterpieces of prose by this man of extraordinary genius.

Besides the poet, critic and prose-writer in Sri Aurobindo, there is also the dramatist in him who reveals a significant aspect of his profound iridescent creative genius. His dramas illustrate the wealth and variety of his vast literary terrain.

Sri Aurobindo's career as a dramatist spans about twenty-six years. The Witch of Ilni, his first attempt at drama, was written in 1891 and Vasavadutta, his last play, in 1916. During this period, he produced eleven plays. Out of them, five are full length dramas and six are incomplete. However, some critics suggest that despite his pretty long career as a dramatist, Sri Aurobindo does not have an established reputation in the field. One of his discerning critics, Jesse Roarke says:

Sri Aurobindo was not exactly a dedicated dramatist, and he can hardly be said to have brought his interest in the art to its highest possible pitch and concentration; but his interest was persistent and strong enough that he did contribute something respectable to dramatic literature.

No doubt Sri Aurobindo is not much known as a
dramatist and it also is true that after some time he
gave up writing drama as a medium of artistic self-
expression; but he does not for that reason belong to
the category of writers like Browning and Hardy who,
after trying their hands at drama for a few years,
adopted other literary forms because they were not very
successful as dramatists. Sri Aurobindo's contribution
to dramatic literature is considerably respectable from
any standard. P.C.Kotoky rightly observes:

Sri Aurobindo is a successful dramatist, and has
treated his subjects, which are almost international
in scope, creditably well. As a dramatic craftsman,
his sense of design and proportion is almost perfect,
and in delineating his characters, he has shown
commendable psychological insight. His power of
portraying characters of diverse kinds with dramatic
detachment, or what Keats called 'the negative
capability', seems to be really amazing; particularly
when one remembers that he has a definite world-view
to present poetically. He was not beset by the
problems of the stage and the actability of his
verse....But it is not to suggest that his plays are
unsuitable for the stage. Given proper facilities,
they can also be successful plays for the stage, for
they have almost all requisite elements of a stage-
play.1

P.C.Kotoky's another observation about Sri Aurobindo
that "it is in a spirit of creative playfulness that he
seems to have taken to the drama"2, is however hardly
convincing. True that Sri Aurobindo left half a dozen

1. P.C.Kotoky, Indo-English Poetry(Gauhati : Gauhati
2. Idem.
of his dramas incomplete and even the complete ones were not finalized. But the fact may be accounted for by things other than Sri Aurobindo's taking to the drama half-earnestly. And if it is true that he adopted the medium of drama in a mood of creative playfulness, there can hardly be a better commentary on his dramatic talent than what P.C. Kotoky himself says about him in the passage quoted above.

Why after all did Sri Aurobindo give up writing drama? One answer may be found in his following observation with reference to versatility:

Yes, to have it [versatility] is an adjunct of intellectual kingliness, but to give expression to it is an intellectual mistake. To give impartial expression to all your gifts is to miss your vocation.

According to him, it is desired of a man to find his vocation and keep to it, for that is a simple and solid rule of life. Pleading for "specialism" in life, he very clearly says:

We however prefer to give an impartial expression to all our gifts, forgetting that the mind is as mortal and as much subject to wear and tear as any


perishable thing, forgetting that specialism is one condition of the highest accomplishment, forgetting that our stock of energy is limited and that what we expend in one direction, we lose in another. We insist on burning the candle at both ends. This spirit appears in our system of public instruction, the most ingeniously complete machine for murder that human stupidity ever invented, and murder not only of a man's body but of a man's soul, of that sacred fire of individuality in him which is far holier and more precious than this mere mortal breath.

Sri Aurobindo always held and repeatedly and categorically declared that he was first and foremost a poet. His poetic talent flowed copiously through a long career of over six decades, achieving its full fruition in Savitri, his magnum opus. To drama also he devoted a good number of the early years of his creative period; but he seems to have realised at a stage that his dramatic talent was not to be given impartial expression, that this was not the aspect of his creative personality to be allowed full flowering. To regard this as a lack of sufficient dramatic genius in him is to be unfair to Sri Aurobindo for the dramas per se belie such an assumption. A more viable explanation of his switching over to other forms of literary expression seems to be a change in his level of consciousness. Between 1892 and 1950 his consciousness continuously experienced new stages of development.

It was perhaps due to this factor that he gave up writing drama. He was now interested in projecting another side of the problem which he had dealt with in his plays. His plays depicted the problem of man's destiny. The heroes here have been shown engaged in a fight against evil in its various forms and emerge as veritable deliverers. But they all accept the truth of Fate and invariably knuckle under in the fight against her. After showing in the dramas the ways of "Fate adamant", he showed in Savitri that Fate could be transcended by the perfectly evolved man. Perhaps, this was a truth revealed to him at the higher level of consciousness he had now reached. To express the truth he needed a new medium which could depict man's struggle to attain his higher purpose in life which is also his destiny — his perfect evolution, self-realisation or divinity in human form. He found the medium in epic, which not only accommodates dramatic elements in it but also gets enriched by them. It alone could be a suitable vehicle for the inner drama of man's soul. The canvas in epic is much larger and the form absolutely free from such constraints as actability of the verse or stageability of the action. In fact, Epic was the form of literature most suited to his
natural genius.¹

Sri Aurobindo's preference for poetry rather than for drama as a medium, and the fact that his dramatic works represent only an earlier and a passing phase of his literary career, explain to a great extent the reason why he does not enjoy the same reputation as a dramatist as he does as a poet. He did scale much greater heights as a poet, a Yogi and a philosopher. Sri Aurobindo, the dramatist, stands overshadowed by Sri Aurobindo, the poet and visionary. But, if he has not attained great heights as a dramatist, it is not because he could not, but because he would not. Unless this is kept in mind, it is likely that one misses Sri Aurobindo's real worth as a playwright which has been exhibited well enough even through the few dramas he has written. Some critics hold that he wrote plays merely to illustrate his views on drama. Some say that he threw before the reader only a few samples of what good pieces

¹ Sri Aurobindo had dramatic ability, but he did not work to develop it. His natural genius was not dramatic, he did not see things in the dramatic way, and his poetic nature flowed more naturally in the lyric and the narrative, and most especially and sovereignly in that enlarging, heightening and intensifying, greater, grander and nobler, that full culmination and superior dimension of the narrative, the epic.

of drama he was capable of writing. Quite a few think
that he left a good number of his plays "tantalisingly
incomplete". The fact, however, remains that Sri Aurobindo
has the pride of place among the first few Indian English
dramatists writing plays in the late nineteenth century.
Unnoticed for pretty long, his dramatic works of late have
begun to attract scholarly attention. Studies of his
dramas, though appearing belatedly and in a small number,
show him in good light. Critics, like S.K. Prasad, have
gone to the extent of saying that Sri Aurobindo's dramatic
genius "can be favourably compared with the Shakespearian
as well as Kalidasian."\(^1\) That is no mean a tribute.

When Sri Aurobindo began to write plays in English,
Indian drama in English was yet to get recognition. (Where
does it stand even today?) Prof. M.K. Naik observes: "If
Indian writing in English is the Cindrella of literature
in English, Indian drama in English has always been, along
with criticism, one of the twin Cindrellas of Indian
writing in English."\(^2\) Of the three forms of Indian English

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1. S.K. Prasad, *The Literary Criticism of Sri Aurobindo*
   (Patna: Bharati Bhawan, 1974), p. 70.

2. M.K. Naik, "The Achievement of Indian Drama in English"
in *Perspectives on Indian Drama in English*, eds.
M.K. Naik and S. Mokashi Punekar (Delhi: Oxford
literature, viz., poetry, fiction and drama, the last has registered the least progress till date. The career of poetry, which has clear pre-eminence over the remaining two forms, began with *The Shair and Other Poems* of Kashi Prasad Ghose published in 1830. The first novel to be published was Toru Dutt's *Bianca or the Young Spanish Maiden* in 1878. As far as drama is concerned, says Prof. Naik, it dates far back to 1831 when Krishna Mohan Banerjee's *The Persecuted or Dramatic Scenes illustrative of the present state of Hindoo Society in Calcutta* was published. But after that no drama in English appeared in the whole of India for more than a generation.  

1 Michael Madhusudan Dutt brought out his *Ratnavali* (1858), *Sermista* (1859) and *Is This Called Civilization?* (1871) much later, all the three plays being translations of his own plays originally written in Bengali. His fourth play, *Nation Builders*, was published posthumously in 1922. Then appeared Ramkinoo Dutt's *Manipur Tragedy* (1893). This is all about the Indian English drama published in Bengal in the nineteenth century.  

2 In Bombay also some plays were written during the time by such writers as G.S. Nazir, D.M. Wadia,

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1. Indian English Drama, according to Dr. S. Krishna Bhatta, took its birth and grew at its own pace in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The *First Parsi Baronet*, perhaps, the earliest Indian English verse play, was written by G.S. Nazir in 1866. S. Krishna Bhatta, *Indian English Drama: A Critical Survey* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1987), p.6.

P.P. Meherjee, etc. In Madras V.V. Srinivas Aiyangar (1871-1954) published a good number of plays between 1911 and 1952. Some other writers who wrote plays there, were P.V.R. Raju, Krishnamacharya, J. Virbhadra Rao, A. Srinivasa-charya, Krishna Iyer, etc. But these writers did not succeed in giving Indian English drama a distinct identity. In the north, the only play known to have appeared in English was *Death or Dishonour* published anonymously in Dehradun.

Hamstrung almost till the end of the nineteenth century, Indian English drama made some headway in the early decades of the present century with the appearance on the scene of some major playwrights like Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, Bharati Sarabhai, T.P. Kailasam, Asif Currimbhoy, etc. But before that, the progress of drama had been really poor. "Modern Indian dramatic writing", it has been truly pointed out, "is neither rich in quantity nor, on the whole, of high quality."¹ Even after Independence, when drama in the Indian languages has 'fared sumptuously' and put on flesh, Indian English drama has had to remain content only with the crumbs fallen from its rich cousin's table.²

² M.K. Naik, "The Achievement of Indian Drama in English", p. 184.
Such having been the condition of Indian English drama when Sri Aurobindo emerged on the scene, one can reasonably commend his achievement in the field. He may not be the first writer of Indian English drama, but he is definitely the first to produce dramatic works on a far larger scale and also of far better quality. His plays, however, were published very late. *Perseus the Deliverer*, a master-piece of Sri Aurobindo, was the first to appear in 1907, but, then, it appeared incomplete, for its two scenes (Act II, Scene ii and iii) were missing at the time and were included in its 1955 edition only. All his other plays appeared much later and posthumously though they all had been written between 1891 and 1916. After *Perseus the Deliverer*, *Vasavadutta* appeared in 1957, *Rodojane* in 1958, *The Viziers of Bassora* in 1959, *Eric* in 1960 and the fragments in 1961 or after. Late publication of the plays of Sri Aurobindo is one major reason for their failure to carve out a niche for their writer among the Indian English dramatists. Nevertheless, increasing interest in the study and appraisal of Indian English drama as well as of Sri Aurobindo the dramatist holds out the hope that, in view of the "impressive bulk" and "rich individuality" of his plays, he will in due course of time be recognised as the first major Indian English dramatist.
or as the Father of Indian English drama.

Sri Aurobindo is a literary critic in his own right. His work on literary criticism, The Future Poetry, has been regarded as "perhaps the one original contribution to the subject of aesthetics in our times." Even those who consider it as overstatement of a fact endorse the view that the book is the most outstanding and original of all the recent contributions to the subject and that it is the richest and most courageous possible synthesis of the critical genius of the East and that of the West. The book contains stray mentions of Sri Aurobindo's views on drama as well. A passing reference to Sri Aurobindo's views on drama may not be uncalled for here too inasmuch as his views on drama may provide a perspective in which his plays can be seen and judged.

1. Sri Aurobindo's principles of literary criticism find expression in the long series of essays published in the Arya from 1917 to 1920 and in his letters written to disciples. The essays were brought out in book-form in 1953 as The Future Poetry, and the letters, in 1949 as Letters of Sri Aurobindo: Third Series. The two were brought out under one cover as The Future Poetry and Letters on Poetry, Literature and Art, B.C.L. Vol. 9 in 1972. The section on Letters also includes a large number of additional letters written later.


Most of the observations on drama, made by Sri Aurobindo, have been occasioned by Shakespearean exegesis. K.D. Sethna presents a brief review of the dramatist's numerous insights and critical observations because, as he says, through Sri Aurobindo's comments on Shakespeare "we can have an inkling of the whole general insight and outlook of Sri Aurobindo the literary critic." Culled from The Future Poetry and Letters of Sri Aurobindo: Third Series, the comments shed sufficient light on the basic principles of drama.

Sri Aurobindo treats the dramatic form of poetry as considerably important. Reacting to Mr. James Cousins' "rather disparaging attitude towards the dramatic form and motive", he says "it is not likely that the poetic imagination will ever give up the narrative and dramatic form of its creative impulse..."

To be really great, a dramatist, he argues, should be not just an artist but a great creator as Shakespeare was.

1. K.D. Sethna, Sri Aurobindo on Shakespeare (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1965), Publisher's Note.
2. Ibid., p. 5.
4. Ibid., p. 7.
He observes:

Racine is the complete poetic artist. But if comparisons are to be made, Shakespeare's must be pronounced to be the greater poetry, greater in the vastness of its range, in its abundant creativeness, in its dramatic height and power, in the richness of his inspiration, in his world-view, in the peaks to which he rises and the depths which he plumbs — even though he sinks to flatness which Racine would have abhorred — and generally a glory of God's making which is marvellous and unique.¹

Racine, according to him, has "his heights and depths and wideness", but he is wanting in a few desiderata. For example, "he has not in him the poetic superman, he does not touch the superhuman level of creation."²

To apply this standard of greatness to Sri Aurobindo the dramatist and give a verdict may not be all too easy. However, it can safely be said that his dramatic world is fairly vast and varied being peopled with characters of different walks of life and strata, several callings, representing various natures and dispositions and, above all, culled from almost all over the world, and all of them full-blooded and living. His heroes like Perseus, Vuthsa, Antiochus and Eric are as living as are his


villains — Polydaon, Phayllus or Almuene. As for the heroines, they form a galaxy of highly beautiful, gracious, intelligent, gentle and bold women. Andromeda, Vasavadutta, Aslaug and Anice-Aljalice all belong to this class. It is not only beauty that is the birth-mark of Sri Aurobindo's heroines. Some of his women like those in The Viziers of Bassora possess remarkable insight into men and events.

From the vast galaxy of his characters one gets the inevitable impression not only of a consummate art of characterization but of a demiurgic power of creation. This power has its manifestation even in the few dramas he has left behind.

The great poet, according to Sri Aurobindo, does not merely hold the mirror up to nature. He does much more as, in his view, Shakespeare did:

Life throws its impressions, but what seizes upon them is a greater and deeper life-power in the poet which is not satisfied with mirroring or just beautifully responding, but begins to throw up at once around them its own rich matter of being and so creates something new, more personal, intimate, fuller of an inner vision, emotion, passion of self-expression.  

In drama as he conceives it, external action is not the only important thing. Perhaps, more vital is inner action. Shakespeare's drama is cited as example. He says:

Nevertheless, his is not a drama of mere externalised action, for it lives from within and more deeply than our external life. This is not Virat, the seer and creator of gross forms, but Hiranyakarsha, the luminous mind of dreams, looking through those forms to see his own images behind them. 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 his own, and it is, in spite of its realistic elements, a romantic world in a very true sense of the word, a world of wonder and free power of life and not of 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.

A perusal of Sri Aurobindo's own plays reveals that they do not merely depict life as it is seen on the surface. The picture in them is made richer by the vision and creative imagination of the dramatist. The action in most cases has a psychological undercurrent. With poetic imagination getting free play in them, a fuller view of life rather than only a picture of external realities is projected. Sri Aurobindo's awareness of the dramatist's role as a creator rather than a mere projector of gross forms of life is reflected in his Perseus the Deliverer, a tour de force and his most representative play. However, what he says here in the prefatory note of the play is applicable not only to it but, to a great extent, to the

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other plays as well. In the Preface he says:

In this piece the ancient legend has been divested of its original character of a heroic myth; it 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.

Referring to the changes he makes in names, and to the locale which is "Syria of romance, not of history", he says in the Preface:

In a romantic work of imagination of this type these outrages on history do not matter. Time there is more than Einsteinian in its relativity, the creative imagination is its sole disposer and arranger; fantasy reigns sovereign; the names of ancient countries and peoples are brought in only as fringes of a decorative background; anachronisms romp in wherever they can get easy admittance; ideas and associations from all climes and epochs mingle; myth, romance and realism make up a single whole. For here the stage is the human mind of all times; the subject is an incident in its passage from a semi-primitive temperament surviving in a fairly advanced outward civilization to a brighter intellectual humanism...and the first promptings of the deeper and higher psychic and spiritual being which it is his ultimate destiny to become.

To encompass so much in its fold a play must necessarily have more to it than meets the eye. Sri Aurobindo's plays exemplify it.

He will not call a drama good drama unless it has a vision of life to project. Referring to the objects of drama and conditions of its greatness he says:
Dramatic poetry cannot live by the mere presentation of life and action and the passions, however truly they may be portrayed or however vigorously or abundantly. Its object is something greater and its conditions of success much more onerous. It must have, to begin with, as the fount of its creation or in its heart an interpretative vision and in that vision an explicit or implicit idea of life and the human being. 1

Sri Aurobindo as a playwright does not approve of a play oppressively external, a drama that only presents and does not interpret. In his view, an outward presentation of manners and passions and lives by vigour of action and quite outward-going speech means absolutely nothing. 2 The praise he lavishes on Shakespeare is due to the fact that of all the Elizabethan dramatists he alone practices the complex conditions of drama envisaged by Sri Aurōbindo, though even Shakespeare "seems to have divined these conditions or contained them in the shaping flame of his genius rather than perceived them by the artistic intelligence." 3

Sri Aurobindo's own greatness like that of Shakespeare lies "not in his reproduction of actual human events or men as they appear to us buttoned and cloaked in life,... but in bringing out in his characters and themes of things

2. Ibid., p. 68.
3. Idem.
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 times, but are least obvious to the moment's experience: when we do see them, life presents to us another face and becomes something deeper than its actual present mask.¹ Sri Aurobindo, unlike Shakespeare, is a dramatic artist equipped with "artistic intelligence". What Shakespeare practised intuitively is practised consciously by Sri Aurobindo in his plays. He saw to it that his plays contained all the elements he considered necessary for a drama, that is why, his plays may well be taken as illustrations of good drama of his own conception.

In addition to his artistic intelligence and insight into the art of drama, Sri Aurobindo possessed a deep knowledge of the very best dramatic traditions of the world — the classical, the English, the Indian, to name only a few. He is as familiar with Aeschylus, Euripides and Sophocles as he is with Marlowe and Shakespeare or, for that matter, with Kalidasa, Bhasa and Bhavabhuti. In his art he assimilates influences from all of them and yet he maintains his own independent personality. He

¹ Sri Aurobindo, The Future Poetry (Quoted in K.D. Sethna's Sri Aurobindo on Shakespeare, pp. 72-73).
therefore defies categorisation as a follower or a path-breaker. To trace influences on him seems an arduous and uphill task and one is reminded of what C.R. Goswami says in this regard:

The growth and development of the mind of a great thinker is an internal process and is seldom accounted for by external events of life. It is all the more true in the case of Sri Aurobindo who has dismissed his biography by saying that his life was not lived on the surface for men to see.1

As such an attempt to trace influences on Sri Aurobindo, the dramatist is bound to be tentative, and, in the opinion of Jesse Roarke, runs "the very large danger of making a fool of oneself".2

Sri Aurobindo's comments on Shakespeare, which show his deep love and sincere admiration for this poetic celebrity, are good enough hints regarding the latter's formative influences on the former. According to Sri Aurobindo, this "great and genuine dramatic poet"3 has always been for the poetic and aesthetic mind "the object of its sincere admiration and a powerful presence and influence."4 In a letter to a disciple he wrote that, apart

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4. Ibid., p. 6.
from his own poems which were unavoidably there, he had
with him in his room no books of poetry except the works
of Shakespeare. This special consideration to Shakespeare
is not without significance. His admiration for Shakespeare
results into obvious influences of the great dramatist on
him.

Sri Aurobindo adopted for his plays the Elizabethan
model of drama perfected by the genius of Shakespeare.
Accounting for this, Prema Nandkumar says:

Consciously he chose the Elizabethan model, for
the five-act structure affords the greatest scope
for the imaginative recreation of an age that is
now past. Shakespearean drama is a plastic instrument
for a creative writer who wishes to project colour,
movement of thought, dramatic contrast and distinctive
characterization as an integrated whole. 1

Like Shakespeare Sri Aurobindo wrote poetic plays and
like him again he preferred an existing story to an
invented one for his plays. There are echoes of Shakespeare
in the language of his plays. Shakespearean influence is
evident on The Witch of Ilni in which reverberations of
his plays like A Missummer Night's Dream, As You Like It,
Romeo and Juliet, Macbeth and The Tempest can be heard,
particularly where the dramatist unfolds the story of

1. Prema Nandkumar, "Perseus the Deliverer" in M.K. Naik
and S. Nokashi Punekar, eds., Perspectives on
Indian Drama in English, pp. 28-29.
Alaciel, the witch of Ilni, and the effect of her sorcery on "Elender, a sylvan poet". A good number of Aurobindonian characters seem to be modelled on characters from Shakespearean world. For example, Basil and Brigida in The Maid in the Mill are reminiscent of Benedick and Beatrice; King Philip has similarities with the exiled Duke in As You Like It. A good portion of The Viziers of Bassora which alludes to Timons of Athens seems to be similar to the play and also to Romeo and Juliet. Similarly, Caliph in The Viziers of Bassora reminds us of the Duke in Measure for Measure who plays the role of a masked Providence. Perissus in Perseus the Deliverer resembles Shakespeare's Falstaff.

Apart from Shakespeare, Sri Aurobindo seems to have been influenced also by some of the great classical Sanskrit writers. Prof. M.K. Naik, however, thinks differently in the matter. Pointing to the plight of Indian drama in English, he regrets that "the Indian English dramatist "has mostly written as if he belonged to a race which has never had any dramatic traditions worth the name, and must therefore solely ape the West"¹, though the fact is that "drama was the 'fifth Veda' for the

¹. M.K. Naik, "The Achievement of Indian Drama in English," in Perspectives on Indian Drama in English, pp. 180-93.
ancient Hindus; and Indian classical drama which flourished for ten centuries and more can safely challenge comparison with its counterparts anywhere in the world.\(^1\) He goes on to say (and this is significant in the context here) that though firmly grounded in the Indian tradition, Sri Aurobindo never seems to have attempted to draw upon the Sanskrit or folk modes, even in plays in which the setting and characters were drawn from classical times. His model was Shakespeare and not Kalidas.\(^2\) While referring to the slender output of Indian English drama due to the lack of theatre\(^3\), Prof. Naik says that one reason for the failure of an original mind like Sri Aurobindo's to evolve a new dramatic form in keeping with the Indian ethos, instead of borrowing the readymade Shakespearean one, is that his plays, due to the lack of stage-facilities in his time, were written not for being actually staged but for being simply read.\(^4\) Had there been no lack of theatre-

1. M.K. Naik, "The Achievement of Indian Drama in English", in Perspectives on Indian Drama in English, pp. 180-93.

2. Ibid., p. 188.

3. The lack of stage facilities, according to Prof. Naik, is an important factor behind the arrested growth of Indian English drama. There is an indissoluble relationship between theatre and drama. Due to the lack of this facility the Indian English dramatist has failed to subject his plays to the acid test of a living theatre. This has resulted in incalculable harm to the literary form.

4. M.K. Naik, "The Achievement of Indian Drama in English", p. 188
facility a talented dramatist like Sri Aurobindo would not have cast his plays "in the age-old Shakespearean model without pondering whether the form was still artistically viable in the modern context."¹ He also feels concerned about the fate of Sri Aurobindo as a dramatist for "no post-Shakespearean playwright who has modelled himself on Shakespeare can escape the transformation of his still small artistic voice into an echo,"² though, unfortunately, "most Indian verse drama in English is," according to him, "a vast whispering gallery of Shakespearean echoes."³ As an illustration he gives instances from Perseus the Deliverer where the mad Polydaon's ravings⁴, recall those of Lear. Again he compares Smerdas' speech 'I have eaten/And drunk of terror'⁵ with Macbeth's (cf. 'I've supped full with horrors')⁶. Then, in an implicit censure of Sri Aurobindo

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2. Ibid., p. 188.
3. Ibid., pp. 188-89.
5. Ibid., p. 90.
the dramatist, he points out:

Modelling his plays exclusively on late Victorian pastiches of Shakespearian drama, Sri Aurobindo unfortunately imposed crippling limitations on his dramatic talent, while in \textit{Savitri} he boldly experimented with age-old epic conventions. In the large whispering gallery resounding with Shakespearian echoes which his plays in the main appear to be, Sri Aurobindo's distinctive voice is scarcely heard as effectively as in the other forms. It is said that even in handling purely Indian material in \textit{Prince of Edur} and \textit{Vasavadutta}, the dramatist could not throw off the yoke of Shakespeare, with the result that his characters seem to think, speak and act less like authentic Indians than like Elizabethan personages in Indian garb.1

Here Prof. Naik seems to overlook one important fact. There is no denying that Sri Aurobindo adopts the Shakespearean model of drama. But to say that he modelled his plays on the "late Victorian pastiches of Shakespearean dramas" is far from true. Sri Aurobindo cannot be charged with giving the go-by to the Indian ethos just because he borrows the Shakespearean dramatic form. In fact, Sri Aurobindo sees considerable affinity between the ancient Sanskrit drama of writers like Kalidasa and the Elizabethan drama.2 Though said in a different context, what Sri Aurobindo says below answers the charge of

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unnecessary and false imitation of the Elizabethan drama, levelled against him by Prof. Naik:

...Kalidasa's play (Vikramorvasie) is romantic in its whole tone and he might almost be described as an Elizabethan predating by a thousand years at least the Elizabethans; indeed most of the ancient Sanskrit dramas are of this kind; though the tragic note is missing, and the general spirit resembles that of Elizabethan romantic comedy.¹

Prof. Naik, who somehow hears "persistent and loud Shakespearean echoes in character, incident, and even dialogue"² in Sri Aurobindo's plays, can find it difficult to agree to the view that Sri Aurobindo's plays recall "the spirit and flavour of the distinctive dramatic type exemplified in different ways by Bhasa, Kalidasa and Bhavabhuti — though, of course, all have Aurobindonian undertones."³

Whether the influence of Shakespeare helped or harmed Sri Aurobindo, whether his plays should be dismissed as mere "pseudo-Elizabethan drama" or commended as entirely Shakespearean, is a debatable issue. But the fact remains that the influence of Shakespeare is there. Professor Naik, however, seems to have lost sight of an important

fact that Sri Aurobindo was not only firmly grounded in the Indian tradition\(^1\), but also "attempted drawing upon"\(^2\) the classical Sanskrit model of drama. Jesse Roarke points out: "He (Sri Aurobindo) was influenced primarily and largely by the Indian classical theater (sic) and by Shakespeare..."\(^3\) Sri Aurobindo himself admits that his "aesthetic temperament and being" were "impregnated with an early cult for the work of the great builders in Sanskrit and Greek, Italian and English poetry."\(^4\) There are a number of classical Sanskrit writers, like Vyasa, Valmiki, Kalidasa, etc., whom he holds in high esteem.\(^5\) He has dwelt on them and their celebrated works and chosen to attempt English rendering of some of the works of

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2. Idem.


5. Sri Aurobindo says that Valmiki, Vyasa and Kalidasa hold supreme place among the Sanskrit writers and bear comparison with the greatest world-names—Homer, Shakespeare and Dante.


Kalidasa, parts of the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the
Bhagavad Gita, Bhartrihari's Century of Life, etc., in
addition to undertaking translation of the Upanishads
and Vedas. Therefore, it is not unlikely that the
classical Sanskrit writers too exercised on him some
influence, direct or indirect.

Personally, Sri Aurobindo does not give Prof. Naik
much reason for his complaint against the Indian English
writers about their "disastrous failure to make creative
use of the rich fund of myth which our tradition readily
affords to any modern writer." ¹ Sri Aurobindo's poetic
creations like Savitri and his plays like Vasavadutta
and Prince of Edur breathe new life into some Indian
myths and legends. When in 'Envoi' he bids farewell to
West and declares his home-coming², he is to be taken
seriously if not literally. His works stand witness to
his coming back from "Sicilian olive-groves" and
"Athenian lanes" to "regions of eternal snow/And Ganges."³

However, it is in keeping with his universal mind and
vision that he selects for his plays subjects from
different climes and ages. But twice at least he turns
to his own country's rich literary heritage while choosing

². Sri Aurobindo, Collected Poems, B.C.L. Vol.5,
³. Idem.
themes for his plays.

As for the influence of the Indian classical tradition of drama, one influence at least is very obvious. In keeping with the Indian tradition, he gave happy ending to most of his plays. Scholars wonder why, with all his poetic gift and insight, Sri Aurobindo was not able to write a tragedy. He did write a tragedy, for *Rodoqune* is one. But his plays are predominantly happy-ending plays. 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..."\(^1\) What he says below on Hindu *Drama* shows that this might have been the result of the influence of classical Sanskrit drama on him, which has demonstrated very well that, in order to be great, it is not necessary for it to be a tragedy.\(^2\) He says:

\[\text{1. Sri Aurobindo, *The Foundations of Indian Culture*, p. 304.}\]
\[\text{2. Jesse Roarke says:}\]

"...one may reflect to some purpose that if the biographical indications are trustworthy at all, he (Shakespeare) was 'tragic' only when he was sick, and not when he had recovered. And indeed tragedy and the whole celebrated 'tragic sense' is a sickness and smallness: a pull of the unregenerate and death-bound vital nature. Tragedy is a creation and a furtherance of the vital ego, that enjoys suffering, and there is nothing dignified, respect-worthy or profound about it. Napoleon is reported to have said that one can usually turn a tragedy into a comedy by sitting down; presumably he was thinking of the French *theatre*; but there is hardly a tragic situation in literature that might not have been avoided or obviated by the use of a little common intelligence.\]

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 to awaken the aesthetic sense of the onlooker and gratify it by moving and subtly observed pictures of human feeling; it did not attempt to seize man's spirit by the hair and drag it out into a storm of horror and pity and fear and return it to him drenched, beaten and shuddering. To the Hindu it would have been a 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 an Othello.  

He gives three reasons for it: first, the divine tenderness of the Hindu nature; secondly, the influence of Buddha; and finally, the principle that aesthetic and intellectual pleasure is the object of all poetic art.  

Then, he says:

The Hindu mind therefore 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 medicolegology 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 the 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. Idem.  
3. Idem.
The analysis above, though dispassionate, contains in the writer's choice of words subtle hints of his preference for the Hindu drama. His sympathies with it get reflected to some extent in his plays as well. Though they resemble the Elizabethan drama in form, in spirit they have greater affinity with the Hindu drama. As we shall see in the chapters on his plays, their stories deviate from their originals in an obvious attempt to attain greater kinship with Indian spirit by eliminating unnecessary violence and death. It is worthwhile to note here what Sri Aurobindo further says while comparing the Hindu and the Elizabethan models of drama:

It has been noticed that the Hindu drama presents many remarkable points of contact with the Elizabethan. In the mixture of prose and poetry, in the complete freedom with which time and scenery vary, in the romantic likeness of the action, in the mixture of comedy with serious matter, in the gorgeousness of the poetry and the direct appeal to the feelings, both these great literatures closely resemble each other. Yet the differences, though they do not strike us so readily as the similarities, are more vital and go deeper; for the similarities are of form, the differences of spirit. 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 unequal grasp upon life; its weakness was a crude violence, imperfection and bungling in workmanship combined with a tendency to exaggeration, horrors and monstrosities. The Hindu drama, on the contrary, was written by accomplished men of culture for an educated, often a courtly audience with an eye to an elaborate and well-understood system of poetics. 

With such a view of the Elizabethan drama, Sri Aurobindo, one would think, will be less amenable to the influence of at least its spirit than to the influence of the spirit of the Hindu drama. The view is likely to get added strength from his following observation on the two modes:

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 happiness and virtue, the Aryan was more civilized and temperate, less crudely enormous than the hard earthy African peoples whom in Europe he only half moralised. If he seeks a Pere Goriot or a Madame Bovary, he will still fail in his quest; for though such types doubtless existed at all times among the mass of the people with the large strain African blood, Hindu Art would have shrunk from poisoning the moral atmosphere of the soul by elaborate studies of depravity.

True to the Hindu tradition Sri Aurobindo scrupulously avoided creating scenes and characters that might have in any way polluted "the moral atmosphere of the soul." He represented not the cruder civilizations and more barbarous national types but the Aryan race which, according to him, was more civilized and temperate. This is one explanation for his deviation from the original story in Rodogune. In the original story Cleopatra kills her own husband and son to satisfy her lust for power and for revenge, and instigates her sons to kill

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Rodogune, their beloved. Sri Aurobindo's typical Indian temperament would not permit such crude violence, such horror and monstrosity in his play. To the sattvic turn of his temperament and imagination studies of depravity or tragic endings of plays were less congenial than were stories of human life with a closing air of peace and calm. So his Cleopatra was made more humane, and compassionate.

Sri Aurobindo combined in his temperament both tradition and contemporaneity. To him the myth and magic element in the Kathasaritsagara version of Udayan-Vasavadutta legend, therefore, did not have much appeal. As such, he trimmed off the parts of the story that were not likely to prove palatable to the modern taste. He made his Vasavadutta a much more modern play than the classical Sanskrit dramas based on the original legend. Bhasa did exercise quite an influence on Sri Aurobindo's Vasavadutta. There is an obvious affinity between Bhasa's play Pratijñānāugundharayan and Sri Aurobindo's Vasavadutta.

A distinctive feature of the plays of Sri Aurobindo is that the dramatist in them revives or recasts old themes and legends instead of inventing new stories for them. This is no cover up for Sri Aurobindo's inability to invent his own stories. It rather emanates from his belief foreshadowed in

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his fragment of a play The Maid in the Mill. Antonio, one of the characters in the fragment, while putting forth arguments in favour of the choice of an old story for a play, says that an old story facilitates a quicker and better comprehension of the play whereas a new plot hampers its appreciation:

...the swift action of the stage speeds on
And slow conception labouring after it
Roughens its subtleties, blurs o'er its shades,
Sees masses only. Then if the plot is new,
The mind engrossed with incidents, omits
To take the breath of flowers and lingering shade
In hurrying with the stream. But the plot known,
It is at leisure and may cull in running
Those delicate, scarcely-heeded strokes, which lost
Perfection's disappointed.

He reiterates the same view, but from a different angle:

Being old besides
The subject occupies creative labour
To make old new. The other's but invention,
A frail thing, though a gracious.

So he concludes:

He's creator
Who greatly handles great material,
Calls order out of the abundant deep,
Not who invents sweet shadows out of air.

Not caring much for originality in respect of plots of his plays, he borrowed them from "the abundant deep" of sources

2. Idem.
3. Idem.
like the Greek mythology, the *Kathasaritsagara*, the Arabian Nights Entertainments, etc. For him originality lay also in calling "order out of the abundant deep", in carving out from the oceanic sources well-chiselled plots and in impregnating them with new meaning and vision.

'Artistic economizing' may be considered as another reason for Sri Aurobindo's practice, like that of Shakespeare, of stealing 'bodily his plots'. Mr. K. Viswanatham points out:

On p. 180 of the *Letters*¹ Sri Aurobindo casually remarks that Shakespeare stole bodily his plots. It is said to be artistic economizing. Steal 'muthos' and reserve your powers for the poetry. If you exhaust your powers on the invention of a plot you are a spent bullet when you come to the treatment of it.... The stealing of the story does not diminish the poet's stature. The poet's excellence is revealed in what he does with the stolen property. If he converts his theft into something rich and rare his crime is venial not venal. Just as in love and war stealing is no crime in poetic creation too. What we call originality, writes Prof. Lewes, then does not consist so much in the creation of something wholly new as in this repristination (to use Browning's word) of something old (Convention and Revolt, p.64). The last word on originality is implied in Anandavardhan's

madhumasa iva drumah
Genius is like the miracle of Spring.²

A voracious reader with the advantage of being a polyglot in true sense, Sri Aurobindo had read the best in many languages and had, it seems, developed a unique familiarity with different countries and peoples, and a capacity to identify himself with whatever people he chose to write about.

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So, unregardful of climes, cultures and peoples, he moved almost through the world in search of themes for his plays. For him, who was "the image of L' Homo Universale, Sārvabhauma or Sanātana, the international cosmopolite"¹, it was only natural. In Perseus the Deliverer he went to Greece, to Bagdad and Bassora in The Viziers of Bassora, to Norway in Eric, to Britain in The House of Brut, The Birth of Sin, Acha and Esarhaddon and The Witch of Ilni, and to Spain in The Maid in the Mill. For Vasavadutta and Prince of Edur he looked home- wards. Thus in his dramatic works he covers a wide range of countries and climes, projecting in them almost as many cultures and peoples as the plays are in number. What is more, he depicts them all beautifully, with amazing ease and vividness. In fact, Sri Aurobindo is a dramatist depicting not only an age and a culture, but a rainbow variety of ages and cultures.

The underlying ideas and thoughts of an artist's work, more than anything else, take us into the deep recesses of his being, unfold the springs of an artistic endeavour and show what relevance it has to life. As such, to get inward view of the poet's personality as also to assess its real value what is essential is not to keep our eyes glued to the decorative frame or background of a work of art, but to peep into its soul; to discover the idea of life and of man that

may lie concealed in it. This is, in fact, the import
and significance of the study of themes in a writer's works.
This is precisely what the present study aims at achieving.
Apart from providing valuable insight into Sri Aurobindo's
personality and important clues to an understanding of his
genius, it will throw light on his view of the world and
life expressed through the medium of dramatic art.