Chapter II

The Viziers of Bassora

The Viziers of Bassora is Sri Aurobindo's "youthful creation" for which he is said to have had "an especial fondness". Written sometime in his early Baroda days (1893-1906) it was presumed to have been lost as a result of seizure of all papers in Sri Aurobindo's house by the police following his arrest in connection with the Alipur Bomb Incident in 1909. The fact has been mentioned in the Introduction to the Collected Poems and Plays, published in 1942. But The Viziers of Bassora along with the other trial exhibits in the Bomb case had been preserved in the Alipur Court for over four decades of the seizure. Narrowly escaping the fate of being disposed of as waste paper, it got rescued in 1951 as a result of "the alert curiosity" of Sri Jitendra Nath Ghosh Dostidar, the then Record-keeper in the Court.¹ The play was first published in Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual, 1959, and then issued in book-form in the same year.

¹ An account of the play's salvage from the Government archives has been given in the Appendix to its 1959 edition by Sri S.C. Chakraborti, Judge, Alipur. Vide The Viziers of Bassora, 1st impression (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1959), pp. 201-202.
As a student Sri Aurobindo was given to much general reading which included the classics of many languages. He had with him for many years an illustrated edition of the Arabian Nights which "he himself selected as a prize."\(^1\) Obvious as it is, his fondness for the book must have been a reason behind his selection of a story from it for The Viziers of Bassora, his first full length dramatic creation. Another factor contributing to the choice seems to have been the amazing variety and novelty in the action of the tales as a result of which their dramatisation needed not "much of imaginative manipulation."\(^2\)

Though he borrows stories for his plays readymade for what he calls 'artistic economizing', Sri Aurobindo incorporates changes in them with a view to bringing his themes into sharp focus. In the case of The Viziers of Bassora, the only changes made in the original tale are a few alterations in names and their spellings and addition of some characters to the story to add to the dramatic effect.

The creation of Fareed, son of the bad Vizier in the

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play, is intended to provide a contrast to the character of Nureddene, son of the good Vizier. He serves also the purpose of accounting for the malignity of his father which seems rather motiveless in the original tale. The sub-plot involving Doonya and Murad is another addition to the tale which helps the growth of the main plot. If Doonya acts as a secret agent of love between Nureddene and Anice-Aljalice and as the artificer of the plan to unite them, Murad helps Nureddene at very critical moment, thus furthering the cause of good in the play. The other new characters born of the dramatist's imagination are Khatoon, wife of Almuene, Balkis and Mymoona, slave-girls, and Harkoos, the Egyptian eunuch in Ibn Sawai's household.

Some of the characters of the original tale have been presented in the play in different light. Haroun al Rasheed, the Caliph, for example, is projected by Sri Aurobindo as a noble virtuous man who, as God's Vicegerent, takes on himself the role of the protector of good and destroyer of evil. Therefore, in a clear departure from the tale, he does not show Anice-Aljalice as living with the Caliph in Bagdad as his mistress, for this would not be in keeping with his fatherly image. Nureddene and Anice both misunderstand him (who is disguised as a fisherman) when the Caliph asks Nureddene to leave her with him in Bagdad
while going back to Bassora. But the Caliph means well and can truthfully assure him:

Hear me, fair youth. Thy love is sacred to me
And will be safe as in her father's house.\(^1\)

Soon afterwards when he reveals his identity as the Caliph and tells Anice that Nureddene has been sent "to be a king in Bassora", she ecstatically exclaims:

O just and mighty Caliph!\(^2\)

Alzayni in the play conspires to kill the Caliph when the latter visits Bassora after issuing orders to depose the former and elevate Nureddene to Bassora's kingship, in pursuance of his policy to punish the bad and protect the good. This is another change in the tale at the dramatist's hand.

A few other minor changes in the action of the play may be noted in passing. Unlike his counterpart in the tale, Nureddene in the play does not go to Bassora to live near the Khalifa as his pensioner but stays in Bassora as the King. Similarly, unlike in the tale, the main characters in the play do not set out to Bagdad, but the Caliph himself comes down to Bassora to settle all matters.

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   In this chapter, the play referred to in *Collected Plays*, B.C.L. Vol. 7 is *The Viziers of Bassora* unless otherwise mentioned.

2. Ibid., p. 705.
there. Then, in the tale, the good Vizier falls ill and
dies, exhorting his son to be faithful to Allah and Anis.
But Ibn Sawy, the virtuous Vizier in the play, does not
die.\footnote{1} He remains on the scene of Bassora throughout except
for a brief period of stay abroad due to a royal assignment.

Such deviations notwithstanding, Sri Aurobindo dramati-
 ses the tale almost faithfully.

\textbf{The Viziers of Bassora} depicts at least three sets of
caracters — each set containing characters diagonally
opposed in nature and disposition. These are the wild
youths (Nureddene and Fareed), the old Viziers (Ibn Sawy
and Almuene) and the rulers (Caliph Haroun and King
Alzayni). If Nureddene, Ibn Sawy and the Caliph represent
virtue, Fareed, Almuene and the King are representatives
of vice. The inevitable struggle that goes on for quite
some time between the bright and dark natures appears to
darken the atmosphere of the play only temporarily, for
ultimately the forces of good are victorious over the forces
of evil and the play ends with glad sunlight. Apparently,

\footnote{1}{This may be considered as an instance of the influence
of the Hindu drama on Sri Aurobindo. The Hindu drama,
as he says, shrank from violence, horror and physical
tragedy, "the Elizabethan stock-in-trade", as also
from unnecessary disease, death, etc.}

\textbf{See} Sri Aurobindo, \textit{The Harmony of Virtue}, B.C.L.
\textit{Vol.3} (Pondicherry : Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1972),
p.302.
therefore, the play is a depiction of the conflict of good and evil in which victory falls to good. This no doubt is the one way in which the play can be and has been interpreted. But it is possible to interpret the play's action in other ways and discover in it other purposes. Prof. K.R.S. Iyengar, however, holds a different opinion in the matter. He says:

For the rest, it is not necessary to discover in the play any deep "purpose", except that youth, beauty, love, charity, poetry, wit, humour are among the great blessings of life, and to foster them — not misuse them — is the way of wisdom... The story of the two Viziers, Ibn Sawy and Almuene, and of their sons, Nureddene and Fareed, can almost be read as a Morality Play; but no! the poetry of the play and the comic spirit that presides over it will permit no such critical excrescence.1

The caution against being too expectant about a deep "purpose" in the play is clear and is of course not wholly unwarranted. But the following statement of Sri Aurobindo regarding purpose in a drama may be of interest here. He says:

Dramatic poetry cannot live by mere presentation of life and action and passions, however truly they may be portrayed or however vigorously and

abundantly. It must have ...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

A subtle indication that drama should have something to point to, has been ingrained in *The Viziers of Bassora* itself:

Plays oft have serious fruit,
'Tis seen; then why not this? 2

If in spite of this, Sri Aurobindo's plays do not have a serious import, it is a serious lapse on his part and should be regarded as a gap between his own dramatic theory and its practice in his plays. In view of what Sri Aurobindo says about purpose in drama and even otherwise, if the readers look for "serious fruit" or some meaning in his plays, they will not be altogether unjustified.

The story of the conflict of bright and dark natures in *The Viziers of Bassora* cannot, of course, be read as a Morality Play. Morality Play deals with ethical problems in which the chief conflict is between good and

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evil. From the viewpoint of the clash of good and evil, the play may be regarded as morality play because in it the conflict has been presented with considerable sharpness. But the conflict here is not intended to highlight its ethical connotations so much as the outcome of the conflict and its significance. Sri Aurobindo writes this play without having any moral axe to grind. He writes it to give a religious message: the message of faith. It is this message that is contained in the numerous serious meaning passages in the play. Without which it will become "a funny romantic comedy glistening with a Shakespearean abandon of world-power."

The play abounds in love, song and laughter due to which it may be considered as a brilliant Romantic comedy, but still it is a Romantic comedy of the Aurobindonian type where some liberty seems to have been taken with the tradition regarding purpose of such a play. Even as a Romantic comedy, it is not confined to "a love affair that involves a beautiful and idealised heroine", in which the course of love "does not run smooth, but


overcomes all difficulties to end in a happy union.\textsuperscript{1}
It is "full of youthful exuberance and gaiety\textsuperscript{2}, has 
plenty of humour and song, but something in addition to 
that, and something more important. In a beautiful 
summing up of the play Jesse Roarke says:

\begin{quote}
Set in Bassora and Bagdad, it portrays the conflict 
of good and evil in various contexts, manners and 
degrees. There is malignity, and there is good-
hearted indulgent weakness, there is deformity and 
scheming and corruption, and there is high-mindedness 
and uprightness and faith in Allah, in his justice 
and in the wisdom of the acceptance of fate: a blind, 
conventional acceptance, and something more living 
and profound... There is evil in the play, and 
darkness: but all expressed in bright words: and 
in a way that we cannot really believe in it, as a 
positive and dangerous force: God reigns, and his 
vicegerent is at work: all is eventually set right 
with the coming forward of the Caliph who is wandering 
and circulating in disguise, "the good Haroun al 
Rasheed.\textsuperscript{3}
\end{quote}

Thus, even in a comic play Sri Aurobindo weaves a 
purpose which, perhaps, is not serious enough to be 
called "deep" but is a "purpose" all the same. He certainly 
does not believe like Ogier or Molière that dramatic 
poetry has for its purpose pleasure and amusement alone.\textsuperscript{4}

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2. Jesse Roarke, \textit{Sri Aurobindo} (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo 
4. A. Nicoll, \textit{The Theory of Drama} (Delhi: Doaba House, 
\end{flushleft}
"If a poet has as high a soul as Sophocles, his influence will always be moral, let him do what he will", said Goethe, thus pointing to the real truth about purpose in drama. This applies to Sri Aurobindo and his works also and it explains why even in a play like *The Viziers of Bassora*, predominantly a play of youth, beauty, song and laughter, a religious truth is embedded. The truth cannot simply escape our notice unless, of course, we, for some reason, choose to ignore the deep meaning passages scattered all over the play.

These passages in the play are the ones that express a faith least expected of an accomplished westerner like Sri Aurobindo who had had, while in England, his "period of agnostic denials." In England he had received an entirely western education without coming in contact with the Indian or Oriental culture. But once in India, he did his best,


3. Dr. Krishnadhan Ghose, who had come back from England completely anglicized, "did not intend his sons...to be in the least contaminated by the "smoky and retrograde" mysticism in which his country was running to waste."

particularly during the Baroda period (1893–1906), to make up the deficiency. He learned half a dozen Indian languages including Sanskrit, acquainted himself with the Indian civilization and culture and its heritage, and assimilated the ethos and spirit of the land to which he had returned after fourteen years of exile as it were. His poems, an index of his mind and heart, were no more "alien and aesthetic, with many echoes from the western classics", for he was bidding farewell to the West now and fondly looking homewards¹:

For in Sicilian olive-groves no more
Or seldom must my footprints be seen,
Nor tread Athenian lanes, nor yet explore
Parnassus or thy voiceful shores, O Hippocrene.

Me from her lotus heaven Saraswati
Has called to regions of eternal snow
And Ganges pacing to the southern sea,
Ganges upon whose shores the flowers of Eden blow.²

He was no more an agnostic he had once been in Europe and "the attitude of doubt and disbelief, which was for so long fashionable in Europe",³ could not survive his reunion with his country, but melted away at the very first touch of her soil.

3. Dilip K. Roy, Among the Great, p. 237
He had a spiritual experience the moment he "set foot on the Indian soil on the Apollo Bunder in Bombay" in 1893. Such experiences as well as a "culture shock" as it were which he received when he came to India "transformed his viewpoint totally." He was now a believer to the core, with an unshakable faith in the Supreme Existence, Infinite, Omnipotent and Immanent. A glimpse of this faith can be had in his early poems like 'The Vedantin's Prayer', 'God', 'Revelation', etc.

Like these early poems, The Viziers of Bassora also offers glimpses of Sri Aurobindo's faith. As Dilip Kumar Roy points out, Science today has driven faith to the wall. But "the sages and saints, seers and prophets, do still align themselves with minstrels of faith, demonstrating with their radiant lives that we walk with God not guided by the rushlights of reason but by the starshine of faith." If the denial of the materialist has not finally prevailed, it is because of the "Godrapt illuminates" like Sri Aurobindo who exude through their life and work a unique certitude about His existence and supremacy. The Viziers of Bassora is one such work of Sri Aurobindo, the minstrel of faith and love.

The faith which is reiterated through the bulk of his literary works is faith in God, faith in man, in life and laws of the universe that must inevitably lead man to divinity, his ultimate goal and destiny. It is faith in the essential nobility of man, and in the ultimate victory of good over evil. It is this faith in its various shades that echoes through the entire work of Sri Aurobindo.

*The Viziers of Bassora* typifies and celebrates the Islamic ideal of submission to the will of God. 1 The faith of Ibn Sawy in God's justice is so deep and unshakable that he resigns to the inevitable even in the face of gravest dangers and worst calamities in life. It is due to his absolute surrender to God's will that he asks his own son to bow to the Will of God even when the latter is going to be executed for no fault:

Bow to the will of God, my son; if thou Must perish on a false and hateful charge, A crime in thee impossible, believe It is His justice still. 2

He derives his strength to face life's difficulties with enviable equanimity from nothing but his faith in the Supreme Power, All-Powerful, All-Merciful and All-Loving. When he comes

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back to his shattered world in Bassora after long absence, he is doubtless grieved, but not shaken in his faith:

God, Thou art mighty and Thy will is just.
King Mahomed Alzayni, I have come
To a changed world in which I am not needed.
I bid farewell.1

His entire family is subjected to persecution and to the worst kind of injustice. But Ibn Sawy does not squirm or waver. The reason is that virtue gets an invincible power from absolute faith in God and complete surrender to His Justice and Will. This is the truth Sri Aurobindo seeks to highlight in The Viziers of Bassora.

In the play he pleads the case of virtue as against that of vice by presenting in it contrasting characters like Ibn Sawy and Almuene, Nureddene and Fareed, King Alzayni and the Caliph, and by showing that the dark natures are crushed under the weight of their black deeds whereas the bright natures, after temporary set backs, trials and tribulations, ride the crest to land in a world of peace and sunshine. A brief survey of characters in these opposite sets may be instructive in the context, particularly if we also look at the proceeds of their respective actions and natures. But, whereas the miseries

and failures in lives of noble characters should be seen as the fire purifying their personality, as the test of their faith in virtue, or as its price, the miseries befalling the ignoble characters must be viewed as the penalty for their vice.

The sets of opposite characters in the play, says Mr. Seetaraman, comprise "radically opposite temperaments with basically different orientations of the energies of life."¹ If one character stands for the type made in God's image and growing more and more in that image of Love, Light and Grace, the other is its exact opposite, "a brutish amalgam of gorilla and Barbery ape."²

The first contrasted pair is that of Ibn Sawy and Almuene, Viziers of the King of Bassora. Ibn Sawy, even though he may not be regarded as a white or thoroughly virtuous character, commands great respect among people as the good Vizier. "He has the serenity and brightness of a nature that never willingly did hurt to any man or living thing."³ His gentle speech, noble dealings, kindness, unassuming nature and unobtrusive manners —

¹ M.V. Seetaraman, Studies in Sri Aurobindo's Dramatic Poems, p. 17.
² Idem.
³ Sri Aurobindo, Collected Plays, B.C.L. Vol. 7, p. 564.
all issue from the Islamic culture he has assimilated in his being along with an abiding faith in God. It is his faith in God, as has been pointed out earlier, which is the source of all his strength he evinces when faced with dangers and difficulties. The faith pays and his ruined world rises from the debris as it were to become a happier and better world, all due to God's mercy.

Ibn Sawy's goodness is not of the stoical, austere, puritan kind which is good because it is one's duty or mandate from above to be good and kind. It is the spontaneous expression of a noble soul and good heart.  

This is illustrated by his behaviour towards the slave-girt, the merchants in the slave-market, his family members and his kind and forgiving gesture towards Khatoon, the wife of his arch-enemy.

Almuene's arrogance, his dark and dangerous mind, his malice, jealousy, revengefulness and tyrannical manners, beget him only hatred, causing him to be called a Satan or Iblis out of hell. Even his wife is not happy with him and she makes no secret of her aversion for the man.

When Almuene, in an angry mood says:

I had been happier bedded with a slave, Whom I could beat to sense when she was froward.

she sharply reacts:

Oh, you'd have done no less by me, I know,
Although my rank's as far above your birth
As some white star in heaven o'erpeers the much
Of foulest stables, had I not great kin
And swords in the background to avenge me.  

Sunjar, the Chamberlain of the Palace, describes him as even worse:

There goest thou, Almuene, the son of Khakan,
Dog's son, dog's father, and thyself a dog,
Thy birth was where thy end shall be, a dunghill.  

This is paying Almuene back in his own coins, for from his mouth ever showers rain of invectives. When Nureddene withdraws Anice from sale to prevent her falling into the wicked Vizier's clutches, Almuene bursts with anger and what he utters is only part of the filth his tongue is capable of:

This is a trick to cheat the law. Thou ruffian!
Cheap profligate! What hast thou left to sell
But thy own sensual filth and drunken body,—
If any out of charity would spend
Some dirhams to reform thee with a scourge?
Vile son of a bland hypocrite!  

He has his own interesting set of values and a shocking view of education, expressed in his long speech (in Act II, ii, 573). The rhetoric here is grand indeed! But not so the views.

2. Ibid., p.569.
3. Ibid., p.662.
For him man is a creature born to live for his body and in his body. Nature's plans, according to him, are at loggerheads with the moral and ethical design of the Universe conceived by sages and saints:

I do not value at a brazen coin
The man who has no vices in his blood,
Never took toll of women's lips in youth
Nor warmed his nights with wine. Your moralists Teach one thing, Nature quite another; which of these Is likely to be right? Yes, cultivate,
But on the plan that she has mapped. Give way;
Give way to the inspired blood of youth
And you shall have a man, no scrupulous fool,
No ethical malingerer in the fray;
A man to lord it over other men,
Soldier of Vizier or adventurous merchant,
The breed of Samson. Man with such youth your armies.

... ... ... ... ... ... ... ...
Yes, Nature is your grand imperialist,
No moral sermonizer. Rude, hardy stocks
Transplant themselves, expand, outlast the storms.
And heat and cold, not slips too gently nurtured
Or lapped in hothouse warmth. Who conquered earth
For Islam? Arabs trained in robbery,
Heroes, robust in body and desire.
I'll get this slave-girl for Fareed to help
His education on. Be lusty, son,
And breed me grandsons like you for my stock.

Almuene's views are not allowed to prevail in the play, for victory does not fall here to those bred along "the lusty pattern" of Nature, but to those whom he would condemn as "scrupulous fool" or as "ethical malingerer". His views attract severest censure from his own wife who

represents forces of good that must resist Almuene's attempts to promote evil. In what may be considered as a very forcible rebuttal and a strong condemnation of such attempts of her husband, Khatoon speaks to him thus in a fit of intense grief when her son, Fareed, dies at the hands of Murad:

Vizier,
Thou slew'st Fareed. My gracious, laughing babe,
Who clung about me with his little hands
And sucked my breasts! Him you have murdered, Vizier,
Both soul and body, I will go and pray
For vengeance on thee for my slaughtered child.¹

Almuene's defeat is, in fact, the defeat of the forces inspiring and encouraging the devil in man and thus trying to deface "God's great stamp/And heavenly image"² on man's mint. If characters like Ibn Sawy kindle faith in virtue and in God, Almuenes generate hatred for virtue and disbelief in God and His world. Hence the defeat of these dark forces in the play of Sri Aurobindo, the minstrel of faith.

Nureddene, the wild handsome roister, is Ibn Sawy's son who "repeats the father/But with a dash of quicker, wilder blood."³ His pastime seems to be hawking, chasing

². Ibid., p.569.
³. Ibid., p.579.
girls and tasting different wines. Sarcastically Doonya refers to these vices when she says that "these are sciences./And should be learned by sober masculine graduates."¹ Nureddene justifies his wildness of youth on the ground that he thus learns of manners and of men which is essential to fit himself later in life. His indulgent father too takes these as "the first wild stirrings/Of a bold generous nature,"² believing that when time comes Nureddene will outgrow his wildness and impetuositie:s:

The blood is good
And in the end will bear him through. There's hope.³

He is rightly described by Doonya as the "Caliph of Faeryland", for he is a romantic young man who dreams of living as a noble chivalrous knight with boundless wealth :

My wealth shall be so great that I can spend
Millions each day nor feel the want. I'll give
Till there shall be no poor in all my realms,
Nor any grieved; for I shall every night,
Like Haroun al Rasheed, the mighty Caliph,
Wander disguised with Jaafar and Mesrour
Redressing wrongs, repressing Almuenes,
And set up noble men like my dear father
In lofty places, giving priceless boons,
An unseen Providence to all mankind.⁴

2. Ibid., p.567.
3. Ibid., p.579.
4. Ibid., p.599.
Thus says Nureddene who obviously has goodness inherent in him. But, for a time at least, he is wild. Due to his "grand profligacy" he is reduced to a pauper by his own friends rightly described as blood suckers and thieves. But essentially noble as he is, he does not blame them for his bankruptcy and forgives even Ajebe who conspires to ruin him at Almuene's instance.

A significant thing about Nureddene is his faith in man's essential goodness. Refusing to judge harshly his friends who desert him in his bad days, he says to Ajebe:

\[
\text{Man}
\]
\[
\text{Is not ignoble, but has angel soarings,}
\text{Howe'er the nether devil plucks him down.}
\text{Still we have souls nor is the mould quite broken}
\text{Of that original and faultless plan}
\text{Which Adam spoilt.}
\]

Here it seems that Sri Aurobindo himself is speaking through Nureddene, affirming faith in man's essential nobility. There may or may not be a hell lurking within us all; but there is a godhead lurking in man's soul, a divinity that sits in him. Man is not only God's creation, he is also divine. Hence Nureddene believes about men:

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\text{God made them; what He made, is doubtless good.}
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2. \textit{Ibid.}, p. 646.
The inherent goodness of Nureddene gets full flowering after the experience of love. It "brings about a progressive chastening of his temperament and releases the noble virtues and gives them their full play." With admirable candour he admits to Anice how he has erred so far, and seems to resolve firmly not to wander any more. His subsequent behaviour shows that he has gained considerably in strength of character and is able to prove his mettle. His development from an "errant gadabout", "a vagabond scapegrace" and a wanton youth into a sober matured nature is largely as a result of love, the alchemist that can turn dross into gold.

During the long absence of his father from Bassora, Nureddene has to face great difficulties due to villainous designs of Almuene who singles out him as his target of torture and tyranny. But, ultimately, the devil has to pay for the injustice, and Nureddene gets his due. He comes alive from the gallows to ascend the throne of Bassora and Almuene is sentenced to death instead. This reinforces faith in virtue. Then, it is in keeping with God's laws to punish the bad and protect the good from danger and difficulty.

Precisely the same purpose is served by showing characters like Fareed getting their deserved punishment. Fareed is like Almuene "as the young baboon is to the adult ape"\(^1\), "a misformed urchin full of budding evil."\(^2\) He has been spoilt by his over-indulgent father. Reckless, rude and wild, he is devoid of the touch of humanness. Khatoon, his mother, is justified in complaining to her husband:

You have indulged the boy till he has lost
The likeness even of manhood. God's great stamp
And heavenly image on his mint's defaced,
Rubbed out, and only the brute metal left
Which never shall find currency again
Among his angels.\(^3\)

This Caliban-like creature hankers after money, curses and plans the murder of his own parents. With his strange ideas about education Almuene only raises up the hell that lurks within his son when he urges him on to wickedness and villainy in the name of not killing the natural man but only cultivating on the plan that Nature has mapped.

Fareed and Nureddene's are contrasting characters — each throwing the other in bold relief. The tragic end of

2. Ibid., p. 566.
3. Ibid., p. 569.
Fareed is well-contrasted with Nureddene's prosperity though it is attained after considerable travail and trauma, the usual price of virtue. The message through the contrasting fates of the two opposite characters is very clear. The dramatist seems to suggest that the "scrupulous" is not a "fool" nor is it any coveted virtue to "take toll of women's lips in youth and warm one's nights with wine."\(^1\) Howsoever, strongly Almuenes might wish their Fareeds to breed them grandsons like them, there is a Justice that must prevent such perpetuation of evil — "rude hardy stocks" of which Almuene and Fareed serve as samples. We must have faith in the Justice and be warned by what Nureddene says:

We sin our pleasant sins and then refrain
And think that God's deceived. He waits His time
And when we walk the clean and polished road
He trips us with the mire our shoes yet keep,
The pleasant mud we walked before.\(^2\)

So, by depicting such diametrically opposite temperaments with basically opposed orientations of energies of life and then showing their respective fates, Sri Aurobindo with his Messianic power here develops the theme to affirm faith in virtue and in man's essential

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goodness. As usual, he shows that in the clash of good and bad, good inevitably emerges victorious. In fact, God Himself sees to it that dark forces are defeated and virtue is restored its position of triumph and eternal glory. He has His "Vicegerents" on the earth like Caliph Haroun al Rasheed precisely for the purpose, Sri Aurobindo seems to plead. There are demi-gods like Perseus who descend on the earth to fulfil His purpose. The Caliph is the unseen Providence ensuring punishment of the wicked and promotion of love and goodness in the world. After crowning Nureddene the King of Bassora, the Caliph has the satisfaction of having performed the role assigned to him:

This is the thing that does my heart most good
To watch these kind and happy looks and know
Myself for the cause. Therefore, I sit enthroned,
Allah's Vicegerent, to put down all evil
And pluck the virtuous out of danger's hand.

1. Children of Intellect and Reason like Yougundharayana in Vasavadutta may lose trust in virtue and may not approve of gestures of nobility shown by champions of heart like Vuthsa, the King:

O, such nobility in godlike times
Was wisdom, but not to our fall belongs.
Sweet virtue now is mother of defeat
And baser, fiercer souls inherit earth.

Collected Plays, B.C.L. Vol. 6, p. 225.

This is proved false in Vasavadutta as much as in The Viziers of Bassora. This affirms the playwright's faith in virtue.

The Viziers of Bassora, though a Romantic comedy, thematically has religious overtones. It comprises colourful strands along with the grey and dark ones giving an overall impression that "life is grave and earnest under its smiles." But it does not suggest that happiness is but an occasional episode in a general drama of pain.

Sri Aurobindo views the world differently. Unlike a pessimist, he does not believe in the Blind Force nor that

1. A significant difference between Sri Aurobindo's The Viziers of Bassora and the comedies of Shakespeare is that the former is characterised by a religious atmosphere which is conspicuous by its absence in the latter. Mr. Seetaraman in this regard says:

His (Shakespeare's) plays are characterised by the absence of religion. They have more of the Renaissance humanism and zest for life. But The Viziers presents in bold relief characters with a well-defined mental love for God and acceptance of His Will. They could say in the great crises of their lives the great words of Dante: In His Will is our peace (not indeed as a spiritual or mystical realisation but certainly as a positive act of religious, mental faith). And in this respect, the play is in the Dantesque medieval spirit. Dante saw the formula for comedy—a tale of trouble that turned into joy—as the pattern or picture of ultimate reality. This romantic comedy is the declaration of the soul of the creative artist of faith in the supreme Architect of life and his master plan of ultimate victory and triumph over Matter.

M.V. Seetaraman, Studies in Sri Aurobindo's Dramatic poems, p. 25.

God is unjust, arbitrary, callous, tyrannical and malevolent. On the contrary, the theme of faith in the play shows Sri Aurobindo's belief that the world is governed by God who is All-Powerful, All-Knowing, All-Merciful, All-Loving. He has firm belief that man's future is secure and there is every hope for humanity for a happy and bright future.

Sri Aurobindo is not particularly disturbed by the manifestations of Evil in the world. Pain and evil is in his opinion not so real as it appears to be. He says:

For this world appears to us rather as a world of suffering than as a world of the delight of existence. Certainly, that view of the world is an exaggeration, an error of perspective. If we regard it dispassionately and with a sole view to accurate and unemotional appreciation, we shall find that the sum of the pleasure of existence far exceeds the sum of the pain of existence,—and that active or passive, surface or underlying pleasure of existence is the normal state of nature, pain a contrary occurrence temporarily suspending or overlaying that state. But for that very reason the lesser sum of pain affects us more intensely and often looms larger than the greater sum of pleasure; precisely because the latter is normal, we do not treasure it, hardly even observe it unless it intensifies into some acuter form of itself, into a wave of happiness, a crest of joy or ecstasy.1

According to him, "the universal and overpowering instinct of self-preservation" is because of "the normal satisfaction of existence."2

2. Idem.
The theme in *The Viziers of Bassora* anticipates Sri Aurobindo's philosophical work *The Life Divine*. Through its plot, characterisation and the entire setting, the play unfolds the theme of faith. The exhortation of the Caliph, with which the play closes, summarises in a good measure the philosophy of life it is intended to project:

Fair children worthy of each other's love
And beauty, till the Sunderer comes who parts
All wedded hands, take your delights on earth,
And afterwards in heaven. Meanwhile remember
That life is grave and earnest under its smiles,
And we too with a wary gaiety
Should walk its roads, praying that if we stumble,
The All-Merciful may bear our footing up
In His strong hand, showing the Father's face
And not the stern and dreadful Judge. Farewell.

Sri Aurobindo here suggests that cheers and tears are the warp and woof of man's life. To be able to overcome the difficulties and sorrows punctuating his life, man must plead for God's fatherly love and kindness, for these, rather than justice, can bring him peace and harmony.

1. In *The Life Divine* Sri Aurobindo discusses at length the twin problems of pain and evil, poses the questions from the various angles of atheists or agnostics and answers all the agnostic denials. After the doubts have been cleared, he affirms faith.

Vide Sri Aurobindo's *The Life Divine*, B.C.L. Vol.18, Chaps. XI, XVI.

The play has another theme, that is, of love, though a minor one. Love is presented by Sri Aurobindo, in his play after play, as a benevolent force which destroys evil and conflict and paves the way for harmony and peace. _Vasavadutta, Prince of Edur, Eric, The Viziers of Bassora_, etc., can be cited as specific cases in point. In _The Viziers of Bassora_ Anice-Aljalice, like the other women in the play, contributes to harmony, sweetness and light to life around her through the radiation of love. The queen among all female characters there, she is "a nonpareil" in beauty, wit and all other accomplishments. A glance at her and Nureddene, the handsome wanton youth falls in love with her. More than her matchless beauty, what characterises Anice truly is sweetness of her temper. She is really a "sweet friend" as her name suggests. Doonya rightly says:

Anice,
There is a sea of laughter in your body;
I find it billowing there beneath the calm
And rippling sweetly out in smiles.1.

Her beauty, sweetness and other virtues exercise on Nureddene a chastening influence. She does not want to be a "kill-joy" frowning at his bright merry world when Nureddene leads a life of grand profligacy. But the tale

she tells him proves quite effective, eliciting and almost immediate promise from him:

Tomorrow I will stop this empty life,
Cut down expense and only live for you.¹

Sri Aurobindo sets out the all-conquering influence of love through the conversion of Nureddene. Significantly, Nureddene is perhaps in the play, with possible exceptions of Murad and Ajebe, who is shown undergoing changes with the development of the theme of love. All other characters are flat. In their cases, no change of heart or of purpose is noticeable. The conflict is there in their cases too; but it is not of the kind that leads to change and progress. In this play the theme of evolution is conspicuously missing. One possible explanation of the fact may be that it is the first complete play of Sri Aurobindo written when he was not very conscious of the idea of evolution as he gradually became. In other plays conflict leads to transformation of character, suggesting evolution, in Sri Aurobindo's terminology. Here Sri Aurobindo is preoccupied with the theme of victory of good over evil. The victory, according to him, involves a conflict, and is made possible due to the strength virtuous men derive from

¹ Sri Aurobindo, Collected Plays, B.C.L. Vol. 7, p. 641.
their faith in God as also due to God's own intervention at the right hour through His Deputies or Vicegerents.

Anice-Aljalice's character assumes great significance also in view of her songs in the play. These songs have a profound significance as they are closely related to the inner meaning of the play. As Mr. Seetaraman points out: "The interpretative vision in a Romantic comedy reveals itself in and through love, laughter and song which are its warp and woof."¹ This is very true of The Viziers of Bassora. The songs here reflect the theme of the play and underline its interpretative vision. Apart from their "romantic ardour", they are to be valued also as the mirror of the playwright's views on "Love, Life and God."²

One of the songs of Anice is about love - its power to ennoble man, to make him grow in God's image. Such love however should rise above the pure physical level. It should be a "holy earth-defeating passion."³ Anice sings:

King of my heart, wilt thou adore me,  
Call me goddess, call me thine?  
I too will bow myself before thee  
As in a shrine,

¹ M.V. Seetaraman, Studies in Sri Aurobindo's Dramatic Poems, p. 16.  
² Ibid., p. 29.  
³ Sri Aurobindo, Collected Plays, B.C.L. Vol. 7, p. 690.
Till we with mutual adoration
And holy earth-defeating passion
Do really grow divine.

True love helps man transcend his ego and teaches him surrender and self-sacrifice which eventually lead to self-knowledge. Self-knowledge being the knowledge of his true divine self, he is led to divinity. Nureddene, Ajebe and Murad, the three lovers in *The Viziers of Bassora*, are better human beings than Almuene, Fareed and Alzayni because the formers dissolve to some extent their egos in their vital love for their beloveds — Anice, Balkis and Doonya, whereas the latters are centred in their ego. The nobility of Ibn Sawy and the Caliph may again be ascribed to love, though of a different kind — it is the love of God.

There is another song which highlights a fact interwoven in the story of the play. Good triumphs over evil, but only after a fierce struggle resulting into a lot of pain and suffering. Pain and suffering however are preconditions and price of man's growth in the divine image. So, from the fire of suffering alone one emerges pure gold of a man. Anice Sings:

Heart of mine, O heart impatient,
Thou must learn to wait and weep.

Wherefore wouldst thou go on beating
When I bade thee hush and sleep?
Thou who wert of life so fain,
Didst thou know not, life was pain?

The way to peace in life is an attitude of "patient resignation" to God's Will, immense unshakable faith in His Justice and Mercy. These give man strength and courage to meet any challenges, even from the mightiest potentates in the world:

The Emperor of Roum is great;
The Caliph has a mighty State;
But One is greater, to Whom all prayers take wing;
And I, a poor and weeping slave,
When the world rises from its grave,
Shall stand up the accuser of my King.

2. Ibid., p. 721.