Chapter IV

Rrodogune

Rrodogune is the only tragic play written by Sri Aurobindo. In Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library Vol. 6, the Bibliographical Note runs thus:

Rrodogune belongs to the end of the Baroda period. It is dated February 1906, just before Sri Aurobindo left Baroda for Bengal. It was first published in Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual, 1958, and also issued in book-form in the same year.

An identical Note was appended to the play when it was first published in book form in 1958:

Rrodogune was written by Sri Aurobindo in Baroda. It is dated February 1906, just before he left Baroda for Bengal. It was first published in Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual, 1958, and also issued in book-form in the same year.

But Dr. Prema Nandkumar says that "Rrodogune, along with Vasavadutta and Eric, belongs to Sri Aurobindo's Pondicherry Period" though she does not give any reason for her divergent opinion about the date and the place of the composition of the play. As Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library Volume 6 as well as the first edition of the play unequivocally give 1906


as the date and Baroda as the place of the composition of Rodogune, there seems little justification, particularly in the absence of any evidence to the contrary, for doubt regarding the information.

In Rodogune Sri Aurobindo makes no exception to his general practice according to which he prefers an existing theme to an invented one. For Syria Sri Aurobindo seems to harbour extra love. Perseus the Deliverer is about Syria, though the myth is Greek. Rodogune too is about the same country — this time the Syria not of romance (as in the case of Perseus the Deliverer), but the Syria of history.

To write about the historical Syria Sri Aurobindo goes to its history and finds in the pages of Appian's accounts of the wars of Syria (The Syrian Wars) a theme that catches his imagination as a fit one for his play. It is Cleopatra, the famous queen of Syria. The story of Cleopatra, which has been given in sections 66, 67, 68 of The Syrian Wars, must have been read in the original by Sri Aurobindo for whom Greek was almost a mother tongue. It was reasonable conjecture that Sri Aurobindo borrowed the story of Cleopatra from the book of Appian, a Roman lawyer. Sri Aurobindo, of course, made many changes in it to make the story suit his imagination and purpose.

The Cleopatra of Appian's history is not the same as the Cleopatra of Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra, nor is she the Cleopatra of Dryden's All For Love, as Dr. A.K. Sinha seems to
believe.¹ The belief is not borne out by the accounts of Cleopatra available in the Encyclopaedia Britannica.² The heroine of Antony and Cleopatra or All For Love seems to be Cleopatra VII Philator (69-30 B.C.), the daughter of Ptolemy XII Auletes, who was personally attached to, and exercised considerable influence over, two of the chief Roman statesmen of her time, Julius Caesar and Mark Antony. She was "by far the most famous bearer of the name"³ (Cleopatra) which was "the name of several queens and princesses of the Ptolemy dynasty."⁴ Appian's Cleopatra who was the queen of Demetrius Nicanore, King of Syria (162 B.C.), must have evidently been born earlier and hence a different person as her story suggests.

In the opinion of Dr. Prema Nandkumar⁵, Sri Aurobindo took some hints for the story of his play from other accounts of Cleopatra's story also. She mentions in this connection the name of Justin in whose account of the universal history of Trojas Pompeius in Latin there is "a parallel situation to Cleopatra's predicament of naming her eldest son."⁶ Similarly,

¹ "Many plays, notable among them being Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra and Dryden's All For Love, have been written on her (Cleopatra's) love-life. But Sri Aurobindo's play is about her life as the queen mother." A.K. Sinha, The Dramatic Art of Sri Aurobindo (New Delhi: S. Chand & Co., 1979), p. 120.

² Encyclopaedia Britannica, Vols. V, 902, and XVIII, 811.
³ Ibid., Vol. V, 902.
⁴ Idem.
⁵ For information on the possible narrative sources of Sri Aurobindo's Rodogune, I acknowledge my indebtedness to Dr. Prema Nandkumar's article "Rodogune: A Study", in Sri Aurobindo Circle, No. 22 (1966).
⁶ Dr. Prema Nandkumar, "Rodogune: A Study", p. 41.
she mentions Flavius Josephus' *Early History of Jews* and *History of Jewish War* and the accounts of the Seleucids in the Maccabees.

Apart from these narrative sources, Sri Aurobindo seems indebted considerably to Corneille, the great French dramatist. His *Rodogune* written in 1645 "shows the steps whereby ambition brings Cleopatre to crime. She poisons all rival claimants to power and finally herself..."¹ Like Corneille, who borrowed only the outer frame of his plot from Appian, Sri Aurobindo is indebted to Appian only for the body of the story. The changes he makes in the story, under the influence of Corneille, bring him closer to the French dramatist than he is to Appian. From a comparison of the story of Sri Aurobindo's *Rodogune* with that of Corneille's *Rodogune*, it seems that though Sri Aurobindo has borrowed the outline of the story from the historical sources of Appian, Justin and Josephus, etc., but for many details in the play his indebtedness to Corneille is irrefutable.

While drawing upon historical sources Sri Aurobindo makes history pass through his own imagination. As a result, historical facts get transformed into a new creation. In the case of his *Rodogune* he borrows and retains quite a few things from the history of Appian, Justin and Josephus. But things on the

whole have undergone great change in the day. The changes seem to have been necessitated largely by the fact that the historical material, Sri Aurobindo had before him, did not fit in his imaginative scheme and, in its existing form, it was incapable of embodying his vision.

Cleopatra, Nicanor and Rodogune have been shown in Sri Aurobindo in the frame of different relationships than in Appian. In Appian, Demetrius Nicanor, Cleopatra's first husband and the King of Syria, is made a captive in Parthia and is married to Rhodogune(sic), the Parthian princess. As a result, Cleopatra grows jealous of Rhodogune and hates Nicanor whom she kills after his return to Syria. Cleopatra's marriage with Antiochus, the younger brother of Nicanor, is a reaction to the latter's marriage with Rhodogune. In Sri Aurobindo things are much different. Nicanor is not married to Rodogune who, unlike in history, is not king Phraates' sister, but his daughter. So the question of Cleopatra's jealousy towards her does not arise. Nicanor is not killed after his return to Syria by the craft of Cleopatra, but "dies miserably/ A captive..."1, in Parthia. Cleopatra, deeply in love with him, cherishes his memories even after his death.2 Cleopatra, no doubt, hates Rodogune. But the hatred


2. Idem.
has a different source. Cleopatra says:

Parthian, you have borne the hate
My husband's murder bred in me towards all
Your nation.¹

Even the hatred changes with the passage of time into motherly love and compassion. After her sons have joined her, Cleopatra is in no mood to live with the "cruel and unhappy thoughts" of revenge, etc., which she hopes instead "to slay and bury with the past/Which gave them birth."² Much better disposed to Rodoquine she says:

Will you assist me, girl?
Will you begin with me another life
And other feelings?³

Cleopatra's marriage to Antiochus is in her own words "a reason of State, an act of policy."⁴ She is full of contempt for him and exults over his death, for it was he who "exiled" his twins when they were still "babes". As compared to her first husband, Nicanor, who was "beautiful/High-hearted lord with his bright auburn hair/And open face"⁵, Antiochus

². Idem.
³. Idem.
⁴. Ibid., p.340.
⁵. Idem.
was "a gloomy, sullen and forbidding soul/Harsh-featured,
hard of heart, rough mud of camps/And marshes."¹ She bears no son to Antiochus. Antiochus dies in Syria as the king and does not commit suicide after his defeat in Parthia. All this is very different from Appian's history.

The two sons of Cleopatra born from Nicanor are Seleucus and Antiochus Gurupus in Appian. In Sri Aurobindo these become Antiochus and Timocrates. As for Antiochus Cyzicenus, born from her second husband, he is altogether omitted in the play. The sons are changed here not only in name, but also in character. They differ from their counterparts in history and also from each other.

Sri Aurobindo shows neither the cruelty of Cleopatra the mother killing Seleucus, her own son, nor the cruelty of her own son, Antiochus, poisoning his mother to death. In Sri Aurobindo's Rodogune we do come across an example of fratricide, but this is indirect because the actual murder of Antiochus is planned by the evil-minded Phayllus who gets it executed through Theras, one of the Syrian captains. As for Cleopatra, it is suggested in the play that she commits suicide.

What presents Cleopatra and her sons in rather bad light in Appian is their blind ambition and moral insensitiveness.

which make them a little too quick to commit the murder of
even their kins. In Sri Aurobindo Cleopatra and her sons are
projected as better human beings. In order to do this Sri
Aurobindo creates new characters, Phayllus and Cleone, the
Chancellor and her sister respectively. Phayllus is ever "a
trickster", an "abhorred and crooked devil", the "subtle Satan",
the "frame of evil" who with Cleone, "the shrewd-lipped, rose-
tainted harlot", keeps plotting and scheming to usurp power in
Syria. As most of the "evil machinations" and villainy are
attributed to Phayllus and Cleone, Cleopatra and her sons are
rid of the evil actions that fall to their lot in Appian.

In Sri Aurobindo there is nothing like revolt by Tryphos to
capture power in Syria after the arrest of Nicanor in Parthia.

There are some other changes also introduced in the play.
Most probably these have been suggested by Justin. First of
all, Rodogune is married to the king of Syria in Sri Aurobindo.
This has its parallel perhaps in Phraates' marriage with the
daughter of Demetrius as described by Justin in his history.
In Justin's history there is a reference to a situation where
Cleopatra is faced with the problem of naming her elder son as
the king after the death of Ptolemy in Egypt. In Rodogune
Sri Aurobindo depicts the situation, thus marking yet another
deviation from Appian.

Sri Aurobindo thus took from Appian, Justin and Josephus
only the germinal idea for his play. He made in the history
sweeping changes so that his play could embody his vision and philosophy.

Sri Aurobindo was influenced by Corneille in dealing with the historical sources of Rodogune. He deviates from the source in a number of ways, obviously, under the influence of the French dramatist. In Corneille's Rodogune events comprising the exposition part — Nicanor's captivity in Parthia, his engagement to Rodogune (the Parthian princess), revolt by Tryphos, Cleopatra's marriage with Antiochus (the younger brother of Nicanor), her twins' exile to Egypt, Nicanor's killing by Cleopatra, Rodogune's imprisonment, etc. — are almost the same as in the history. But he turns the marriage of Nicanor and Rodogune into an engagement only. Sri Aurobindo does not follow Corneille in using history in the existing form in the exposition of his play. But he takes the hint from Corneille's change in Rodogune's marriage to Nicanor and in his turn omits the marriage altogether.

Another change suggested by Corneille is the love of Cleopatra's twins for Rodogune. But, unlike in Corneille and in the history, in Sri Aurobindo Timocles and Antiochus love Rodogune without consequential hostility between them.

These influences notwithstanding, Sri Aurobindo's Rodogune differs in spirit and atmosphere considerably from Corneille's play as well as Appian's history. If critics find
Appian's material "bare, crude and almost intractable"¹, they also find Corneille's play "full of horror and violence."² Sri Aurobindo admits in his play neither the crudities in Appian nor the horror and violence in Corneille, for he does not believe in admitting in drama unnecessary violence and cruelty. His Cleopatra is not a monster killing her own husband and son to quench her feeling of revenge and jealousy or for power, nor does she plan the murder of Rodogune through her sons who are passionately in love with the captive Parthian princess. Sri Aurobindo thus turns her into a human character, kind, compassionate and loving.

Sri Aurobindo's play differs from Corneille's in details of the action also. More important, however, is the difference in the purpose of the two plays, or in the themes underlying their respective actions. Corneille's purpose in his play is to show Cleopatra's thirst for power as a result of which she embarks on a career of crime and revenge. This is not so in Sri Aurobindo. Ambition in Cleopatra has not been denied. But it does not assume the proportions of the fatal flaw in her nor does it make her ruthless and violent. The jealous Queen in Appian and Corneille gets transformed into a sorrowing mother in Sri Aurobindo. Unlike the characters in Corneille,

¹ Prema Nandkumar, "Rodogune: A Study", p. 53.
who are responsible for their actions, Cleopatra in Sri Aurobindo is not entirely so for all her sufferings. Part of the blame at least is to be shared by what has frequently been referred to as gods, Fate, Nature, etc. This is so in the play because the playwright intends to project a different vision of life so unmistakable in the play.

After the death of king Antiochus, Cleopatra is so happy that she could cry her exultation "upon the palace-tops."¹

She is ecstatic with happiness at the restoration of her sons to her after eighteen long years of separation, and says:

Never again can grief be born
In this glad world that gives me back my sons.²

Due to the conspiracy of Phayllus and Cleone "to sow the seed of destruction in the royal household", her dreams "to have peace and peace for ever more" seem to be getting shattered rather too soon. She says:

I will not suffer to all time your wrongs.
Hush, hush, Cleone! It shall not be so.
I thought my heart would break with joy, but now
What different passion tugs at my heart-strings,
Cleone, O Cleone! O my sweet dreams,
Where have you gone yielding to pangs and fears
Your happy empire? Am I she who left
Laughing the death-bed of Antiochus?³

2. Ibid., p. 341.
3. Ibid., p. 364.
But the worst for Cleopatra is yet to come. What is in store for her is tragically in contrast to what she expected and we do not realise till towards the end of the play how prophetic the words of the dying king Antiochus were. The tragic irony of fate with all its cruel intensity is felt when the wronged mother says in most pathetic words:

Call me not mother!
I have no children. I am punished, gods,
Who dared outlive my great unhappy husband
For this!

Even if we do not with Timocrates blame for this "only the dire gods and bronze Necessity"², we do feel that there is a difference, as regards the responsibility for their respective actions, between Sri Aurobindo's Cleopatra and Corneille's Cleopatre. On the dying lips of Cleopatre there is a formidable curse for her only surviving son and his wife, Rodogune:

Reign! crime hath followed crime, and thou art king!
I rid thee of thy father, of thy brother,
And of myself. May heaven let its vengeance
Fall on your heads, making you both its victims
In payment for my deeds. May ye in marriage
Find naught but horror, jealousy, and strife,
May there be born to you a son like me.³

2. Idem.
There may be other points of difference also in the play of Corneille and Sri Aurobindo. As for the changes Sri Aurobindo makes in history, they result from thematic considerations, from the requirement of projecting through the plays his own view of things of life-thought. The vision expressed in Sri Aurobindo's plays bears close resemblance with his philosophy. Interestingly, the play of Sri Aurobindo anticipate, to a great extent, some of the important facets of his philosophy which he expressed years later in his purely philosophical works like The Life Divine and literary works like Savitri. The fact may well be treated as a corroboration of Sri Aurobindo's assertion that his philosophy is not the product of a thinking mind, but the statement of experience, realization. In common parlance a philosopher means one who derives conclusions from an intellectual exercise of the analysis of the external world. Sri Aurobindo emphatically denies being a philosopher in this

1. Discussing the difference between the plays of Sri Aurobindo and Corneille, Dr. Prema Nandkumar says that "Corneille's is... a neo-classical structure, a 'drama of concentration' that can afford to retain the original material providing merely the psychological motivation. All Corneille wants to do is to project a particular idea — jealousy, the lust of power, the desire for revenge — in vivid lines." But, according to her, "Sri Aurobindo's play is a complete contrast to Corneille's. ...He has chosen the Shakespearean way, 'the drama of extension'. He would not limit his subject to the fixed outlines of a historical past. He wished to expand the thematic and psychological barriers until he could achieve a Shakespearean amplitude."

sense in a letter to Dilip Kumar Roy. In the letter he says:

"Let me tell you in confidence that I never, never, never was
a philosopher — although I have written philosophy which is
another story altogether. I knew precious little about philo-
sophy before I did the Yoga and came to Pondicherry — ..."¹

He maintains that there "is very little argument in my philo-
sophy... What is there is a harmonizing of different parts
of a many-sided knowledge so that all unites logically together
But it is not by force of logical argument that it is done, but
by a clear vision of the relations and sequences of the
knowledge."² In fact, he wrote "sixty-four pages a month of
philosophy" for the Arya not from the intellect, though, as
he says, the Arya was intended to be the intellectual side of
his work for the world.³ He says: "...I had only to write
down in terms of the intellect all that I had observed and
came to know in practising Yoga daily and the philosophy was
there automatically."⁴ Since his philosophy is not conclusion
derived from argument, but knowledge, experience, realization,
a thread of unity runs through all its expression whether it

1. Sri Aurobindo, On Himself, B.C.L. Vol.26 (Pondicherry:

2. Idem.

3. Sri Aurobindo, Supplement, B.C.L. Vol. 27(Pondicherry:

is in germinal form in his early writings like his plays, or in full fledged form in the later writings. His plays are mirrors of the different parts of a many-sided knowledge which Sri Aurobindo claims his philosophy to be.

It is in this perspective that one has to look at Rodogune which has for its theme the Aurobindonian conception of Fate. In it there is frequent reference to Fate, variously called 'Necessity', 'gods', etc., in the play, and implying some invisible powers which play important role in human affairs.

The concept of Fate illustrated in the play, is introduced to answer what Sri Aurobindo calls the most knotty of all metaphysical questions — the question of man's freedom in relation to the supreme Power that rules the world. The scientist's answer is not very encouraging. He does not believe in any "real free will". "All our action", according to him, "is determined by two great factors, heredity and environment."¹ Sri Aurobindo does not agree to the scientist's view, nor does he express any faith in the 19th century theories of mechanized determinism of the west. He considers the materialistic theories of Europe as "very dangerous to the moral future of man". These theories say that man is a creation and slave of matter, that the mind itself is a form of gross matter and that there is no free will. According to

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Sri Aurobindo, these are false and dangerous doctrines of materialism.  

It is perhaps because of the danger posed by such theories that Sri Aurobindo says:

The time has almost come when India can no longer keep her light to herself but must pour it out upon the world. Yoga must be revealed to mankind because without it mankind cannot take the next step in the human evolution.  

"Yoga", according to him, "gives us a means of escape" from "the dangerous doctrines of materialism which tend to subvert man's future and hamper his evolution."  

So, in Rodogune, in which Syrian history has been put in the mould of Shakespearean drama, Sri Aurobindo has embedded as its theme the truth discovered by the Indian Yogins. This is a venture quite in keeping with his universal vision. The truth forms part of the Hindu view of life and is the Indian answer to the question regarding man's freedom in relation to the supreme Power governing the world. Rodogune may, therefore be regarded as an attempt to pour out upon the world India's light which in Sri Aurobindo's opinion is the need of the hour.

2. Ibid., p. 375.
3. Ibid., p. 376.
The materialistic theory of the west — Calvinistic fatalism or mechanized determinism, etc. — are no final solution to the problem of man's freedom referred to above. In Sri Aurobindo's view, the answer to the question lies in the Hindu philosophy, the Indian concept of Fate and Free-Will. The "rigid and sterilizing fatalism"¹ of the west believes in an inexorable and "for ever immutable fate" and does not recognise man's free will at all. Hence a dispute regarding Fate and Free-Will. In Sri Aurobindo's conception of Fate there is "a reconciliation of the dispute by a view of man's psychology in which both Fate and Free-Will are recognized."² The Hindu conception of Fate wards off the pessimism that inevitably results from theories professing belief in blind, arbitrary, unconscient Chance or Fate as the ruling deity over the world and thus hold out no hope of man's freedom. Sri Aurobindo's Fate is not like the Fate of Hardy. He asks why one should say that life is, to use Shakespeare's phrase, "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing; even if all is predetermined and there is nothing like free will. "Life would rather be that if it were all chance and random incertitude." But it is not that.³

³ Ibid., pp. 469-70
However, to be able to see this truth, Yoga is necessary in Sri Aurobindo's opinion. It imparts an ability to man to see that "behind the visible events in the world there is always a mass of invisible forces at work unknown to the outer mind of men."¹ "By Yoga (by going inwards and establishing a conscious connection with the Cosmic Self and Force and forces) one can become conscious of these forces, intervene consciously in the play, and to some extent at least determine things in the result of the play. All that has nothing to do with predetermination."²

Such a view of things, Sri Aurobindo says, admits neither of a rigid predetermination nor of blind inconscient Chance. In this view there is an implicit faith in the Supreme Power from which all physical as well as spiritual or psychical phenomena proceed. This is the Power which "the Upanishads call the Brahman and the primal entity from which all things were born, in which they live and to which they return."³

The world is governed by the Will of this Cosmic Self, by the Divine Will. All that happens in the universe is in fulfilment of the Divine Will. It is the Divine Will that is worked out in Nature, the Prakriti.

¹ Nirodbaran, Correspondence with Sri Aurobindo (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1969), p. 121.
² Idem.
This working out of the Will is not arbitrary. It is subject to Law. Nature is guided by Law which has been described as causality. "The whole causality", according to Sri Aurobindo, "may be defined as previous action leading to subsequent action, karma and karmaphala."¹

Fate is nothing but insistent causality, which is another name for Law. Law is nothing but a mode or rule of action which in Indian philosophy is called dharma, holding together, it is that by which action of the universe, of its parts, of the individual is held together. This action in the universal, the parts, the individual is called karma, work, action, energy in play. Each man has a distinct nature of his own and that is his law of being which ought to guide him as an individual.²

But beyond and above those minor laws, says Sri Aurobindo, is the great dharma of the universe which provides that certain previous karma or action must lead to certain karma or result.³

Thus the theory of Fate speaks of "the chain of karma, the bondage of work" from which there seems to be no escape. But it is not so in reality. It is from this chain or bondage that the Hindu seeks salvation. The Hindu philosophy recognizes not only Fate but also Free-Will. Law, Fate or Nature are

2. *Idem.*
3. *Idem.*
not supreme. There is something within us which is above these all. "This entity", says Sri Aurobindo, "the Hindu teaching finds in the spirit ever free and blissful which is one in essence and in reality with the Supreme Soul of the Universe. The spirit does not act, it is nature that contains the action. If the spirit acted it would be bound by its action."¹ But the spirit is free. Giving the reason for its freedom, Sri Aurobindo says:

"The thing that acts is Prakriti, Nature, which determines the svabhava of things and is the source and condition of Law or dharma. The soul or purusa holds up the svabhava watches and enjoys all the action and its fruit, sanctions the law or dharma. It is the king, Lord of Ishvara without whose consent nothing can be done by prakriti. But the king is above the law and free."²

This gives us hope instead of the pessimistic feeling of being caught in an unending process of blind cause and effect that like a whirl-pool leads nowhere. A significant aspect of the Indian view of Fate (which is Sri Aurobindo's view as well) is the recognition of personal will or endeavour. A great deal of importance has been attached to it by Sri Aurobindo who believes that it is possible even to modify Fate to some extent, even to rise above it, through one's endeavour. The Divine Will is fulfilled by the play of forces — spiritual, mental, vital and physical. These forces include personal will.

¹ Sri Aurobindo, The Harmony of Virtue, p. 381.
² Idem.
or endeavour.¹

However, in order to transcend Nature or Fate man's communion with the universal spirit is necessary. Sri Aurobindo says:

But in order to feel its mastery of Nature the human soul must put itself in communion with the Infinite, the Universal Spirit. Its Will must be one with the Universal Will. The human soul is one with the universal Spirit, but in the body it stands out as something separate and unconnected, because a certain freedom is permitted to it in order that the svabhava of things may be diversely developed in different bodies. In using this freedom the soul may do it ignorantly, or knowingly. If it uses it ignorantly, it is not really free, for ignorance brings with it the illusion of enslavement to Nature. Used knowingly, the freedom of the soul becomes one with surrender to the universal Will.²

It is this liberation from bondage to Nature which is the true progress of humanity and also the Will of the Divine.

The Divine Will is behind Fate which works through Nature for man's progress. Life, according to Sri Aurobindo, "is not Chance or random incertitude."³ It is rather "something foreseen, planned in every detail." Nature and Fate have been working up to a secret Purpose powerfully, persistently, through the ages, and ourselves are a part of it and fellow workers in the fulfilment of that invincible Purpose.⁴ The

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4. *Idem.*
action of Rodogune embodies these facts of life, it hints at these truths about the workings of Fate and the Purpose to which it works.

So, Sri Aurobindo's views on Fate may serve as a background to the study of the theme of Rodogune. Through the plot, the characters and indeed the entire atmosphere of Rodogune Sri Aurobindo seeks to underline fatality as a truth of human life. There are lines scattered all over his plays which appear to be simple poetic renderings of his affirmations about Fate referred to above. A few may be cited here as illustrations:

A screened Necessity drives even in the gods.  
Over human lives it strides to unseen ends;  
Our tragic failures are its stepping-stones.1

This world is other than our standards are  
And it obeys a vaster thought than ours,  
Our narrow thoughts! The fathomless desire  
Of some huge spirit is its secret law.  
It keeps its own tremendous forces penned  
And bears us where it wills, not where we would.2

This world's the puppet of a silent Will  
Which moves unguessed behind our acts and thoughts;  
Events bewildered follow its dim guidance  
And flock where they are needed.3

3. Ibid., p. 299.
For she alone is prompter on our stage,
Things seen and unforeseen move by a doom,
Not freely. Eric's sword and Aslaug's song,
Music and thunder are but petty chords
Of one majestic harp. She builds, she breaks,
She thrones, she slays, as needed for her harmony. 1

But the gods wrest our careful policies
To their own ends until we stand appalled
Remembering what we meant to do and seeing
What has been done.2

Fate orders all and Fate I now
Have recognised all the world's mystic will
That loves and labours.3

Some say
Atomic Chance has put Eric here, Swegn there,
Aslaug between. But I have seen myself,
O you revealing gods, and know though veiled
The immortality that thinks in me,
That plans and reasons.4

The gods prodigiously sometimes reverse
The common rule of Nature and compel
Matter with soul. How else should it be guessed
That gods exist at all?5

There are obviously not too veiled references to the Divine
Will which is the Force behind the universe. Nature obeys a
vaster thought than ours. Its "secret law" is nothing but the
fathomless desire of God, and the "heaven's secret" is the
Purpose for the fulfilment of which Nature and Fate as also
ourselves have been working through the ages. What prevails

2. Sri Aurobindo, "Perseus the Deliverer" in Collected Plays,
   B.C.L. Vol.6, 132.
4. Ibid., p. 546.
5. Ibid., p. 514.
in the world is not human spirit, but the Universal Spirit, not personal will, but the Universal Will — a silent Will of which this world is the puppet. It is the Divine Will that is there behind Fate so that Fate is nothing but "the world's mystic will that loves and labours." Then, though the Divine Will is worked out through Law, the Supreme is in no way bound by it. It is not only above the Law, but also free, and is capable of reversing the common rule of Nature and compelling Matter with soul.

The denunciation of theories like mechanized determinism is also unmistakable in the lines as is the insinuation of the purpose to which Nature and Fate work.

According to Sri Aurobindo, the contradiction between man's will and the Will of the Supreme Soul is the cause of human suffering. Man suffers due to his inability to put the human spirit in communion with the Universal Spirit and identify his will with the Universal Will. To project this theme through his plays Sri Aurobindo creates quite a few characters in them, who seem to recognise Fate as "all the world's mystic will" and do not complain that Fate is blindly arbitrary or capriciously decisive. Like their creator, they believe that Fate works for the fulfilment of the Divine Will, to a secret and sacred Purpose identifiable as perfection of the universe as well as human beings. It does not work blindly, maliciously or malignantly. This is what has been said in the following
lines of Rodogune addressed to Antiochus by the Parthian princess.

The gods are strong; they love to test our strength
Like armourers hammering steel. Therefore 'twas said
That they are jealous. No, but high and stern
Demanding greatness from the great; they strike
At every fault they see, perfect themselves
Labour at our perfection.1

The general sense of fate is present in a number of Greek plays. In a drama like Oedipus Tyrannus, fate is shown as something which constantly baffles human effort. She plays in it a significant role, cheating, deceiving, betraying, watching with a grim smile the blundering actions of the miserable king.2 A sense of fatality no doubt characterizes the plays of Sri Aurobindo also. But it is not the same as the Greek sense of fate which, according to Sri Aurobindo, implies some superior caprice or divine jealousy ("fatal jealousy that watches us/From thrones unseen").3 Sri Aurobindo's Fate is not "a blind Fate" or "inscrutable Necessity", nor is it "the mysterious ways of an arbitrary...Providence."4 Fate, in Sri Aurobindo's view, is another name for Universal Law which holds together all the things in a state of harmony.5 Its caprices and arbitrariness

are apparent, not real, for it works to a definite end. Thus, Sri Aurobindo integrates the Greek sense of fate with his own concept of evolution to produce a newer and more perfect view of fate. His concept of fate is in fact the Indian concept that explains fate as Karma. Referring to Indian theory of Karma, Sri Aurobindo says:

Fundamentally, the meaning of Karma is that all existence is the working of a universal Energy, a process and an action and a building of things by that action.... that all is a continuous chain in which every one link is bound indissolubly to the past infinity of numberless links, and the whole governed by fixed relations, by a fixed association of cause and effect, present action the result of past action as future action will be the result of present action, all cause a working of energy and all effect too a working of energy.¹

Sri Aurobindo makes no secret of his belief in God's intervention in affairs of man.² He rather tries to inculcate the belief in us by projecting through his plays, like Rodoquine, the clear view that "Fate orders all."

¹ Sri Aurobindo, The Supramental Manifestation, p. 126.
² The Greek sense of fate, observes A. Nicoll, is seen also in Shakespeare's tragedies, though in a modified form. Fate here is presented as a conscious or unconscious agent guiding and shaping our actions. Romeo and Juliet in particular expresses this view of fate. In other tragedies Shakespeare seems usually to have preferred to employ simply chance with which there is barely a sense of an outer world power governing our actions. However, Shakespeare has frequently intensified the fatal as opposed to the chance sense of his tragedies. He utilises the sense of fate, but never employs any direct intervention of gods in human affairs, nor does he deliberately enunciate a belief in supernatural influence.

In Rodogune Sri Aurobindo says: "Nature and Fate do all." All that Nature and Fate do is done powerfully and persistently, with a tenacity of purpose — with "great wise pitiless calmness". In Eric, Eric says to Aslaug:

I have learned, Aslaug, from my soul and Life
The great wise pitiless calmness of the gods,
Found for my strength the proud swift blows they deal
At all resistance to their absolute walk,
Thor's hammer-stroke upon the unshaped world.
Its will is beaten on a dreadful forge,
Its roads are hewn by violence divine.1

The belief of Eric is not shared by many characters in Sri Aurobindo's plays. They see an atrocious and outrageous arbitrariness in the actions of Fate and find behind them no purpose whatsoever. Philoctetes in Rodogune says:

But since upon this random earth unjust
We travel stumbling to the pyre, not led
By any power nor any law, and neither
What we desire nor what we deserve
Arrives, but unintelligible dooms
O'ertake us and the travesty of things,
It is better not to hope too much.2

This complaint against Fate has rings of Hardy's protestations against Time and Chance at whose hands, he says, one may deem "anything possible" "except, perhaps, fairplay".3

1. Sri Aurobindo, Collected Plays, B.C.L. Vol.6, 523.
2. Ibid., p. 348
The tenor, however, of the plays of Sri Aurobindo in general is different. Most of the characters in them are either those who have faith in the rule of moral law in the world — of a Force that far from being pitiless, blind, malignant, unjust and arbitrary is kind, benevolent and just, or those who through suffering come to recognize the existence of such a Force. If the Force bears us where it wills, not where we would, or if the invisible powers strike at every fault they see, the reason is different. It is a concern for man's perfection, his evolution from mortality to immortality, to divinity that is behind the apparent pitilessness or arbitrariness of the invisible powers. This is what Sri Aurobindo means when he says: "God guides best when He tempts worst; loves entirely when He punishes cruelly, helps perfectly when violently He opposes."¹

If the ways of the Supreme Power do not converge with the human ways, or if the Supreme Will is at variance with the individual will, Hardy's explanation would be that the world is governed by a Power blind and unjust which he would call Chance — "an unintelligible supreme caprice." Sri Aurobindo, however, emphatically rules out Chance in this sense. He says:

Chance, that vague shadow of an infinite possibility, must be banished from the dictionary of our perceptions, for of Chance we can make nothing, because it is nothing. Chance does not at all exist; it is only a word by which

we cover and excuse our own ignorance. Science excludes it from the actual process of physical law; everything there is determined by fixed cause and effect. But when it comes to ask why these relations exist and not others, why a particular cause is allowed to a particular effect, it finds that it knows nothing whatever about the matter...and it is convenient then to say that Chance or at most a dominant probability determines all actual happening, the chance of evolution...But this is only a reading of our own ignorance in the workings of the universe...

What governs the universe, in Sri Aurobindo's opinion, therefore is not Chance — a name only in fact for man's own ignorance — but "the immortality that thinks" in us, "plans and reasons":

Some say
Atomic Chance has put Eric here, Sween there,
Aslaug between, But I have seen myself,
O you revealing gods, and know though veiled
The immortality that thinks in me,
That plans and reasons.

This is what Rodogune seeks to underline. Characters here are presented as engaged in unequal battle with forces they neither know of nor can ever control. They are at best the playthings in the hands of these forces which often seem to work at cross purposes with human beings, engendering in them awe and a sense of utter helplessness, and reducing them to baffled witnesses of spectacles of shattered dreams, mocked ambitions and vanquished hopes.

Sri Aurobindo uses dramatic irony in *RoderPOSE* to develop the theme of intervention of destiny. Instance of irony of fate in the lives of characters here are aplenty. More often than not there is left a yawning gap between what they mean to do and what is really done. For example, there is a strange contrast between Cleopatra's dreams and her achievements. She exults at the prospect of union with her long-separated sons and looks forward to the meeting with "feverish excitement". But, as the crude irony of fate would have it, she is reduced to a woman who would refuse to be called mother by her own son Timocrates, once so dear to her. The same Cleopatra who thought that her heart would break with joy at the meeting and believed, after the sons were restored to her, that "Never again can grief be born/In this glad world that gives me back my sons," finds not joy, but quite different passions tugging at her heart-strings. Her pathetic words sum up the irony of fate thus:

O my sweet dreams,  
Where have you gone yielding to pangs and fears  
Your happy empire? Am I she who left  
Laughing the death-bed of Antiochus?

Her lot, it may seem, is a punishment awarded to her by the gods, for she dared outlive her great unhappy husband. The

2. Ibid., p.364.
gods, she has no doubt, exist and are all-powerful and intervene to restore the right, even with "violence divine", if need be.

The queen knows that to lie about the primogeniture of her twins to favour Timocles, as Cleone would like her to do, would be a "vile deceit". It would be "to transgress all laws yet known or made/And dare heaven's utmost anger." But she is driven by circumstances to do precisely this, though the motive behind the act can hardly be doubted. Too sick of war and hatred already, she chooses the younger Timocles for Syria's throne, instead of Antiochus, because the latter is war-hungry, blood-thirsty and too ambitious, and might as a king embark upon a career of hatred and war to quench his insatiable thirst for a vast empire. Also, Cleopatra suffers from an acute sense of loneliness which, she thinks, will only be intensified by Antiochus' frequent trips out to battles, and she will find herself lonely in the crowded palace. Due to her solitariness she has an abnormally developed possessive instinct. As a result, she wants to keep both her sons with her and together. It is another matter that Fate sees to it that the more she attempts to get rid of her loneliness, the lonelier she becomes and cries in deep anguish: "I am alone,

so terribly alone."¹ It is from Cleopatra's sense of loneliness that the tragic conflict of the play originates. However, what she wants now is peace for herself, for everybody:

I do not wish for hatred any more
The horrible and perilous hands of war
Appal me. O, let our people sit at ease
In Grecian Antioch and Persepolis,
Mothers and children, clasping those golden heads
Deep, deep within our bosoms, never allow
Their going forth again to bonds and death.
Peace, peace, let us have peace for ever more.²

For the sake of peace she would not hesitate even to elevate as queen Rodogune whom she hated so much for being the daughter of Phraates, the King of Parthia, who killed her first husband. But, ironically enough, her efforts and sacrifices yield not glorious peace, but fratricidal civil war. By making Timocles the king of Syria she seeks to loosen what the careless wills of gods had tangled. But, as a result, the confusion is intensified. When she tries to take Mentho, the nurse, who knew the true precedence of the twins, into confidence about her plan for peace, the nurse refuses to be an accomplice to it and condemns it as "cold, unmotherly and cruel plot"³, "a wickedness beyond all parallel."⁴ Cleopatra regrets that Mentho does not know the cause. But the nurse admonishes the queen saying:

1. Sri Aurobindo, Collected Plays, B.C.L. Vol. 6, 420.
2. Ibid., p. 354.
3. Ibid., p. 392.
4. Idem.
Art thou Olympian Zeus?
Has he given thee his sceptre and his charge
To guide the tangled world? Wilt thou upset
His rulings? wilt thou improve his providence?
Are thy light woman's brain and shallow love
A better guide than his all-seeing eye?
O wondrous arrogance of finite men
Who would know better than omniscient God.¹

The wisdom and truth of the words dawn on Cleopatra, no
doubt, but a little too late and only after she has fallen
victim to cruel ironies of fate. It was presumptuous on her
part, one would think, to seek to unmake, even though with a
noble intent, what God had made. She is punished for her faults
and she accepts the punishment. The moral of her tragic career
is contained in the words of Mentho purported to make the queen
"shun the tragical responsibility"² of the "dire error". Mentho's
words prove prophetic :

Dream not that happiness
Can spring from wicked roots. God overrules
And Right denied is mighty.³

The warning is preceded by an advice, which may well be consi-
dered as the theme of the play and also the playwright's
message to men. :

What he has made strive not to unmake but shun
The tragical responsibility
Of such dire error. If from thy act spring death
And horror, are thy human shoulders fit
To bear that heavy load? Observe his will,
Do right and leave the rest to God above.⁴

2. Idem.
3. Idem.
4. Idem.
Sri Aurobindo seems to argue that man, like Fate and Nature, is an instrument in the hands of God. Unless he realises this, he is in bondage and suffers. The liberated man "knows that the supreme Shakti is doing in his mental, vital and physical body, adhisthana, as the sole doer the thing appointed by Fate which is in truth not Fate, not a mechanical dispensation, but the wise and all-seeing will that is at work behind human Karma."¹ Thus, according to Sri Aurobindo, the way to liberation for man is to do "his appointed work as the living instrument one in spirit with the universal Spirit."² Most of the characters in Rodogune do not do their appointed work as living instruments of God. Hence their suffering. Besides, their suffering is rooted in their own temperament. It is through the passions of human beings, through their own temperament that Fate works: "The imperfections, impulses and passions surging in the cauldron of man's nature are the instruments for the witchcraft of Fate; they are the lever of its uncanny operations."³

Antiochus in the play is a character in the heroic mould. He has "greatness, genius, pride and force."⁴ But he has his

². Idem.
⁴. Sri Aurobindo, Collected Plays, B.C.L. Vol. 6, 415.
share of blemishes too. He possesses "gigantic appetites/That makes a banquet of the world."¹ He says:

What are Syria, Greece
And the blue littoral to Gades? They are
Too narrow to contain my soul, too petty
To satisfy its hunger and its vastness.²

He is too proud, too preoccupied with Power, too much conscious of his king-like qualities, and considers himself to be the king of Syria already:

I need no human voice to make me anything, Who am king by birth and nature. Who else should reign In Syria?³

He has been given by the playwright "the stain of hubris". He lacks humility. The following words of Timocles, though an example of his "princely petulance" and jealousy and uttered "in a frenzy of passion", point to the "Aeschylean hubris" of Antiochus:

What's his kinglyness
But a lust of grandiose slaughter, an ambition
Almost inhuman and a haughty mind
That lifts itself above the highest heads
As if his mortal body held a god
And all were mean to him? ...

... ... ... ... ... ...

... ... ... What's his love?
A despot's sensual longing for a slave,
Carnal, imperial, harsh, without respect,
The hunger of the vital self, not raised,
Refined, uplifted to the yearning heart.⁴

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1. Sri Aurobindo, Collected Plays, B.C.L. Vol, 6, 431.
2. Ibid., p. 330
3. Ibid., p. 387.
4. Ibid., p. 410.
The tragedy of Antiochus originates from his stubborn pride, from the Aeschylean hubris. The trials and tribulations of his life, however, make Antiochus pause and ponder. He has a sad sense of failure in realising his dreams; but he still feels it is "more heroic/To battle with than to accept calamity". Eremite, Fate incarnate as it were in the play, comes at the right moment to guide Antiochus. But he is still in no mood to resign to the inevitable. His problem is whether to go like a patriot and fight for Syria, which is in peril now because the Parthian king contemplates invading it, or "rather go/With my sole sword into the changeful world/Create an empire". Eremite forthrightly tells him that his end is near and he should go to Antioch. But Antiochus reacts to the suggestion saying:

So then, defeat and death were from the first
My portion.' Wherefore were thoughts gigantic
With which I came into my mother ready-shaped
If they must end in the inglorious tomb?

When he finally decides to go to Antioch and fight for Syria, he knows he is choosing deliberate death. But he is ready to yield to the gods to the extent because, as he says, they can break his body, not his soul; "for that belongs, I feel,/To other masters".

1. Sri Aurobindo, Collected Plays, B.C.L. Vol. 6, 432.
2. Idem.
3. Ibid., p. 433.
4. Ibid., p. 434.
Antiochus is a victim of tragic irony of fate. When he returns to Antioch after giving up revolt against Timocles, he has sincerely resolved to be devoted to the Syrian king. He tells Timocles:

My sword is thine, and I am thine and all
I have and love is thine, O Syrian Timocles,
Devoted to thy throne for Syria.1

Timocles is happy too at the "recovered amity/That binds once more for joy Nicanor's sons."2 Antiochus feels that "all things work out by a higher will."3 But he does not know in the least what the "higher will" indeed is up to. The man for whom he gives up revolt and to whom he surrenders his all entrusts Phayllus to try and execute him. Sudden and swift is Phayllus' stroke and Antiochus is murdered.

The punishment of Antiochus is due to his pride and to his error of judgment in returning to Antioch. Eremite condemns him for his arrogance and defiance of gods:

Break then, thou hill
Unsatisfied with thy own height. The gods
Care not if thou resist or if thou yield;
They do their work with mortals. To the Vast
Whence thou, O ravening, strong and hungry lion,
Overleaping cam'st the iron bars of Time,
Return! Thou hast thy tamers. God of battles!
Son of Nicanor! Strong Antiochus!
Depart and be as if thou wert not born.
The gods await thee in Antioch.4

1. Sri Aurobindo, Collected Plays, B.C.L. Vol. 6, 442.
2. Idem.
3. Ibid., p. 443.
4. Ibid., pp. 433-34.
The "strong and hungry lion" has his tamer in gods, in Fate. Eremite had earlier warned him that he would not be the king and that he would yield to destiny in spite of his greatness, genius, pride and force. Antiochus' reply had been: "If Fate/Would have me yield, let her first break me." He does not mind if "Fate hostile stands" in his path and leads the revolt against Timocles. But gods can take care of those who dare defy them. So Eremite tells Antiochus:

The guardians of the path then wait for thee Vigilant lest the world's destiny be foiled By human greatness. March on to thy doom. Antiochus would not listen to the words of Eremite's warning. Eremite promises to see Antiochus again when death shall lead him into Antioch. And death leads him there ultimately. Also, as indicated by Eremite, Antiochus seems to realise the truth about Fate and yields to her. He tells Rodogune:

The gods are strong; they love to test our strength Like armourers hammering steel. Therefore 'twas said That they are jealous. No, but high and stern Demanding greatness from the great; they strike At every fault they see, perfect themselves Labour at our perfection.

This is a great truth about Fate and its realization by Antiochus is indeed a remarkable transformation of the man,

2. Idem.
3. Ibid., pp. 428-29.
whose life sets out the theme of the play.

Fate is an agent of spiritual evolution. All its apparent caprices and preposterous combinations are meant to perfect human beings. But man does not often realise this. He fails to see that behind Fate there is the Divine Will which seeks to guide the Soul in its growth of consciousness. He often fails to see that, through his trials and tribulations, man is made to evolve. Rodogune, evidently, stresses the purposiveness of suffering, its importance as an instrument in the hands of Fate to help man's evolution.

Here it may be remembered that "spiritual evolution is a matter of inner life and growth of consciousness and has to be distinguished from outer life with its achievements and frustrations." The outer lives of characters in Rodogune may not show much progress; but the inner lives of most of them evince great evolution. According to Sri Aurobindo, man will be able to transcend the limitations of his physical

2. Sri Aurobindo says in the play:

   The gods are strong; they love to test our strength
   Like armourers hammering steel. Therefore 'twas said
   That they are jealous. No, but high and stern
   Demanding greatness from the great; they strike
   At every fault they see, perfect themselves
   Labour at our perfection.

   Sri Aurobindo, Collected Plays, B.C.L. Vol.6, 429.
existence and live in the realm of eternal bliss as the growth of 'supramental consciousness' takes place. The character of Antiochus is an approximation to this ideal of Sri Aurobindo. So long as he is in the stage of the 'Mind', he challenges and fights and takes pride in his victories. But, with the manifestation of patriotism, he is transformed into a man with a new knowledge and new vision. He is now above the feelings of earthly pleasure and pain. He feels no loss of pride when he returns to Timocles, nor does he feel hurt when arrested. He is now a changed man for whom death is not an end but a beginning. He tells Phayllus:

What were Death then but wider life than earth
Can give us in her clayey limits bound?
Darkness perhaps! There must be light behind. 1

Cleone, an accomplice of Phayllus in his villainy aimed at gaining power, is the evil genius of Cleopatra. He entrusts her with the task of worrying "the conscience of the Queen to death" 2 so that he "may sit unobserved on Syria's throne." 3 Her jealousy towards Rodogune and her secret ambition to be the Queen of Syria make her behave unscrupulously. She tries to win the love of Timocles with obvious motives. Phayllus wants Timocles as the king of Syria so that when the "shapeless soul" is the king, Phayllus may become the de facto ruler and

1. Sri Aurobindo, Collected Plays, B.C.L. Vol. 6, 453.
2. Ibid., p. 365.
3. Ibid., p. 364.
Cleone, the Syrian queen. The coquetry and prostitution of her physical charms are of no avail to her. Her beautiful body can be a means of amusement to Timocles when he feels lonely or is in a lustful mood. But it can hardly effect deep springs of love in his heart for her. Timocles yearns for the love of Rodogune, when his frivolous moods of flirtation are over: "Give me my love/Or let me die".¹ He is sick of Cleone's "gold and roses" and impatiently bids her: "Take hence, thou harlot,/Thy rose-faced beauty! Thou are not Rodogune".² Her "white limbs" are "made to be kissed and handled".³ She is like the common beautiful flower people wear "lightly, smell and throw away".⁴ When she is condemned by Timocles as the "shrewd-lipped, rose-tainted harlot" and is banished from his kingdom, she "sees the inconstancy of superficial passion".⁵ It is now that she realises that "Light love ends wretchedly".⁶ Thus Cleone's character again is an illustration of the theme of purposiveness of the sufferings of human being in Rodogune.

Cleone is a victim of irony of fate. With Phayllus she conspires to ascend the Syrian throne as the queen of Timocles.

¹. Sri Aurobindo, Collected Plays, B.C.L. Vol. 6, 423.
². Idem.
³. Ibid., p. 421.
⁴. Ibid., p. 369.
⁵. M.V. Seetaraman, op. cit., p. 11.
⁶. Sri Aurobindo, Collected Plays, B.C.L. Vol. 6, 422.
But as it happens, she finds her exposed to the prospects of Timocles reaching an agreement with Antiochus, which envisages that Timocles will "have Rodogune" and Cleone herself will "like a common flower be thrown into the dust-heap." The idea of changing lovers with Rodogune does not seem altogether bad to her in the circumstances. She is desperate and decides to offer help to Eunice and Rodogune, her enemies.

Cleone's ruin is rooted in her own character. Her lustfulness and ambition and mad hatred for Rodogune turn him into "the good bitch" she is for Phayllus. She helps him in his wicked design and brings about her fall and frustration.

The awful presence of Fate is felt as much in the life of Phayllus as in those of other characters in Rodogune. The "abhorred and crooked devil"², the supreme "intriguer", the selfish cunning man with his dark ambitious nature "meant for darkness, plot and hatred"³, is indeed "the frame of evil"⁴ and the very Devil — "a rare study"⁵, and "a god in evil"⁶, as Antiochus calls him. In spite of all he does and

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2. Ibid., p. 466.
3. Ibid., p. 346.
4. Ibid., p. 467.
5. Ibid., p. 454.
6. Ibid., p. 455.
thinks he is capable of doing, he falis, his wickedness and machinations boomerang on him and he gets the end he deserves. He plays on the weaknesses of people and makes them willing accomplices in his conspiracies for power. It is this "subtle Satan" who, as Nicanor rightly points out, with his "wicked promptings/And poisonous whispers worked to dangerous rage/The kindly moods Timocles."¹ He is the "fatal knave" who "sits always whispering"² at Timocles' ears. So when Timocles, in a mood of utter disgust, despair and anger, orders him to be slain, he wants the punishment to the "dire knave" to be the severest:

Slay him with tortures! Let him feel his death
As he has made me feel my living.³

The activities of Phayllus must have incurred the worst wrath of gods. So while ordering his slaughter Timocles says

May the gods
In their just wrath with this be satisfied.⁴

The irony of Phayllus' life is manifest when the high pitch of his confidence about his powers and capabilities is contrasted with the low ebb at which he confesses that there are limits to his powers. After the death of Antiochus,

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1. Sri Aurobindo, Collected Plays, B.C.L. Vol.6, 466.
2. Ibid., p. 436.
3. Ibid., p. 467.
4. Idem.
Cleopatra's second husband, Phayllus' ambitions assume abnormal proportions. Whoever of the "two king-cubs"—Antiochus and Timocles—becomes the king, he will be the actual ruler, Phayllus thinks. He boasts that what he says "has a strange gift of happening"¹, and believes fortune to be his slave girl:

Fortune will bear me out; she's grown my slave girl. What liberties have I not taken with her Which she has suffered amorously, kinder grown After each handling.²

But, in spite of his shrewdness, practical intelligence, cool calculations and cunningness, he realises with a rude shock that fortune is not his slave girl and that Fate is invincible for men like him. So, through his character again, the theme of the play is underlined.

Like other characters in the play, Timocles also is "thrown into the cauldron of passions, to learn and grow by hard fate"³ and he too is a victim of irony of fate. Due to his ease-loving nature, Antiochus says that "he would not wish/To wear the iron burden of a crown;/If he has a joy, it is enough for him."⁴ As for himself, Antiochus thinks he is

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2. Ibid., p. 447.
"king by birth and nature."¹ But Fate is not always "careful to fit in/The nature with the lot."² So, ironically enough, not Antiochus but Timoecles ascends the Syrian throne. Unlike Antiochus, who thinks "it is divinity on earth to be a king"³ Tomocles looks at kingship of Syria as an epicure: "It will be all pleasure/To reign in such a country."⁴ He says: "This, this is Paradise, a mother, friends/And Syria."⁵ But the throne proves to be a bed of thorns. Due to his "dim goddess", Rodogune, whom he loves passionately, and due to whom he and his brother fall apart, his soul is "already haunted by the tempest."⁶ Now he has to face an open revolt against him by his own brother, for he has been denied the Syrian kingship. Timocles is smitten by jealousy towards Antiochus before becoming the king:

All, all are for Antiochus, the crown,
And Syria and men's homage, women's hearts
And life and sweetness and my love.⁷

After he has become the king, he feels that his throne is "brittle" and the gods have "mocked" him with it. He sees

2. Ibid., p. 347.
3. Idem.
4. Ibid., p. 351.
5. Idem.
7. Ibid., p. 390.
hardly any future for him. The future is there with Antiochus only. To assuage his feelings of insecurity, loneliness and frustration, Cleone tells him:

Look round, King Timocles, and see how many Prefer you to your brother. I am yours, Phayllus works for you, princely Nicanor Protects you, famed Callicrates supports. Your mother only weeps in fear for you, Not passion for your brother. 1

But Timocles loves Rodogune more than Cleone, Phayllus and all, including his mother. As far as Rodogune is concerned, she leaves Timocles, "who worshipped her" to join Antiochus, whose love is "a despot's sensual longing for a slave." 2

Giving expression to his jealousy towards Antiochus, he says:

Yet Rodogune, my Rodogune to him Has offered up her moonlit purity, Her secret need of sweetness. O she has Unveiled to him her sweet proud heart of love. She would not look at me who worshipped her. 3

Jealousy in him keeps smouldering, his loneliness and frustration intensify. Phayllus adds fuel to the fire and a stage comes when Timocles seems to have lost all peace of mind. He must have Rodogune at any cost. He tells Phayllus:

Accursed ruffian, give her to my arms. Use fair means or use foul, use steel, use poison, But free me from these inner torments. 4

In his recklessness he can go to any extent.

When Antiochus comes back to Syria giving up revolt, recovered amity seems to bind Timocles and Antiochus once more. But Phayllus, the fatal knave, who sits always whispering at Timocles' ears, shatters the bonds once again. Working upon Timocles' infatuation for Rodogune, he prevails upon the king to agree to the execution of Antiochus. When Antiochus has been killed, Timocles blames "only the dire gods/And bronze Necessity"^1 for the murder. But perhaps he, with his shapeless soul, the "clay for each passing circumstance to alter"^2, is not less to blame. He is "highly combustible material which Phayllus knows how to ignite."^3

The tragedy of Timocles has its origin in his feeling of solitariness which results mostly from his frustration in love. He feels that no one loves him and that he is uncared for:

I have had
Light loves, light friends, but no one ever loved me Whom I desired. So was it in our boyhood's days, So it persists.^4

His attempts to get rid of his loneliness land him into the trap of Phayllus with whom Fate seems to connive to cause an utter void in the life of Timocles. The murder of Antiochus only adds to his feeling of frustration and agony. It does not

1. Sri Aurobindo, Collected Plays, B.C.L. Vol. 6, 461.
2. Ibid., p. 433.
mitigate his jealousy either. He finds himself a lone walker
in the world:

I must live for ever
Unfriended, solitary in the shades;
But thou and she will lie at ease inarmed
Deep in the quiet happy asphodel
And hear the murmur of Elysian winds
While I walk lonely.

He suffers immensely, paying heavily for his own weaknesses.

The following words spoken by him at the close of the play,
present a sharp contrast to the bright hope with which his
career opened in Syria:

Something has snapped in me
Physicians cannot bind. Thou, Prince Nicanor,
Art from the royal blood of Syria sprung
And in thy line Seleucus may descend
Untainted from his source. Brother, brother,
We did not dream that all would end like this,

... ... ... ... ... ... ... ...
... ... ... ... But now unto eternity
We are divided.

In Timocles' mind, heart and action we find "the coexistence
of contraries — the noble sentiments and meanest of
passions." Such a man is bound to suffer. But the suffering
is purposive here too, so that the theme of the play is
highlighted once again. Fate has worked through his own
passions and temperament. But his suffering does enmmble him
as is evident from his words of deep repentance after all has

1. Sri Aurobindo, Collected Plays, B.C.L. Vol.6, 469.
2. Idem.
been ruined in his life and around it. Like Cleone, he also realises that "light love ends wretchedly" and that Fate is invincible.

Rodogune in the play is presented as a paragon of beauty, "a moonlit purity" whose fair exterior is matched by a fairer interior. Apart from her "pale loveliness" and "dim mystery", what attracts one's attention is a remarkable poise characterising her mind and spirit:

She is all silent, gentle, pale and pure,
Dim-natured with a heart as soft as sleep.

She seems to live in perfect peace with life. Of life she herself says:

Always I strive to make it sweet
By outward harmony with circumstance
And calm soul within that is above
My fortune.

She has faith in Fate, and has acquiesced in it as the doer of all: "Nature and Fate do all." As a result, she has calm and serenity, an ability to face even the worst in life without allowing her self-possession and harmony to be disturbed in the least. She knows no impetuous passions, but enjoys the placidity of deep emotions. She is "monarch of a calm royalty within", and her blood is her subject.

The steadfastness of her character is exemplary. It is evinced through her "consistent, courageous and self-sacrificing love." A perfect contrast to Timocles, she is not a wavering mind, not "clay for each passing circumstance to alter." She refuses to be tempted by Phayllus who promises not to rest till she is crowned the queen of Syria and asks her in return to respond favourably to Timocles' love:

**PHAYLLUS**

... The royal Timocles
By your beauty strived ensnared. ...

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

**RODOGUNE**

You speak a language that I will not hear.

**PHAYLLUS**

... Are you not Parthia's daughter? Do you not wish
To sit upon a throne?

**RODOGUNE**

Not by your help.
Nor as the bride of Syrian Timocles.
What are these things you speak?

The firmness and candour with which she rejects Phayllus' offer of treaty is remarkable. Phayllus chooses to take her for a

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3. Ibid., p. 373.
common woman who can be tempted with his promises of "empire, joy/All the heart needs, the pleasures bodies use." But he is mistaken. Giving him a befitting reply, Rodogune says:

I need no empire save my high-throned heart,
I seek no power save that of sceptred love,
I ask no help beyond what Ormuzd gives.
Enough, I thank you.

Rodogune's beauty is too pure, too "ethereal" and "unsensual" to be deserved by Timocles. She is "heaven-pure/And must like heaven be by worship won." Timocles claims that his love "grows a cloistered worship." But Rodogune knows he "danced a radiant and inconstant moth/Above the Egyptian blossoms." She says "such wild passion burning under his lids/I never thought to see in human eyes." She is in love with Antiochus, but, like a true selfless lover, she keeps it concealed in her heart, for she does not want to bring "misfortune" on him through her love. Once she has given her heart away to Antiochus, she is his for ever: "I am thine, thine, thine for ever." She cannot be persuaded to marry

1. Sri Aurobindo, Collected Plays, B.C.L. Vol. 6, 374.
2. Idem.
3. Ibid., p. 369.
4. Ibid., p. 376.
5. Ibid., p. 375.
7. Ibid., p. 383.
Timocles even if the marriage were to mean queenship of Syria. She tells this to Eunice flatly when the latter conveys to the former Cleopatra's wish that she should marry Timocles:

God gave my heart and mind; they are not hers
To force into this vile adultery.
I am a Parthian princess, of a race
Who choose one lord and cleave to him for ever
Through death, through fire, through swords, in hell, in heaven.

These are not mere words — she proves what she says by offering her all as sacrifice at the altar of true love when the need arises. Antiochus proposes to her to go to Parthia, her country, as he sees Rodogune's life in danger along with his own. But Rodogune says:

I have no country, I have only thee,
I shall be where thou art; it is all I know
And all I wish for.

She shall be where Antiochus is. When he dies, she goes to join him "behind Death's barrier." Unable to stand the ghastly sight of Antiochus lying in a pool of blood, she falls down dead on his body.

Rodogune is, thus, projected as "the very embodiment of love", who, when she dies, "leaves behind a tale of pure and self-sacrificing love." Through her character, Sri Aurobindo

seeks to project once again his favourite theme of the supremacy of pure and self-sacrificing love, and its purifying and ennobling effect on man's soul. This is the main theme of Sri Aurobindo's plays like Vasavadutta and Eric and also the principal vision of Rodogune. Antiochus and Rodogune are immortalised by love. "The passion of oneness" their two hearts had been in life, "denies the steps of death for ever." They "lie at ease in armed/Deep in the quiet happy asphodel/And hear the murmur of Elysian winds," whereas Timocles suffers death-in-life.

The character of Antiochus is transmuted — elevated and ennobled — as a result of Rodogune's pure love for him. Rodogune accepts Antiochus in the midst of danger and uncertainty effecting a change in the warrior's heart. He learns what love is — what love can dare. But she rejects Timocles only to make him a maddened beast constrained in the cage of his own passions, who becomes so inhuman as to reject mother, brother, friend, and all. This illustrates the power of love. Antiochus comes to accept fate and looks to the greater truth and reality beyond which man moves through many lives, bound by fate, until he can overcome it. He comes to know that men are hammered and given to the fire by the gods until they are

2. Ibid., p. 469.
perfect instruments. This change in him is due to the influence of Rodogune, his love. Sri Aurobindo believes that love is the supreme force on the earth. It can effect transformation of man's character and reawakening of his soul. That is why, Rodogune, who is the symbol of true love that enlightens and ennobles, lends her name to the play.

Thus, Rodogune, which underlines the purposiveness of suffering, is a parable of the working of Fate and also a celebration of the supremacy of love, its power and glory. Rodogune has been depicted in the play in such a way that she exemplifies acquiescence in Fate as well as true love, one lending her harmony and peace and the other giving her glory of immortality. Love denying "the steps of death for ever" is not an idea peculiar to Rodogune. It is, in fact, Sri Aurobindo reiterated theme which he formally presents in 'Urvasie', 'Love and Death', and Savitri. In addition, of course, to his other plays like Eric, Vasavadutta and The Viziers of Bassora, Rodogune seeks to project the power of love simultaneously with presenting Fate as an executive of the Divine Will, as an agent of spiritual evolution. If it presents Fate as the great Victor and the Doer of all, it also sings of love as the great Redeemer, the Saviour of mankind from all ills and evils. It anticipates the message Sri Aurobindo gives through Eric:

Some day surely
The world too shall be saved from death by love.

Chapter V

Eric

Eric, along with Vasavadutta, was written in Pondicherry in 1912 or 1913. It was first published in Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual in 1960 and also issued in book-form in the same year.¹ From chronological point of view, it is considered to be the fourth of Sri Aurobindo's complete plays.

Sri Aurobindo's preference for existing themes rather than the invented ones is apparent in Eric also. Dr. Prema Nand Kumar who makes a scholarly attempt to trace the sources of Eric's narrative², is of the opinion that, keeping in view his fondness for re-charging existing themes and legends with new significances, one may reasonably suppose that Sri Aurobindo dived into the "abundant deep" of the sagas of Norwa and Sweden to get the story of Eric's rise to power. The main characters in the play belong to actual legend or history, though it has not been possible so far to identify Eric with

¹ Sri Aurobindo, Collected Plays, B.C.L. Vol. 6, (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1971), Bibliographical Note.
² The play referred to in Collected Plays, B.C.L. Vol. 6, in this chapter, is Eric, unless otherwise mentioned.
any legendary or historical character. "Olaf, Swegen and Eric are common names in the history of Norway, but no one seems to be the exact prototype of the play's hero"¹, she says. Erik XIV of history, a king of Sweden in the 16th century, ambitious, quarrelsome and mentally deranged towards the close of his life, is the subject of two historical plays, both titled *Erik XIV*, written by August Strindberg (1849-1912) and Bergt Linder. In Linder's play, which is a tragedy in the pre-Romantic style of 1780's, the contestants are little better than criminals.

Henrik Ibsen wrote plays, on the historical and legendary characters of Norway, his country, like *The Pretenders* and *The Vikings of Helgeoland*. The former is based upon the early Norse history and depicts the rivalry between Skule, the King by actual right and Hakon, the King 'by confidence'. In the latter, the heroine is Hiordis. She is heard saying in the play: "Erik is the King in Norway — do you rise against him! Many goodly warriors will join thee and swear thee fealty."

On the basis of the facts mentioned above, Dr. Prema Nandkumar reaches the following conclusion:

The interest shown by Strindberg and Ibsen in Norse history, and the vogue of these dramatists among the intellectuals at the turn of the century, may have drawn Sri Aurobindo also to the same fountain-source. In any case, he was deeply familiar with Norse history and legends before writing *Eric*, and he may have drawn upon them liberally.²

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2. Ibid., p. 96.
Then, on the basis of evidence from Carl Hallendorf and Adolf Schuck's *The History of Sweden* (1929), which mentions a thirteenth century historical character, the nearest to Sri Aurobindo's hero, she goes on to say that "the origins of the Eric-Swegn conflict (one elected, the other proclaiming his hereditary right) may be traced to Swedish and Norwegian history."¹

According to Dr. A.K. Sinha, however, Eric's story, "in its outline, has its origin in the Scandinavian mythologies about the sons and daughters of Odin, Thor and Freya, in the story of Eric, the legendary king of Sweden and in *Aslaug's Knight* — a romance by Dena Motte Foque."² It was translated by Carlyle in *German Romance*.

*Eric*, however, is a new creation for, whatever his sources, Sri Aurobindo transmutes and recreates the material to adapt it to his scheme of things and to project through it his vision of life. For him 'the truth of history' is not so important as 'the truth of a man's character'. He is interested mainly in delineating man's growth through the clash of circumstance and character, through the interplay of the one on the other. As such he does not feel obliged "to be historically accurate."

Writing to Dilip Kumar Roy in this regard, he says:

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Poetry, drama, fiction also are not bound to be historically accurate; they cannot indeed develop themselves successfully unless they deal freely with any historical material they may choose to include or take for their subject. One can be faithful to history if one likes but even then one has to expand and deal creatively with characters and events, otherwise the work will come to nothing or little.  

Sri Aurobindo is not only a litterateur, but a literary critic also. He has his own dramatic theories, containing significant affirmations on the nature and function of drama. Referring to the object of drama he says that it cannot serve its great purpose by the mere presentation of life and action and passions, however truly, vigorously and abundantly they may be portrayed. It must have an interpretative vision; the vision must have an explicit or implicit idea of life and the human being; the interpretative vision and the idea must appear to arise out of the inner life of characters through an evolution of speech leading to an evolution of action. According to him, the true movement and result in all great drama is really psychological and the outward action is only either its symbol or else its condition of culmination.

From the view point of interpretative vision, all the plays of Sri Aurobindo qualify to be considered as true dramas. They all interpret life and project a life-vision. The life-thought they contain may pertain to his philosophy of evolution, or to

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2. Ibid., pp. 67-68.
Love presented as "the great solvent of all varieties of evil", and the "supreme truth and goodness and power."\(^1\) It may be related also to Fate as the chief executive of Divine Will. But though Sri Aurobindo's plays may be considered as almost dramatic renderings of his philosophic ideas, they are considerably interesting even as pure dramatic achievements.

Sri Aurobindo, it seems, agreed with Arthur Miller who says that the drama "must communicate as it proceeds and it literally has no existence if it must wait until the audience goes home to think before it can be appreciated. It is the art of present tense par excellence."\(^2\) This is evident if we look at Eric whose "arguments have an immediacy of appeal."\(^3\)

Eric contains a theme with which Sri Aurobindo remained almost as preoccupied as he was with the theme of evolution. The play is purported to be an exposition of the truth of Love, the truth that finds expression in some way or the other in all his works, and the sublimest in Savitri. Eric anticipates Savitri.

It points to the truth of which the great epic is a masterly exposition when it says:

\textit{Some day surely The world too shall be saved from death by Love.} \(^4\)

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3. \textit{Idem.}
The victory of Love over Death really takes place in Savitri, but it is not so in Eric. However, it does form part of Eric's optimism which is inspired by his victory over Aslaug. Motivated by the intensest feeling of hate, she fights against love with her whole might before finally yielding to the imperatives of love. So, Eric's victory over Aslaug is to be interpreted as Love's triumph over Hate and Eric is to be seen as dramatisation of the conflict between the two extreme emotions.

Some sort of struggle between love and hate is to be witnessed in Vasavadutta also. It goes on for a time in Vasavadutta's heart. But, ultimately, love gets the better of hate. The resistance she offers to love which she feels for Vuthsa melts away with love reigning her heart sovereign. But the "mild struggle" between love and contempt in Vasavadutta can hardly be compared to the "agonising mental drama" it becomes in Eric. Here the action is more psychological than physical, so that the play fulfils another requirement of great drama as conceived by Sri Aurobindo. With the shift of emphasis from external to the inner action in the play, the conflict has naturally been delineated with greater intensity and vividness and on a larger scale.

Eric, a great warrior, is elected the king of Norway with the help of the people of the northern Norway. But the south, claiming to be the real Norway, disputes Eric's right
to Norwegian throne. Swegn, the Earl of Trondhjem, being the son of the late King Olaf Thorleikson, has hereditary right to Norway's kingship. Therefore, he refuses to yield to Eric, and a battle follows in which Eric emerges victorious. Swegn still refuses to owe allegiance to Eric who, for the first time in the country's history, has been able to conquer and unite it within a short period of three years. He is called "a mere usurper", an "upstart", and "fortune-fed adventurer". Aslaug, Swegn's sister, considers him not "an earl of Odin's stock", but "a pauper house/Of one poor vessel and a narrow fiord/And some pine-trees possessor."

This leads to the conflict on the physical level in the play. Eric is determined to maintain the newly forged unity of Norway and to put down with iron-hand any attempt to disrupt it. About Swegn, who "lifts his outlawed head" against him, Eric says to Gunthur, one of the Earls:

He only now resits,
Champion of discord, ruthless, fell and fierce
This partisan and pattern of the past.
Such men are better with the Gods than here
To trouble earth. Let him not live, if taken. 1

As for Swegn, he is equally adamant on challenging Eric's authority:

I have the snow for friend and, if it fails,
The arms of death are broad enough for Swegn,
But not subjection. 2

1. Sri Aurobindo, Collected Plays, B.C.L. Vol. 6, 481.
2. Ibid., p. 541.
Eric, therefore, confronts a problem. The unity he has attained through "the swiftness of his sword seems elusive, for it might not last when the sword is broken or when death proves swifter. So, he is in search of a power which proves more effective than "wisdom and force" which he has. What can that power be, he asks. Ready comes the reply to his question as it were, a reply which is also a very apt statement of the theme of Eric:

Love is the hoop of the gods
Hearts to combine.
Iron is broken, the sword
Sleeps in the grave of its lord;
Love is divine.1

Eric thinks this must be the answer of Freya, the mother of Heaven, whom he had forgotten. Unity or integrity can be achieved not through sword but by winning men's hearts. But how to do it is the question before Eric's "iron mind". The sweet words of the song being sung by Aslaug still float in the air:

When Love desires Love,
Then Love is born;
Nor golden gifts compel,
Nor even beauty's spell
Escapes his scorn.
When Love desires Love,
Then Love is born.2

Here is the answer to the problem Eric is faced with. From the "light lips and casual thoughts" of Aslaug, Sri Aurobindo

1. Sri Aurobindo, Collected Plays, B.C.L. Vol. 6, 471.
2. Ibid., p. 478.
suggests, it is the gods who speak. This song, sung by Aslaug in all innocence, contains the whole truth Eric seeks to highlight. It epitomises the theme of the play.

The real conflict in the play, however, is the one that goes on in the mind of Aslaug, the conflict on the psychological plane. Aslaug and Hertha, Swegn's wife, come to Eric's court disguised as dancing-girls, to lure him into the trap of beauty and music and to do him to death at the earliest opportunity. They want to avenge their wounded family honour and pave the way for Swegn's emperorship. Eric seems to have fallen in love with Aslaug at the first sight, "the girl with antelope eyes/And the high head so proudly lifted up/Upon a neck as white as any swan's."¹ Aslaug's first reaction after seeing Eric is likewise one of strong attraction towards his personal charms:

A mighty man!
He has the face and figure of a god,—
A marble emperor with brilliant eyes.
How came the usurper by a face like that?²

In the very next breath she refers contemptuously to the "root" Eric sprang from. The reference, however, is alternated by such words as the following:

He has a strength, an iron strength, and Thor Strikes hammerlike in his uplifted sword.
His voice is like a chant of victory.³

1. Sri Aurobindo, Collected Plays, B.C.L. Vol. 6, 482.
2. Ibid., pp 483-84.
3. Ibid., p. 484.
So far there is no real conflict in Aslaug's mind. Her natural attraction to Eric's beauty does not shake her in her resolve. When Hertha tells her if Eric is not of Odin's race, "Odin is for him", Aslaug retorts:

But fate alone decides, when all is said, Not Thor, not Odin, I will try my Fate.1

Aslaug's pride spurs her into stronger resolve of vengeance on the usurper of Norway's throne. It incapacitates her (as it does in the case of Vasavadutta) to love Eric, in spite of the strong natural attraction. When Hertha asks her if she noticed the way Eric looked on her, Aslaug proudly answers:

I am fair.

Men look upon me.2

It is pride again that manifests itself when Aslaug says to Hertha:

I am not of the earth, To bound my actions by the common rule. I claim my kin with those whom Heaven's gaze Moulded supreme,—Swegn's sister, Olaf's child, Aslaug of Norway.3

Rightly, therefore, does Hertha think of Aslaug as "pride violent" and "loftiness intolerable".

Eric on his part is already bewitched by Aslaug's beauty—her "sweet imperious eyes"; "noble stature" and "lofty look",

1. Sri Aurobindo, Collected Plays, B.C.L. Vol. 6, 484.
2. Ibid., p. 486.
3. Idem.
the beauty which is so "compelling" that "no man can gaze on and possess his soul." 1

Suspicion, however, is bred in Eric's subtle mind about her true identity by Aslaug herself. She is provoked into saying or doing things which tend to divulge what she must keep a secret. That is why Eric tells her:

Better play thy part.  
If thou art really nobler than thou feign'st,  
Declare it. If thou art a dancing-girl,  
I have bought thee for my hire, thy song, thy dance,  
Thy body. I shrink not from whatever way I can  
Possess thee more than hesitates the sea to engulf  
What it embraces. 2

This may be a subtle move to lift the mask off the face of Aslaug. The mask really seems to have fallen when she cries out in anger:

King, thou speakest words  
I scorn to answer. 3

Eric fires another salvo:

Thou art an enemy who in disguise  
Enterest my court to know and break my plans. 4

The way she replies to the question, leaves no one in doubt about her noble birth. But picking up the fallen mask, she tells the Norwegian king that she has come to Norway not to

1. Sri Aurobindo, Collected Plays, B.C.L. Vol. 6, 488-89.  
2. Ibid., p. 490.  
3. Idem.  
4. Idem.
spy, but *to sing, to dance and earn.*

Then richly earn.

Aslaug, even then thou knowest why I looked
Upon thee, why I kept thee in my house.
Thou, thou hast given the means of my desire!
Yet if thy form and speech more nobly express
The truth of thee than thy vocation can,
Avow it, beg my clemency.

This is really too much and Aslaug flares up. However, she controls herself immediately. But how long can she, after all! As for Eric, he feels that he is in full control of Aslaug and she can hardly escape his "passionate will":

Because thou hast the lioness in thy mood,
Thou thought'st to play with Eric. It is I
Who play with thee. Thou liest in my grasp.
How will thou now escape my passionate will?

He goes on, then, to make a plain confession of his love for her:

I am enamoured of thy golden hair,
Thy body like the snow, thy antelope eyes,
Thy neck that seems to know it carries heaven
Upon it easily. Thy song, thy speech,
Thy rhythmic motion of thy gracious limbs
Walking or dancing, and the careless pride
That undulates in every gesture and tone,
Have seized upon me smiling sweet control.

As Eric has "not learnt to yield to any power/But to surprise, to force and to command," Aslaug must be either prisoner and

1. Sri Aurobindo, Collected Plays, B.C.L. Vol. 6, 492.
2. Idem.
3. Idem.
4. Idem.
5. Idem.
enemy or dancing-girl and purchased chattel.\(^1\) Hence a terrible and iron pressure on her mind. Eric gives her a necklace which she throws to the ground, obviously prompted by her mind. The mask falls once again revealing that she is not "the dancing-girl of Norway", but "some disguised, high-reaching, noble soul."\(^2\) A renewed effort to keep up the mask is made immediately after she recovers herself and is reminded of her humble role:

I am thy dancing-girl, King Eric. See I take thy necklace.\(^3\)

Eric has already seen through the mask. In plain words he says to Aslaug:

Take it; still be free.\(^4\)
As thou decidest, thy price or else my gift.

These moves and counter moves of Eric and Aslaug bring the latter to a stage where she both loves and hates Eric. The game of see-saw between love and hate continues through tense moments and deep breath-taking suspense for pretty long. The reader keeps his fingers crossed and watches the progression of things with increasing interest till love emerges victorious in the end and the theme of love's supremacy and glory is underlined.

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3. Idem.
4. Idem.
In the psyche of Aslaug which has been turned into a virtual battle-field, the warring forces are her love for Eric, a god of wisdom and force and beauty, and her hatred for him for being the usurper of her brother's right. In the battle, Eric seems as much in control of himself as of the external situation, whereas Aslaug seems to lose control over herself as well as over the situation. A character whose personality is centred in the vital, she keeps swinging to extremes, from the passion of love to the passion of hate, and thus appears caught in the maelstrom of intense inner conflict. Eric on the contrary, fights a winning battle, his victory taking time only because he gives Aslaug a long rope. He says to her:

No light decision I would have thee make,
But one that binds us both. I give thee time.
Ponder and let thy saner mind prevail,
Not courage most perverse, though ardent, rule.
Confess thy treason, Aslaug, trust thy King.1

But Aslaug, it seems, would not be advised. She would rather let ardent and perverse courage rule her heart. She unwillingly admires Eric for his terrible subtleness, for being the mighty tyrant he is, but driven by the passion of hate, contemplates his murder at the same time. Her divided mind is shown in the following words she speaks to Hertha, who sees the former's love peeping through "new lustres" in her

"face and eyes". When Hertha asks Aslaug what Eric told her, she replies:

What did Eric say?

Eric to Aslaug, sister of King Swegn, A kingdom's price, Swegn's kingdom, And for him, My marble emperor, my god who loves, This mortal Odin? What for him? By force Shall he return to his effulgent throne?

Aslaug, however, denies that she has a "divided mind" or is "heart-perplexed." But the fact that she is getting less and less sure of herself, itself shows that she is fighting a losing battle against Eric and her love. Hertha advises her to make a show of love to Eric; but Aslaug refuses. Then Hertha says:

Give freedom but no license to his love, For when he thinks to embrace, we shall have struck.

Aslaug's reply vividly shows her mind at the moment:

And, Hertha, if a swift and violent heart Betrayed my will and overturned your plans? Is there no danger, Hertha, there?

Eric has no such fears. They believe that the anarchy of love disturbs even gods. But Eric "would be/Monarch of a

2. Ibid., p. 496.
3. Idem.
4. Ibid., p. 497.
5. Idem.
calm royalty within, /My blood my subject." ¹ He could "force a oneness" with Aslaug if he chose, but he uses restrain:

I see a tyranny I will delight in
And force a oneness; I will violently
Compel the goddess that thou art. But I know
What soul is lodged within thee, thou as yet
Ignorest mine. I still hold in my strength,
Though it hungers like a lion for the leap,
And give thee time once more; misuse it not.
Beware, provoke not the fierce god too much;
Have dread of his flame round thee.²

Aslaug breaks into a laughter to hear this, showing however, only the intensity of her inner conflict:

Odin and Freya, you have snares! But see,
I have not thrown the dagger from my heart,
But clutch it still. How strange that look and tone,
That things of a corporeal potency
Not only travel coursing through the nerves
But seem to touch the seated soul within!
It was a moment's wave; for it has passed
And the high purpose in my soul lives on
Unconquerably intending to fulfil.³

The conflict between Aslaug's heart's desire and her mind's purpose, instead of ceasing as a result of her efforts, gains in intensity. The mind spurs to move forward to kill Eric, the heart holds her back:

A marble statue gloriously designed
Without that breath our cunning maker gives,
One feels it pain to break. This statue breathe!
Out of these eyes there looks an intellect

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1. Sri Aurobindo, Collected Plays, B.C.L. Vol. 6, 499.
2. Ibid., p. 502.
3. Idem.
That claims us all; this marble holds a heart,
The heart holds love. To break it all, to lay
This glory of God's making in the dust!
Why do these thoughts besiege me? Have I then —
No, it is nothing; it is pity works,
It is an admiration physical.
O he is far too great, too beautiful
For a dagger's penetration. It would turn,
The point would turn; it would deny itself
To such a murder.1

Aslaug, who once boasted, "There is/A trouble in my blood.
I do not shake"2, now shrinks and trembles at the thought of
striking Eric. The reason is not far to seek. In spite of
all her pretences and feignings, she fails to conceal her love
for Eric. Eric knows the reality, so he says to her: "All is
not lion-like and masculine there/Within."3 At the very first
use of force by the king, Aslaug seems to give in. When Eric
holds her suddenly in his embrace and begins to kiss her, she
exclaims:

O gods! I love! O loose me!4

The moment is most opportune for Eric to exhort her:

Sweetly, O Aslaug, to thy doom consent,
The doom to love, the death of hatred. Draw
No useless curtaining of shamed refusal
Between our yearnings, passionately take
Thy leap of love across the abyss of hate.

1. Sri Aurobindo, Collected Plays, B.C.L. Vol. 6, 503.
2. Ibid., p. 501.
3. Ibid., p. 507.
4. Ibid., p. 506.
Force not thy soul to anger. Leave veils and falterings
For meaner hearts. Between us let there be
A noble daylight.1

The exhortation to take "the leap of love across the abyss
of hate" is meant for the whole mankind. It is indeed the
message and meaning of Eric, its most obvious theme.

The following dialogue shows that Aslaug, now in the arms
of Eric, has taken the leap already:

ASLAUG

Let me think awhile!
Thy arms, thy lips prevent me.

ERIC

Think not! Only feel.

Love only.2

ASLAUG

O Eric, king, usurper, conqueror!
O robber of men's hearts and kingdoms! O
Thou only monarch!

ERIC

Art thou won at last,
O woman who disturb'st the musing stars
With passion? Soul of Aslaug, art thou mine?

ASLAUG (sinking on a seat)

I cannot think. I have lost myself! My heart
Desires eternity in an embrace.2

1. Sri Aurobindo, Collected Plays, B.C.L. Vol. 6, 506.
2. Ibid., pp. 506-7.
Here, the playwright subtly refers to another theme—the victory of heart over mind, suggested by Eric's "Think not! Only feel!" In Eric, love seems to beget love; the barriers between the souls of Aslaug and Eric seem to break, the heart seems to assert its supremacy. The victory of heart over mind, however, is not a smooth affair. What Aslaug says above proves to be the sweep of an impetuous passion, not the sane voice of a deep and placid emotion. Eric has knowledge of the human heart and knows that "opposite passions wrestle there with gusts/And treacherous surprises", as happens in the case of Aslaug's heart here. A fierce storm blows within her. She implores Eric not to trust her sudden heart:

I know no longer if I am my own,
The world swims round me and heaven's points are changed.
A purpose! I had one. I had besides
A brother! Had! What have I know? You gods,
How have you rushed upon me? Leave me, King.
It is not good to trust a sudden heart.
The blood being quiet, we will speak again
Like souls that meet in heaven, without disguise.

The conflict now is at its worst. Torn between two opposite pulls, Aslaug does not know which way she should go:

Leave me, King, awhile
To wrestle with myself and calmly know
In this strange strife the gods have brought me to,
Which thing of these in me must live and which
Be dumb for ever.

2. Ibid., p. 508.
3. Idem.
Eric has, no doubt, been able to bring to surface the painstakingly concealed love of Aslaug for him. His "restrained violences" have drawn out her loving soul. But a gulf between her will and heart yet remains to be bridged. There are indications also that "the older Aslaug rises against the new."1

Aslaug, let not the darker gods prevail.
Put off thy pride and take up truth and love.2

She asks herself repentantly:

What was it seized on me, O heavenly powers?
I have given myself, my brother's throne and life,
My pride, ambition, hope, and grasp, and keep
Shame only.3

She resolves once again to stick to her old purpose of killing Eric. But Hertha decides to help Eric in the meantime:

I must act at once.
Or this may have too suddenly a tragic close.
Not blood, but peace, not death, you Gods, but life,
But tranquil sweetness!4

Fate is with her, working towards the same end. Aslaug too knows that "Fate alone decides,.../Not Thor, not Odin."5

1. Sri Aurobindo, Collected Plays, B.C.L. Vol. 6, 509.
2. Ibid., p. 510.
3. Ibid., p. 512.
4. Ibid., p. 513.
5. Ibid., p. 484.
She believes that —

...she alone is prompter on our stage,
Things seen and unforeseen move by a doom,
Not freely. Eric's sword and Aslaug's song,
Music and thunder are but petty chords
Of one majestic harp. She builds, she breaks,
She thrones, she slays, as needed for her harmony.

According to Aslaug, if love is inspired in her heart, it is god's doing. If Eric commands her to dance before him, it's again due to Fate. That is why, in her fight against her heart, she seeks gods' help:

Help me, you gods, help me against my heart.
I will strike suddenly, I will not wait.

Sri Aurobindo shows that fate & gods cannot play a negative role. They are for love, which is invincible and must prevail. Hertha in the play acts as Fate's instrument as does Eric. So, the two collaborate and are eventually victorious. This is suggestive of another major theme, i.e., Fate. To highlight it Sri Aurobindo writes one whole play, Roodcune. It has been hinted at by passages scattered over all his plays. To accept Fate's invincibility as the Law of the world and as God's Will, to collaborate with her rather than oppose her due to ignorance, is the way to peace. Eric and Hertha win, for they, unlike Aslaug, are free from

2. Ibid., p. 512.
egoistic pride and can see what Fate wills.

Hertha, after negotiating terms with Eric for peace of Norway with admirable ingenuity and shrewdness, divulges to him the secret about her and Aslaug — their identity, their treason and plots:

Thy enemies are here,
No dancing-girls, but Hertha, wife of Swegn,
And Aslaug, child of Olaf Thorleikson,
His sister.1

This is a decisive step against Aslaug as she is now left alone with her plot which is bound to misfire. Eric grants Hertha all her three demands in return of her gesture of cooperation — life and liberty for Swegn, life and pardon for Aslaug and forgiveness for her ownself. He, then, rightly rejoices in his victory which, indeed, is the victory of Freya, the goddess of Love:

O Freya Queen,
Thou help' st me even as Thor and Odin did.
I make my Norway one.2

Eric feels that his victory has issued from a new knowledge which is the knowledge of his own self. He has realised his "wide flaw" — the lack of love in him: "There was the wide flaw, —/The coldness of the radiance that I was."3 Because of the flaw he was incomplete as a creation:

1. Sri Aurobindo, Collected Plays, B.C.L. Vol.6, 518.
2. Ibid., p. 521.
3. Ibid., p. 522.
It left my soul the torso of a god, 
A great design unfinished and my works
Mighty and crude like things admired that pass,
Bare of the immortality that keeps
The ages.1

Without love "the trinity of glorious manhood"2 remains incomplete. In the beginning of the play, Eric says :

Wisdom and force I have; one strength's behind
I have not; I would search it out.3

He has found it out now :

Strength in the nature, wisdom in the mind,
Love in the heart complete the trinity
Of glorious manhood.4

He realises the truth contained in the words of Aslaug though uttered in a cavalier manner :

O, the word they spoke was true!
'Tis Love, 'tis Love fills up the gulfs of Time.
By Love we find our kinship with the stars,
The spacious uses of the sky. God's image
Lives nobly perfect in the soul he made,
Reflected in the nature of a man.5

Such hymns to love are quite in keeping with the main theme of the whole play which seems to have been written to celebrate love's power, grace and supremacy. Eric's triumph over Aslaug is made possible largely through love. If

2. Idem.
3. Ibid., p. 577.
4. Ibid., p. 522.
5. Ibid., p. 523.
Aslaug's heart is delivered from revolt and fierce hate, it is through the power of love. Love tames an unruly heart, rids it of its waywardness, and liberates it from the violent impulses that trouble it and dissipate its energies. About heart and love's impact on it, Eric says:

Unruled, it follows violent impulses,
This way, that way; working calamity,
Dreams that it helps the world. What shall I do,
Aslaug, with an unruly noble heart?
Shall we not load it with the chains of love,
And rob it of its treasured pain and wrath
And bind it to its own supreme desire?
Richly 'twould beat beneath an absolute rule
And sweetly liberated from itself
By a golden bondage.1

Liberated from its treasured pain, wrath and hatred, Aslaug's heart is bound to its supreme desire. The sweet liberation is effected through the bondage of love, a golden bondage.

Aurobindo shows that love's powers are great and mysterious are its ways. This is well illustrated by the miracle it works in the play in the form of Aslaug's surrender. Unaware that Hertha has betrayed all their secret to Eric, Aslaug tenaciously pursues her goal to attack Eric suddenly when she performs the scheduled 'dance with the dagger'. But she is overpowered by love:

O gods, I did not know myself till now,
Thrown in this furnace, Odin's irony
Shaped me from Olaf's seed! I am in love
With chains and servitude and my heart desires,
Fluttering, like a wild bird within its cage,
A tyrant's harshness.2

2. Ibid., p. 527.
The mind proves powerless; her heart, her senses and indeed her entire being is held in sway by love. Eric knows this:

The power to strike has gone out of her arm
And only in her stubborn thought survives.1

So he feigns to sleep, when Aslaug returns to his chamber, to see if she attacks. Finding the opportunity most favourable to her design she says to herself:

If I must strike, it could be only now;
For time is like a sapper, mining still
The little resolution that I keep.
Swægn's death or life upon that little stands,
Swægn's death or life and such an easy stroke!
Yet so impossible to lift my hand! 2

Twice she lifts the dagger and twice she lowers it, then throws it away in desperation and falls at Eric's feet.

The victory of love over hate, however, is not yet complete. She still has feeling of bitter self-abasement:

Eric of Norway, live and do thy will
With Aslaug, sister of Swægn and Olaf's child,
Aslaug of Trondheim! For her thought is grown
A harlot and her heart a concubine,
Her hand her brother's murderess .3

Her frustration and indignation are due to the defeat of her "high intention" by her "passionate body". Eric would like her to submit herself to him "without ashamed reserve"4; not

1. Sri Aurobindo, Collected Plays, B.C.L. Vol.6, 528.
2. Ibid., p. 529.
3. Ibid., p. 530.
4. Ibid., p. 531.
to recoil from her heart, but "let its choice be absolute" over her soul. But Aslaug's self-abasement continues unabated. Eric now asks her to kill him if she so chooses, and promises not to defend him if he is attacked. He wants her to kill him or to gift to him both his life and kingdom:

My life and kingdom twice are in thy hands  
And I will keep them only as thy gift.2

Eric knows that Fate is on his side and Aslaug is full of love for him and hence she cannot but surrender. He is right, for Aslaug surrenders to him, saying:

O Eric, is not my heart already thine,  
My body, thine, my soul into thy grasp  
Delivered? I rejoice that God has played  
The grand comedian with my tragedy  
And trapped me in the snare of thy delight.3

Sri Aurobindo through Eric lyrically expresses here his belief in the all conquering power of love:

Aslaug, the world's sole woman! thou cam'st here  
To save for us our hidden hopes of joy  
Parted by old confusion. Some day surely  
The world too shall be saved from death by Love.4

The play, thus, has a predominant theme of Love. It sets forth a celebration of the heart's triumph over the mind — "of the heart of love over the mind of hate", — of

1. Sri Aurobindo, Collected Plays, B.C.L. Vol. 6, 531.
2. Ibid., p. 532.
3. Ibid., p. 534.
4. Idem.
a calm royalty within over a passionate wayward heart.

Love not only gets better of Aslaug's hate, but also of the rebellious heart of Swegn. When Eric starts on his final campaign against him, there is a unique self-assurance in his heart because he goes "with mercy and from love."¹ In his peace proposals, he offers Swegn the Earldom of Trondhjem, "honours, wealth and state"², and urges him to accept the offer considering his "country's wounds."³ But Swegn is too proud, too stubborn, and too conscious of his noble birth. He has too little regard, it seems, for national interest and honour to yield to Eric. The peace offer is turned down arrogantly and obdurately, and Gunthur, Eric's emissary of peace, receives an acrimonious message for his lord:

Think'st thou that to the upstart I shall yield, The fortune-fed adventurer, the boy Favoured by the ironic gods? ...

... ... ... ...  ...  ...  ...  Go, tell thy King, Swegn of the ancient house rejects his boons. Not terms between us stand, but wrath, but blood, I would have flayed him on a golden cross And kept his women for my household thralls, Had I prevailed. Can he not do as much That he must chaffer and market Norway's crown? These are the ways of Kings, strong, terrible And arrogant; full of sovereignty and right. Force in a King's his warrant from the gods. By force and not by bribes and managements

1. Sri Aurobindo, Collected Plays, B.C.L. Vol. 6, 537.
2. Ibid., p. 540.
3. Idem,
Empires are founded! But your chief was born
Of huckstering earls who lived by prudent gains.
How should he imitate a royal flight
Or learn the leap of Kings upon their prey?1

Swegn's aversion for Eric, his towering pride, his obtrusive
sense of nobility, his rashness and obstinacy and narrow
sense of loyalty do not allow him to a magnanimous surrender
to the greater cause of Norway's unity and greatness. Eric,
however, holds it dearest to his heart and must achieve it
irrespective of "pebbles" like Swegn obstructing his march.
Full of sound and fury, Swegn is like the cloud that roars
before it rains. But Eric "is the thunderbold that strikes/
And threatens only afterwards."2 Swegn is defeated and
brought captive to Eric's court at Yara to submit to him,
the "earth's mightiest man"3 He is already unnerved to know
that Hertha and Aslaug are Eric's captives, that his "Fate
has wandered into Eric's camp"4 and that his "soul is made
his prisoner."5 Yet he does not surrender. Eric now
understands that Swegn's submission can be effected "not by
love only, but by love and force"6:

This man must lower his fierceness to the fierce,
He must be beggared of the thing left, his pride
And know himself for clay.7

1. Sri Aurobindo, Collected Plays, B.C.L. Vol. 6, 541-42.
2. Ibid., p. 544.
3. Ibid., p. 543.
4. Ibid., p. 544.
5. Idem.
6. Ibid., p. 546.
He knows that he is his "country's brain of unity," and says there is an "immortality that thinks in me, /That plans reasons." He is an instrument of God's Will, which must necessarily prevail. So he decides to rob Swegn of his too lofty sense of honour and pride. Swegn cannot be allowed to oppose his egoism, his pride and his desire against a country's fate, against the God's Will. Eric's wisdom devises a plan to humble Swegn. Hertha and Aslaug are asked to appear in their robes of dancing-girls. This is a sight Swegn cannot bear, for it implies an onslaught on his honour which a typical Scandinavian hero like Swegn must defend at all cost. He condemns Hertha's crooked scheming brain responsible for the present ignominy and shame to Olaf's race. He reprimands Aslaug also who goes over to Eric, his enemy, taking his fate and courage. But he cannot see them shamed before his own eyes. Hence he surrenders unconditionally to Eric to safeguard his family honour:

King, I have yielded, I accept thy boons. 
Heir of a starveling Earl, I bow my head 
Even to thy mercies. I am Olaf's son, 3
I shall be faithful to my own disgrace.

The surrender may be unconditional, although not free from grief and shame. But the self-abasement in Swegn's heart

1. Sri Aurobindo, Collected Plays, B.C.L. Vol.6, 547.
2. Ibid., p. 546.
3. Ibid., p. 554.
dissolves and yields place to happy surprise when he hears
Eric grant him unexpected boons:

Four prisons I assign to Olaf's son.
Thy palace first in Trondhjem, Olaf's roof,
Thy house in Nara, Eric's court — thy country,
To whom thou yieldest, Norway — and at last
My army's head when I invade the world. 1

Naturally overwhelmed by the King's magnanimity, Swegn says:

Eric, enough! Have I not yielded? Here
Let thy boons rest. 2

The victory of Eric over Swegn is thus complete. It
serves the purpose in the play of reinforcing the theme of
love, for Eric's victory is the victory of love over pride,
of force and wisdom tempered with love over haughty pride
of race, egoism and arrogance.

Like his creator, Aurobindo, who was a great champion
of the nationalist cause, her will, her unity, integrity
and peace. His mind is always full of "Norway's needs".
He pitied Swegn who forgets "to value Norway's will", and
wishes that the rebel, instead of being loyal to his race
and blood only, were devoted to the cause of his country:

O narrow obstinate heart!
Had this been but thy country or a cause
Men worship, then it would indeed have been
A noble blindness, but thou serv'st thy pride. 3

1. Sri Aurobindo, Collected Plays, B.C.L. Vol. 6, 555.
2. Ibid., p. 556.
3. Ibid., p. 549.
Like Sri Aurobindo again, Eric feels that a unity attained through revolution, through "the swiftness of a sword", may not last long. The warrior's sword can join, but it may fail to solder. Hence the search for a viable alternative to physical force. The alternative is found in Love. At the time of writing Perseus the Deliverer or poems like 'Baji Prabhu', in the first decade of this century, Sri Aurobindo preached fiery nationalism, and favoured the use even of the sword when necessary. His nationalist politics was not very different from revolutionary terrorism. But by the time Sri Aurobindo was writing Eric, his political thinking had undergone changes. The fact is amply borne by the play. Here Sri Aurobindo's hero has discovered love as the most effective instrument for national unification, as the surest way to durable peace and unity.

Apart from the theme of love enshrined in the play, there is also in it the theme of Fate. If Aslaug is won through love and force, Swegn is won through love and grace.

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1. Sri Aurobindo said:

"My idea was an armed revolution in the whole of India. What they (P. Mitra and Miss Ghosal, etc.) did at that time was very childish, killing a Magistrate and so on. Later it turned into terrorism and dacoities which were not at all my idea or intention.... — We wanted to give battle by creating a spirit in the race through guerilla warfare. But at the present stage of the science such things are impossible and bound to fail."

Love is there in both the cases, for it is the only true cementing force for hearts, it is "the hoop of the gods hearts to combine." But, Eric looks at his ultimate victory from one more angle. According to him, Aslaug, who had a violent and mighty purpose, yielded at last to the noble heart because it was Odin's purpose. Her recognition of the heart's desire was the inevitable surrender of the individual will to the Will Supreme, to Fate. Similarly, Eric views his victory over Swegn as the triumph of gods. Aslaug too thinks that all that Eric does must necessarily be well because he executes only gods' will:

What canst thou do but well?
For in thy every act and word I see
The gods compel thee.

She feels that God has averted the tragic course of her life and trapped her in the snare of Eric's delight. All this reflects faith in a Power that is loving, merciful and benignant. The conclusion she reaches on the basis of her personal experiences speaks of her faith in the Supreme Power she calls Fate:

Fate orders all and Fate I now
Have recognised all the world's mystic will
That loves and labours.

2. Ibić., p. 558.
3. Ibić., p. 536.
There is frequent reference to gods, to Fate in Eric and characters in it believe in her supremacy. Aslaug "sees Fate even in a sparrow's flight."\(^1\) Hertha is always conscious of gods' existence and asserts her faith in them variously. Eric's faith in Fate is evident. SEwgn attributes Eric's rise or his fall to Fate. From such frequent reference to Fate and from the characters' speeches and actions the impression is created that Eric seeks to project the truth of Fate, the truth that Fate does all even though human beings may be her instruments.

Fate is the most favourite word of Aslaug. According to her, Fate "alone is the prompter on our stage."\(^2\) But Eric thinks differently. "I think the soul is the master"\(^3\), he says. Thus is introduced in the play the problem of Fate versus Soul. Aslaug in the beginning speaks of Fate as the grim Necessity, the god that rules all men. She believes in Fate which is inexorable, in "Fate in the sense of iron determinism, an impersonal, subconscious force of Necessity" in "iron gods". But after she has awakened to love, the aspiration of man's innermost soul or his psychic being, and

3. *Idem*.
has begun to feel that "God has played/The grand comedian
with her tragedy" by trapping her in Eric's delight, her
views of Fate change. She says:

Fate orders all and Fate I now
Have recognised all the world's mystic will
That loves and labours.

To this Eric adds:

Because it labours and loves
Our hearts, our will are counted, are indulged.
Aslaug, for these few days in hope and trust
Anchor thy mind. I shall bring back thy joy.
Because I go with mercy and from love.

Thus Sri Aurobindo believes that the world is not governed
by a blind Power, a dire Necessity, or iron gods who do not
take into account aspirations of man's inmost soul. Aslaug
says: "A heart, not iron gods, overrules." Eric refers to
gods and voices the same opinion:

They shut our eyes and drive us, but at last
Our souls remember when the act is done.

Thus, between Fate and man's Soul, there is no contra-
diction whatsoever. To plead for Soul's supremacy over Fate
is to say by implication only that God's Will (Fate) is
subservient to God Himself which is what man's soul is. Soul

1. Sri Aurobindo, Collected Plays, B.C.L. Vol. 6, 534.
2. Ibid., p. 536.
3. Ibid., p. 537.
4. Idem.
5. Ibid., p. 569.
is God's own image:

Lives nobly perfect in the soul he made,
Reflected in the nature of a man. 1

There is "a divinity that sits in man", says Sri Aurobindo in Rodoquene. The seat of divinity is the soul. To harken to the soul's voice, therefore, is to heed God's voice. Fate is the mystic will, the heaven's secret, or the Law Divine operating through the whole universe. As such, faith in Fate means faith in God and vice versa. As far as Sri Aurobindo is concerned, he expresses through his plays faith in the Creator, faith in the Creation and faith in the Law of the Creation. Eric exudes this faith in ample measure.

The theme of evolution is also implied in Eric. As in the other plays of Sri Aurobindo, in Eric also characters are shown as growing — and developing and getting transformed through conflict into better human beings. The theme is presented here also through a dialectic as is done in Perseus the Deliverer or in Rodoquene etc. The action in the play originates from the criss-crossing of love and hate, the two extreme emotions, and all the characters involved emerge transmuted from the fierce conflict. Eric's "iron mind" is transmuted with the touch of love; he is no more "the coldness of the radiance" 2 that he was, his soul

1. Sri Aurobindo, Collected Plays, B.C.L. Vol. 6, 523.
2. Ibid., p. 522.
no more "the torso of a god"\(^1\) as, with the advent of love in his heart, the trinity of glorious manhood is completed and Eric is a whole man, capable of rendering Norway unified and peaceful. He has learnt from his "soul and life/The great wise pitiless calmness of the gods"\(^2\) enjoys "a calm royalty within"\(^3\), and lords over his blood.

Aslaug, the heroine of the play, is basically a character of the emotional type. She is thrown into the fire of conflict due to her own violent nature which knows only extreme emotions. Absolute and extreme in all things she must be, whether it is slaying or surrendering, hating or loving. Left free she moves like a lioness midst her passions. The sweet violent spirit badly needs love as the tamer of her heart, for "unruled, it follows violent impulses,/This way, that way:/working calamity,/Dreams that it helps the world."\(^4\) The impulsive unruly heart of Aslaug is loaded with "the chains of love."\(^5\) The result is its complete purgation of "its treasured pain and wrath,"\(^6\), its riddance from the bitter feeling of hate and revenge. A proud heart like that of Aslaug does not sink prostrate in

2. Ibid., p. 523.
3. Ibid., p. 499.
4. Ibid., p. 525.
5. Idem.
surrender to force easily; and when it yields after all, it is filled with grief and shame. But love washes it completely of all negative feelings so that a pure serene flame of love burns in the heart. Liberated from the agonising conflict between the warring passions in her heart, Aslaug now is happy that God has trapped her in the snare of Eric's delight.

Equally conspicuous is the transformation of the character of Swegn. A true representative of the Scandinavian traditions of heroism, culture and way of life, Swegn is ready to sacrifice all at the altar of his honour and pride, for apotheosis of the heroic ideal of honour is among the very best values of his country and the pattern of life in which he has been bred and brought up. Regrettably for Eric, however, his sense of honour is too narrow to encompass the honour of the whole country. It is he who "has been the invisible wall separating the love-locked hearts of Aslaug and Eric."¹ He is among those whose hearts are "rugged and hard/As Norway's mountains, as her glaciers cold/To all but interest and power and pride."² Eric calls him "champion of discord, ruthless, fell and fierce."³ According to him,

2. Sri Aurobindo, Collected Plays, B.C.L. Vol. 6, 482.
3. Ibid., p. 481.
Swegn is "a man treacherous and rude and ruthless." Like his sister, Swegn also is a violent spirit, impetuous and headstrong. Stubbornness, arrogance, pride and egoism are the hallmarks of his personality. He takes greater pride in his race and blood than in his country. Eric says:

O narrow obstinate heart!
Had this been but thy country or a cause
Men worship, then it would indeed have been
A noble blindness, but thou serv'st thy pride.

If from the ages he can buy this word,
"Swegn still was stubborn." That to him is all.

But Swegn, the stoical hero, also changes. His obduracy and pride dissolve under the force of Eric's mighty personality, his terrible subtle mind and love. From the fire of his confrontation with Eric, Swegn emerges pure gold of a man. A brave honourable warrior, Swegn's is a fearless nature that cannot be cowed down to submission or purchased through offers of wealth, honour and state. His surrender to Eric adds to Swégén's stature, for it means rising above the narrowness of sticking only to one's racial honour to embrace the greater cause of the nation's unity and honour.

Like the other characters in Eric, Swegn grows from a "life based on egoistic ignorance" to a life of "light and love" due to "the masterful, compelling and unselfish

1. Sri Aurobindo, Collected Plays, B.C.L. Vol.6, 549.
2. Idem.
character" of Eric. Eric can almost see through a man's character. He knows that Swegn too has a heart capable of loving. He loves his sister and wife deeply. That is why Eric decides to torture him into enlightenment by threatening an outrage on Swegn's family honour by making Hertha and Aslaug dance before him in the court. The trick works and Swegn's pride is broken. Eric wins his heart by gestures of love and grace. Now that his ego, which was the main barrier in the way of love's manifestation, is broken and love pervades the whole atmosphere, Swegn's loving heart manifests itself naturally and freely. The birth of love in his heart results into transformation of his being.

Significantly, these transmutations in the various "fundamental types of human personality"—"the subliminal Eric, the emotional Aslaug and the stoic-ethical Swegn"—are attributed in the play to love. Sri Aurobindo in the play wants to project love as the "best educator" in life. Eric says:

If man could seize the heart as palpably,
The forms, the limbs, the substance of this soul!

... ... ... ... ... ... ... ...

... Walled from ours are other hearts:
For if life's barriers twixt our souls were broken
Men would be free and our earth paradise
And the gods live neglected.

2. Ibid., p. 98.
3. Sri Aurobindo, op. cit.,
Then, as has been mentioned above, **Eric**, like Sri Aurobindo's other plays, presents the conflict of opposites, the resultant change pointing to the possibility of a better and higher life for man. Sri Aurobindo's experience of his own life had been that a crisis, a conflict, a dialectic means a change, a lurch forward, and a call to transformation. He had inferred the evolutionary dialectic also in the cosmic play which was a drama of confrontation, conflict, a push forward, a decisive change. This is insinuated and even underlined in several of his poems, including 'Ilion' and *Savitri*; and it is more or less explicit in his dramas.¹

*Eric* in the play is shown as attaining the perfection of the three-fold nature: strength in the nature, wisdom in the mind and love in the heart. Besides, he has surrendered his individual will to the will of Odin and lives to accomplish the work Odin has entrusted to him:

> But Odin gave the work to me. I came
> Into this mortal frame for Odin's work.²

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1. Sri Aurobindo, in a letter to his wife, on Feb. 17, 1908 wrote:

> "...From now on I no longer am the master of my own will. Like a puppet I must go wherever God takes me; like a puppet I must do whatever He makes me do..."


Unlike his rival, Swegn, whose character presents a sharp contrast to that of Eric's and serves to throw into bold relief the qualities of the latter, Eric does not oppose his egoism, his pride and desire against a country's fate or against the Supreme Will. Hence, no conflict in his life. He is a man of destiny, Fate's "favourite and brother." Or, perhaps, he is master of his Fate, no more obliged to obey its command, for he has surrendered his heart and soul to the Will of God. He had "a highly developed consciousness that can draw back and observe the workings of nature without being bound by them." Persons, like Swegn, who are not even masters of themselves can hardly be a match to Eric. In his famous soliloquy with which the Act III opens, Eric says:

I have resumed
The empire with the knowledge of myself.
For this strong angel Love, this violent
And glorious guest, let it possess my heart
Without a rival, not invade the brain,
Not with imperious discord cleave my soul
Jangling its various harmonies, nor turn
The manifold music of humanity
Into a single and a maddening note.
Strength in the nature, wisdom in the mind,
Love in the heart complete the trinity
Of glorious manhood. There was the wide flaw,—
The coldness of the radiance that I was.
This was the vacant gap I could not fill.
It left my soul the torso of a god,
A great design unfinished and my works
Mighty and crude like things admired that pass,
Bare of the immortality that keeps
The ages. O, the word they spoke was true!
'Tis Love, 'tis Love fills up the gulf of Time.
By Love we find our kinship with the stars,
The spacious uses of the sky. God's image
Lives nobly perfect in the soul he made,
Reflected in the nature of a man.

This is the central idea of the play, the main thrust of its action. As for Eric, he foreshadows Sri Aurobindo's Superman towering far above "pinchbeck potentates" like Swegn. In the period between his political leadership and his siddhi of 1926, points out Dr. Prema Nandkumar, Sri Aurobindo made consistent effort in various ways to limn the identification-marks of the leader of mankind.¹ Eric is a result of such efforts of Sri Aurobindo, explicitly made in his dramas. Eric as such remains, besides being Sri Aurobindo's apotheosis of love, an enunciation of his principle of evolutionary progress. By insinuating faith in "the world's mystic will that loves and labours", in "the immortality that thinks" in us, "that plans and reasons" and dwells in our secret souls, Sri Aurobindo emerges in the play as a singer of faith and love.

Love must not cease to live upon earth,  
For love is the bright link twixt earth and heaven.  
Love is the far Transcendent's angel here,  
Love is man's lien on the Absolute.²

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