CHAPTER II

SHI AURANGDE AND THE NATURE OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

Aesthetics is a branch of philosophy which concerns itself with the investigation of what is meant to be asserted when we write or talk correctly about beauty. Its chief task is to elucidate the notion of beauty as the distinguishing feature of works of art and to propound the valid principles which underlie all aesthetic judgments. Thus the problems of aesthetics are the most fundamental philosophical problems arising out of man’s interest in beauty, its creation and appreciation.

Aesthetics deals with the ineffable realm of imagination and feeling. All that is beautiful and charming in the world of matter and in the world of mind becomes the subject of aesthetic investigation. The aesthetic is thus the very foundation of all human experience. It is what distinguishes man from the lower order of creation. It is a unique kind of experience brought about by a higher mode of being, and awareness and a heightened consciousness which the individual attains through his own inner capacities.

Aesthetic values are not extraneous to the other values of life, nor are they irrelevant to it. The aesthetic experience is not very different from any mundane experience. When the aesthetic experience is immediate and unified and the aesthetic value is immediately apprehended, we feel an aesthetic emotion quite different from the ordinary emotions of life. This aesthetic value is direct, independent of all intellectual, moral or other aspects which the object might possess. Sometimes the aesthetic value is influenced by the intellectual and moral aspects of the object to the extent the perception of the object is derived from, or influenced by those aspects. The higher mode of being and awareness giving rise to aesthetic experience in man is engendered by a special mental attitude which makes the observer disengage himself from the irrelevant and transient properties of the objects of perception and identify himself with its intrinsic properties, to the exclusion of all the other aspects of it. This involves a withdrawal from the object as well as an identification with it taking place simultaneously leading to a total experience wherein the object of perception is known directly.

This aesthetic experience which transcends the common phenomenal attitudes to things can be brought about only when a transformation is effected on not only the aesthetic object during the process of art creation but also on the perceiving
Sri Aurobindo's analysis of the aesthetic process is characterised by his artistic temperament and spiritual insight. The creative aesthetic experience of the man of letters or poet, according to him, is born of a relation of personal consciousness with its objects very different from the kind present in intellectual cognition. The relation here is simple, direct, intimate and personal. The artist is drawn to the object of his attention by a kind of kinship; response to the object is from his whole being. Induced by the excited and concentrated activity, with the feeling intensified and imagination stimulated, the mind goes beyond mere discrimination and analysis of the object under perception and discerns something of its inner being. The object enters the mind in its living and spiritual wholeness and an individual whole begins to unfold its nature in the imagination of the artist.

That the aesthetic experience of the highest order always arises from intuition is beautifully expressed by Sri Aurobindo in 'Sāvitrī', Book II, Canto 11:–

"A fourth dimension of aesthetic sense
Where all is in ourselves, ourselves in all,
To the cosmic wideness realigns our souls,
A kindling rapture joins the seer and the seem;
The craftsman and the craft growth inly one,
Achieve perfection by the magic throb
And passion of their close identity."
everything is the Truth, Goodness and Beauty of the Eternal inherent in them, the saccidānanda aspect basic to all existence and all matter. All is Brahman to the true artist. All matter and all forms of life participate in the essence of the Eternal and a true artistic vision alone could discern the beauty of every object it turns to irrespective of the various labels attached to it. "He will experience all the universe as the manifestation of the One: he will be conscious in the Brahman that is the All, sarvam brahma, in the Brahman infinite in being and infinite in quality, anantam brahma, in Brahman as self-existent consciousness and universal knowledge, jnanam brahma, in Brahman as the self-existent bliss and its universal delight of being, ānandam brahma."\(^4\)

This integral knowledge, according to Sri Aurobindo, is a triune realisation of all in Self, Self in all and Self becoming all: inclusion, indwelling and identity. This intrinsic awareness or knowledge is possible only through intuition, the spontaneous consciousness of the spirit which is everything and all, when the subliminal breaks its boundaries and becomes one with cosmic consciousness.\(^5\)

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4 The Synthesis of Yoga, Vol. 21, p. 669

The integral knowledge is possible only through spiritual intuition. The Ultimate Reality, Sri Aurobindo asserts, can only be grasped in a sort of intuitive knowledge through direct contact. Intuition has been universally accepted as a valid source of knowledge in philosophy. Defined variously as 'knower's knowledge' and as 'experience as a whole', it is a grasp of Reality in its universal as well as its singular and individual aspects. This intuition is pure only at supra-mental level, Sri Aurobindo points out, but it becomes mixed and distorted in the process of its descent through the mental, vital and physical levels. When our consciousness again ascends to the supra-mental level, we get this original and native intuition where reason is a mere passive witness. An intuition can only be completed or judged by another higher intuition and can itself perform all the actions of reason: the intellect hence has no part to play in it.

This spiritual intuition is beyond the distinctions of knower, known and knowledge. It includes and explains all intuitions. It is a consummating experience which transcends the lower experiences. It is an integral experience which does not negate or reject the experience gained through physical, vital or mental instruments, but affirms and transforms even the lowest type of experience. It is thus a knowledge through experience, not through intellectual processes.

6 R.N. Sharma, 'Philosophical Methods', Darshana
The line 'where all is in ourselves, ourselves in all' refers only to this integral knowledge gained through spiritual intuition. We are united in our soul with the soul of everything on earth; it is only a realignment, the identity having been forgotten by us on account of our ignorance. Thus on account of the realignment of our souls to the cosmic wideness and the extensive creation, we are able to realize the play (jīlā) of the Absolute which manifests itself in all forms and names in the process of creation. This realization in turn leads us to enjoy the supreme aesthetic delight, a divine ecstasy (ānanda) which joins the seer and the seen, because both participate in his essence. 'A kindling rapture joins the seen and the seen'. Sri Aurobindo calls it a kindling, rapture, an ecstasy which leads him in his fullness of joy and delight to express himself in terms of ānanda. The result is the supreme artistic creation which bestows on everyone who comes in contact with it the same kind of ecstasy which led to its creation. The Taittirīya Upaniṣad says that this ānanda is itself brahman, the Eternal, wherefore all things are born, wherein they grow and exist and whereto they all return.

3. Śāvitrī, (Vol. 28), p. 112

8. Śāvitrī, (Vol. 23), p. 112
'Anandam brahmeti vyajñāt. Anandādyeva khalvimāni bhūtāni jāyante. Anandabhā jātāni jīvanti. Anandam prayantyabhisamvisānti.'

This is the greatest realisation and the acr̥ of spirituality.

"Aesthetic experience represents partially and imperfectly one stage of the progressive delight of the universal soul in things in its manifestation, and it admits to us in one part of our nature that detachment from egocentric sensations and that universal attitude through which the one soul sees harmony and beauty where we divide and experience rather chaos and discord."

Not only the seer and the seen, the perceiver and the perceived but the act of perception as well, the craftsman and the craft, the agent and the action, become one in their essence, 'therefore one' and achieve perfection, according to Sri Aurobindo. This perfection which is impossible of achievement at the mundane level is made possible at the spiritual level by the magic throw of a divine inspiration and passion.

9 Taittirīya Upaniṣads, III, 7. 1-4
The aesthetic experience is a state of disinterested joy. It is a liberating experience which transcends the ego and the intellectual categories, as well as the empirical and phenomenal states of existence and is quite accessible, even familiar, to the common man. It belongs to the realm of intuitive knowledge which again belongs to the highest order of human consciousness. Intuitive knowledge is a state of pure contemplation wherein conceptual thought and intellectual cognition and analysis find no room. It is a knowledge derived through 'being' not through 'reasoning'. The subject identifies itself totally with the object; the where, the when, the why and what for of things are of no consequence in aesthetic contemplation.

Aesthetic experience expands and intensifies our perception and awareness. Adding depth and dimension to our superficial experience, it widens the horizons of our personality. It frees the human consciousness from the restrictions imposed upon it by our mental inhibitions and ugly passions. It exercises a healing effect on the personality leaving it spiritually soothed and refreshed. It enriches human sensibility. Sri Aurobindo calls the Kathartic effect of art 'Citta Suddhi', which leads ultimately to 'Citta Vistāra', a widening of the mind which gets freed of its tensions and troubles.