



THE PROLOGUE OF *PERSEUS THE DELIVERER*: A CRITICAL ELUCIDATION

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ABSTRACT

Perseus the Deliverer is the representative play of Sri Aurobindo, which deals with the themes of freedom from slavery, the victory of love over hatred, and love for nationalism. During his sojourn in England, Sri Aurobindo was well aware of the pathetic plights of the people of India, who were in the grip of the Britishers and were suffocating under the cruel administration of the English people. So, keeping in mind the tortures and persecutions of the people of our country, Sri Aurobindo made use of the story of Perseus from Greek mythology, and through the portrayal of the protagonist, he seems to express his subdued sentiments of nationalism and patriotism. Perseus symbolizes the superhuman agency that comes to liberate and uplift a nation enchained by slavery, superstitions, illiteracy, and several other social, cultural, and political ills and maladies. In *Bande Matram*, Sri Aurobindo observes:

Nationalism is an Avtar. It is a divinely appointed Shakti and must do its God-given work before it returns to the bosom of Universal Energy from which it came. (Gupta,77)

Keywords: Indian Drama, Nationalism, Dramatic Technique, Aurobindo, and Patriotism.

Sri Aurobindo wrote *Perseus the Deliverer* with a mission in his mind. He wanted to eradicate the various evils from society by educating the people of India through his writings. In this respect, he is very close to

G.B. Shaw, who wrote his plays with a purpose, as he only wrote a single line with a purpose in his mind. Similarly, this play has symbolic significance, and through the portrayal of the characters, the playwright

tries his best to raise the voice of freedom and liberty. Sri Aurobindo wrote:

I entered into political action and continued it from 1905 to 1910 with one aim and one alone: to get into the people's mind a settled will for freedom and the necessity of a struggle to achieve it in place of the futile ambling methods till then in vogue. (Aurobindo,149)

In this play, almost all characters are symbolic. The hero, Perseus, symbolizes the savior of a nation in travail. Andromeda, the play's heroine, stands for total self-sacrifice and the persecuted and tortured people of the nation. Capheus and the others associated with him symbolize the vain appeasement of ineffective national leaders. We know that during the freedom struggle, several leaders in India strongly believed in the appeasement of the Britishers and never protested them directly; they wanted to improve the nation's condition with the British people's help. In other words, this play is based on his famous theory of Evolution, where man moves forward by his action or effort and is also helped by divine power in his hour of crises and critical juncture:

Perseus the Deliverer is so completely Greek in its accents that it is almost as if a Western author steeped in the classical Greek tradition had written it. The larger-

than-life characters are all entirely Greek. However, the meter gives it away, and the supple blank verse brings it sharply to the Elizabethan times. Besides, the Roman Age is also evident in some of the names and allusions. Again, the spirit is partially Greek. The ancient Greek was wedded to the ideal of beauty – the beauty of body and mind — but Fate also ruled the beautiful and noble creature, and almost always, Fate pushed him towards the brink of tragedy. (Perseus,04)

The prologue of *Perseus the Deliverer* is quite in line with the rich tradition of Sanskrit drama, where everything is placed in the form of a tiny seed containing all the features of a full-grown tree. The tumultuous and arresting opening stands for the central conflict between good and bad, rough and sublime:

Error of waters rustling through the world

Vast ocean, call thy ravenous waves that march

With blue fierce nostrils quivering for prey,

Back to thy feet. Hush thy impatient surges

At my divine command and do my will. (05)

A close practical criticism of these opening lines of the play very clearly shows the next



happenings and the simple, innocent people crushed and trodden under the tyrannous and callous administration of the Britishers. The phrase “Error of Waters” seems to suggest the various ills and maladies of the society; the ‘ravenous waves’ symbolize the cruel and tyrannical British rule, which is hungry to devour everything. The ‘Vast ocean’ represents this vast country full of various castes, classes, cultures, and colors. The image of ‘a fierce animal with nostrils quivering for prey’ is obvious, and no need to explain. The last line: “At my divine command and do my will,” shows the megalomania and ambition of the ruler over the ruled. About the significance of the Prologue, the editor of the play says:

The Prologue provides the play with a tumultuous and arresting opening and a central conflict out of which the rest of the action flows. In Greek mythology, Athene and Poseidon are depicted as constantly challenging each other’s might. One such battle of wills gave the victory to Athene and consequently the control of the land of Attica. Athens took its name from her. Sri Aurobindo uses this mystic enmity to give a frame for his play, which is, in its essentials, a struggle between the stultifying forces of

scientific and spiritual progress.
(164)

Perseus the Deliverer is based on the legendary and historical story of Perseus, who delivered Andromeda from the chains of Poseidon and then married her. But before studying the story of love and liberation of Andromeda, a brief knowledge of the pursuits and exploits of Perseus is needed for the readers to understand the plot and other dramatic techniques easily.

The legend of Perseus runs like this:

Acrisius, the Argive king, warned by an oracle that his daughter’s son would be the agent of his death, hoped to escape his doom by shutting her up in a brazen tower. But Zeus, the king of Gods, descended into her prison in a shower of gold, and Danae bore a son named Perseus to him. Danae and her child were exposed in a boat without a sail or oar on the sea, but here, too, fate and the gods intervened, and guided by divine protection, the boat bore her safely to the Island of Seriphos. There, Danae was received and honoured by the king. When Perseus had grown to manhood, the king, wishing to marry Danae, decided to send him to his death and, to that end, ordered him to slay the Gorgon

Medusa in the wild, unknown, and snowy North and bring to him her head the sight of which turned men to stone. Perseus, aided by Athene, the Goddess of Wisdom, who gave him the divine sword Herpe, winged shoes to bear him through the air, her shield or aegis, and the cap of invisibility, succeeded in her quest after many adventures. On his return, he came to Syria. He found Andromeda, daughter of Cepheus and Cassiopeia, king and queen of Syria, chained in the rocks by the people to be devoured by a sea monster as an atonement for her mother's impiety against the sea god, Poseidon. Perseus slew the monster and rescues and weds Andromeda. (01)

Sri Aurobindo was a nationalist and great patriot in his early phase of life. He believed in the great power of spirituality that could redeem and uplift the miserable condition of the people of India. What he believed is exactly what Athene, the Goddess of wisdom, believes in the prologue of the play:

Me the Omnipotent
Made from His being to lead and discipline
The immortal spirit of man, till it attains
To order and magnificent mastery

Of all his outward world. (06)

This poetic stanza, in a nutshell, contains the spiritual philosophy of Sri Aurobindo and, at the same time, his vision of liberating the persecuted and tortured people from the tyrannous hands of the Britishers. If a man knows the art of controlling the various deviating thought waves of mind while leading a life of purity and chastity, society and the whole nation will be automatically improved. Then, the people will lead a life of freedom, peace, and prosperity without hindrance. Patanjali *Yogasutra* says: Yoga is, first and foremost, the art of discipline. Further, it is said that Yoga controls the mind's thought waves. In the ninth sloka of Patanjala *Yogasutra*, the process of controlling the mind's thought waves has been mentioned: Through practice and renunciation, the mind's thought waves can be disciplined). Judged on these aphorisms of *Yogasutra*, Sri Aurobindo's concept of spirituality lies in the liberation of the soul from the body or the emancipation of the spiritual thoughts from the fabrication and zigzag of intellect and cold philosophy.

The prologue presents the keynote of the play. It is just like the preamble of our Indian constitution, containing all the gist in a condensed form. The elements of preservation and destruction, roughness and sublimity, and light and darkness are introduced at the very beginning of the



play. Sri Aurobindo opens the play with the tumultuous and stormy ocean, which stands for the various political and social upheavals of Mother India under British rule. So, to dispel this tumultuous situation, Pallas Athene, the Goddess of wisdom, appears to discipline the people and destroy the evils. The playwright says in the stage setting:

The ocean in tumult, and the sky in the storm: Palas Athene appears in heaven with lightning playing over her head and under her feet.
(Perseus,05)

The stage setting of Sri Aurobindo also has a meaning. It sheds light on the characters and other happenings in the play. It acts like a structural unifier integrating the visions and views of the playwright to the general audience or readers. It reminds us of the stage settings of G.B. Shaw, but while Shaw's settings are often lengthy, big, and sometimes boring, Aurobindo's stage-setting description is short, condensed, and epigrammatic.

The stage setting of the prologue is very philosophical, spiritual, and mystical. On the spiritual plane, the ocean's tumult and the sky's storm show the ill wills and deviating and destroying thought waves of the mind, which often create hurdles in the path of the voice of consciousness. So long as men are under the control of the evil

thoughts of mind, all his natural stints, his divine thoughts remain subdued. So, to eradicate these deformities and abnormalities of the mind, a spiritual vision is needed, and it will be possible only by paying constant heed to the voice of consciousness. The lightning playing over the head of Pallas Athene represents the spiritual thoughts and visions of the soul about which the Bible lays much stress on introspecting, and Sant Kabir observes: "Aatam Gyan Bina Sab suna, Kya Mathura Kya Kashi. (Kabir) (Without the knowledge of the supreme soul or the voice of consciousness, all our religious visits to Mathura and Kashi are meaningless).

One thing is very remarkable in the opening line of Sri Aurobindo. He describes light not only playing over the head of Pallas Athene but also under her feet. Through this symbol, Sri Aurobindo seems to integrate both head and feet. Here, the 'head' represents intellect, while the feet show work and service. On the social ground, the head represents the Brahmin, the intellectual people as Veda says: "Brahmnoasya Mukhmasid"¹³ that is, the Brahmin is the mouth of God" and the feet symbolize the working-class people who work hard to feed the stomach. The Vedas say about the origin of these working classes: "Padabhyam Sudroajayat"¹⁴, that is, from the feet, the sudra is born. In other

words, both head and feet are necessary for the body. The head without feet is meaningless, and vice-versa. During British rule, cooperation between all sections of society was very necessary. Perhaps this is why Sri Aurobindo seems to lay equal stress on the needs of both head and feet, so lightning is playing over her head and under her feet.

The phrase 'untamed waters' in the speech of the voices of the sea is an imagistic variation upon the previous phrases "Error of waters," "ravenous waves," and "impatient surges." The arrival of Pallas Athene and, later on, that of Perseus is like an illuminating and radiating vision for breaking the bondage of slavery or purging the dross of desire of the body. Dr. M.Bana observes:

Sri Aurobindo sensed the rising nationalistic fervor. He realized the need to steer this onward, not only towards independence but also as a leader in the international arena. He believed that India's spirituality would ultimately redeem the world. He visualizes his country's major role in human upliftment and unity. He wanted his countrymen to realize the need for spiritual power to achieve independence. (Bana,37,)

It is interesting to note here that Sri Aurobindo, a great believer in ancient

Indian dramatic traditions laid down by the great sage Bharat and further led by the great poets and dramatists like Bhash, Bhavbhuti, and Kalidas, here seems to live up to the ideals of dramatic art. In the prologue, the playwright has set a background for the protagonist's appearance. The name of the hero or protagonist has been mentioned to make his path of appearance clean and fresh. In a dialogue between Athene and Poseidon, the readers or audience get a hint of the hero's arrival. Athene says:

Perseus, the Olympian's son,
Whom Danae in her strong brazen
tower Acrisius's daughter, bore, by
heavenly gold, Lapped into
slumber: for of that shining rain. He
is the beautiful offspring.
(Perseus,09)

This concept of dramatic art is quite in line with Shakespeare's great plays. In his well-known play *Othello*, we see that the hero never appears in the beginning, but other characters mention his name and activities. Iago says: "In following him, I follow but myself"¹⁷ In this sentence, 'him' stands for Othello. Roderigo also mentions the name of *Othello* in the first scene: "Thou holdest me thou didst hold him in thy hate"¹⁸ Before William Shakespeare, C. Marlow had already set this concept of mentioning the hero's name before his arrival. In his famous play *Edward II*, Gaveston, the



friend of Edward II, appeared in the first scene of the first Act. He speaks out a letter containing the hero's name, and later on, Gaveston's speech reveals some of the features of Edward II's character. He says:

Sweet prince, I come; these, these
thy amorous lines

It might have forced me to swim
from France. (Marlowe, scene 2)

Thus, the prologue of this play serves as a structural unifier. It gives a brief idea about the play and sets a keynote for the whole process of things enacted later on the stage. In the prologue, Sri Aurobindo puts his theory of spiritualism through the famous speech of Athene, who asserts her divine power with the help of her whiteness and strength' to 'lead and discipline the immortal spirit of man.'

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