



Renaissance

Sri Aurobindo Society

INDIA FROM PAST DAWNS TO FUTURE NOONS



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Theme: Life, Literature and Yoga

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“It is not by books that Sri Aurobindo ought to be studied but by subjects—what he has said on the Divine, on Unity, on religion, on evolution, on education, on self-perfection, on supermind, etc., etc.”

– The Mother (CWM, Vol. 12, p. 206)

Guided by this advice from the Mother, *Renaissance* aims to bring to the readers thoughtfully curated pearls of deep wisdom from the oceanic writings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, as well as other sadhaks and devotees, on a variety of themes. Published by Sri Aurobindo Society, *Renaissance* is a monthly online journal with special focus on India’s Rebirth through Integral Yoga.



Sri Aurobindo Society

BHĀRATSHAKTI

INDIA – FROM PAST DAWNS TO FUTURE NOONS

On Life, Literature and Yoga

Beloo Mehra

Amal Kiran once wrote that in his youth when he first learned about Sri Aurobindo, the Great Yogi, what had impressed him more was that he was also a master of English as well as several other languages and was an extraordinary litterateur. He was struck by the fact that this spiritual figure not only possessed a Light from beyond our earth but also saw meaning in earthly endeavour and expression through literature.

Literature, poetry, science and all other studies can be a preparation of the consciousness for life, says Sri Aurobindo. But when one consciously walks the path of Yoga, these things can continue as part of the *sādhana* only if they are done for the Divine or taken up by the Divine Force. The first requirement there is that one should not want to be a writer or a poet for the sake of being a writer or a poet only, or for fame, applause, etc. (CWSA, Vol. 27, p. 723)

What does it mean to be engaged in literary activity for the Divine? And what kind of literature should a *sādhak* read, if any? Should it only be spiritual or religious literature? What about the literary classics that may be seen as ‘secular’ literature? For a large majority of the educated people who at some point in their lives turn to spiritual pursuit, reading spiritual literature becomes a big part of their process. What is the right place and significance of reading spiritual literature in the path of *sadhana*? Can reading and meditating on such literature help prepare the *sadhak*, can it become a hindrance? These and a few other related questions became the focus of May 2023 issue of *Renaissance*. In this second issue of *Renaissance Redux*, we feature a few selections from that comprehensive issue.

Reading can be only a momentary help to prepare the mind. But the real knowledge does not come by reading. Some preparation for the inner knowledge may be helpful—but the mind should not be too superficially active or seek to know only for curiosity's sake.

~ Sri Aurobindo, CWSA, Vol. 27, p. 729

Reading and Yoga

In response to some questions on how one should approach literature, especially if one is an aspirant on the path of integral yoga, the Mother explained that the significance of literature is not to be found in what is said but rather in how it is being

said and the feeling it evokes in the reader. While reading high quality literature can help one progress intellectually and develop a good taste and sense of forms, the Mother reminded that the real knowledge comes from above the mind. And to receive it one needs to move beyond reading literature.

When it comes to choosing which books to read, the Mother cautioned that today's world is filled with worthless literature, and there are many books that lower or degrade one's consciousness. One needs to consciously choose books that are filled with light. Once a disciple asked Sri Aurobindo why is it that sometimes secular literature gives a greater light and illumination than religious literature. Sri Aurobindo's reply gives us much to contemplate on:

Religious literature inspires only the religious-minded,—and most religious literature, apart from the comparatively few great books, is poor stuff. Secular literature either appeals to the idealistic mind or to the emotions or to the aesthetic element in us, and all that has a much easier and more common appeal. As for spiritual light, it is another thing altogether. Spirituality is other than mental idealism and other than religion.

~ CWSA, Vol. 27, p. 730

If one is looking for spiritual light or progress in the inner journey, there is only a limited preparatory role that reading and meditating on spiritual literature can play. But because the real knowledge comes from above the mind, for that one needs to silence the mind, bring a certain quietude within so that one becomes open and receptive to the light of higher knowledge. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother have explained that for a *sādhak*, it is not sufficient to read spiritual literature and acquire knowledge. One must go beyond what is in the scripture to acquire the eternal knowledge. They also emphasize the need to practice what has been read.

It is also important to understand that the consciousness which has gone in writing of a work of literature — any kind, religious, spiritual or secular — has an impact on the experience it creates in the reader. This is why the Mother gave specific guidance to teachers on selecting appropriate reading material for the children. She also emphasised that reading good literature can help refine the being, and bring one out of the crudity and shallowness. Sri Aurobindo also wrote several letters to disciples in this regard.

But given that a human being is a complex mixture of many different parts, which in turn are again inter-mixed and

are moved by various kinds of forces from different planes of consciousness, we often find that “plenty of insincere men have written inspiring things.” Sri Aurobindo explains that this is because something in them felt it, though they could not carry it out in life, and that something was used by a greater power behind.

“Very often in his art, in his writings, the higher part of a man comes out, while the lower dominates his life.”

~ Sri Aurobindo, CWSA, Vol. 27, p. 730

When it comes to reading Sri Aurobindo’s works, we must never forget the important advice given by the Mother. She says that if one sincerely aspires, one can get all answers from his potent words. Sri Aurobindo’s words are containers of spiritual forces. And that is why his words need to be read little by little and regularly with a silent mind so that they penetrate the depth of the being. For a conscious reader, especially when one is trying to progress on the path of sadhana, it is important to reflect upon the significance of the reader’s will and aspiration when approaching spiritual literature such as the works of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother which are the containers of their consciousness and force. In this regard, we have a very helpful advice from Sri Aurobindo himself:

Q: How is it that one person reads sacred books, yet is very far from the Divine, while another reads the most stupid so-called literary productions and remains in contact with the Divine?

Sri Aurobindo: It is not reading that brings the contact, it is the will and aspiration in the being that bring it.

~ CWSA, Vol. 27, p. 731

The May 2023 issue of *Renaissance* explored several aspects which brought out the rightful place of reading and other literary activity in *sādhana*. Here, we have chosen to feature 3 selections from that issue which help us go deeper into some of the literary works of Sri Aurobindo, revealing an important facet of his vast and integral personality. We encourage readers to browse through the full issue at <renaissance.aurosociety.org> to explore further.

Invoking the Divine Mother who is the Source of all our work as well as the ever-present Force and Guidance behind it all, we offer this second issue of *Renaissance Redux* on the theme of **Life, Literature and Yoga** at the Lotus Feet of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.

Ever in gratitude.



Disciple: Mother, how can one become wise?

The Mother: Read Sri Aurobindo.

– CWM, Vol. 12, p. 206



Guiding Light: Words of Sri Aurobindo

Intelligence does not depend on the amount one has read, it is a quality of the mind. Study only gives it material for its work as life also does. There are people who do not know how to read and write well who are more intelligent than many highly educated people and understand life and things better.

On the other hand a good intelligence can improve itself by reading because it gets more material to work on and grows by exercise and by having a wider range to move in. But book knowledge by itself is not the real thing; it has to be used as a help to the intelligence, but it is often used only as a help to a loquacious stupidity or ignorance—ignorance because knowledge of facts is a poor thing if one cannot see their true significance.

– SRI AUROBINDO (CWSA, Vol. 31, p. 70)

For the sadhaka of the integral Yoga it is necessary to remember that no written Shastra, however great its authority or however large its spirit, can be more than a partial expression of the eternal Knowledge.

He will use, but never bind himself even by the greatest Scripture. Where the Scripture is profound, wide, catholic, it

may exercise upon him an influence for the highest good and of incalculable importance.

It may be associated in his experience with his awakening to crowning verities and his realisation of the highest experiences. His Yoga may be governed for a long time by one Scripture or by several successively,—if it is in the line of the great Hindu tradition, by the Gita, for example, the Upanishads, the Veda. Or it may be a good part of his development to include in its material a richly varied experience of the truths of many Scriptures and make the future opulent with all that is best in the past.

But in the end he must take his station, or better still, if he can, always and from the beginning he must live in his own soul beyond the limitations of the word that he uses.

The Gita itself thus declares that the Yogin in his progress must pass beyond the written Truth,—*śabdabrahmātivartate*—beyond all that he has heard and all that he has yet to hear,—*śrotavyasya śrutasya ca*. For he is not the sadhaka of a book or of many books; he is a sadhaka of the Infinite.

– SRI AUROBINDO (CWSA, Vol. 23, pp. 55-56)

Woman in Sri Aurobindo's Poetry

Romen Palit

Editor's note: In several of Sri Aurobindo's writings, especially in his poetry, we find a very high and deeply inspiring portrayal of the essence of womanhood and the Shakti that she is. This article highlighting some of these portrayals was first published in 1966 in the Ashram journal, *Mother India*, Vol. XVIII, No. 5, pp. 42-47, and thereafter in Volume VI, Issue 5 of *Renaissance*.

The author had prepared this for a talk that he delivered at the Second Annual Conference of the New Age Association on 9th September 1965. This association was started with the blessings of the Mother and held quarterly seminars and annual conferences.

There is a hierarchy in the concept of the perfect woman in Sri Aurobindo's poetry. Each type in this hierarchical order is inevitable and perfect in her own sphere. Each reveals something essential, elemental and true in her character, her nature, in her acts and moods and emotions. But it is not possible to deal with all of Sri Aurobindo's female creations in this short survey. Therefore we shall select only the most representative ones for our analysis.

The woman who typifies the eternal feminine principle is Ahana who is close to earth and is a link between the two poles of being — God and man. She is the representation of perfect beauty, of supreme felicity and is the soul of spiritual knowledge and love. She is the dawn of the soul, the revealer of the secrets of the spirit. She is the first principle of manifestation. She tops the hierarchy. She is divine in nature, immortal in her existence.

Next, we discover Urvasie and Helen. They are typical higher vital principles of love, beauty and passion. Urvasie is rich with mystery and light. She too is immortal – not in the spiritual domain, but in the kingdom of higher life where all is a wonder, a discovery, a rapture and a seizing. She is not a goddess like Ahana, but a nymph, a heavenly woman who has entered the heart of beauty, and her body is a revel of ethereal enchantment. She was

*... a face
Of dawn, a body fresh from mystery,
Enveloped with a prophecy of light
More rich than perfect splendours.*

(*Urvasie*, CWSA, Vol. 2, p. 67)

And her body was

*A warm rich splendour exquisitely outlined
Against the dazzling whiteness, and her face
Was as a fallen moon among the snows.*

(*ibid.*, p. 72)

Here we find a note of grace, a subtle beauty which is not outwardly vivid. This mystic note is typically Aurobindonian. Sri Aurobindo is never loud, harsh, gaudy with external colour; rather he is soft and mystic with unseizable suggestiveness. He gives Urvasie a heart of love which is almost human in, its intensity. But he gives her a faithfulness which is rare amongst supernatural beings. In short, he gives her a double character, that of a heavenly nymph and that of the eternal lover. This concept prevails everywhere in his poetry. His woman is a link between earth and heaven.

We note in passing that Kalidasa's Urvasie is almost a woman of earth, full of passion, jealousy, possessiveness and the home-making instinct. The Urvasie of Tagore is ravishing, swift, elemental, impetuous, a cosmic entity of life's power of beauty. But the Urvasie of Sri Aurobindo is heavenly in her temperament, divine in her nature, but earthly in her capacity for love, without the degrading influence of human weakness.

Next in the hierarchy is Helen. Again, Sri Aurobindo gives this Homeric character, who caused great disaster to two nations, a special characteristic. She too is half-divine in her beauty; her self of physical perfection is the manifestation of Divine Beauty in a human frame. Sri Aurobindo pictures Paris seeing her:

*Calmly he looked on the face of which Greece was
enamoured, the body
For whose desire great Troy was a sacrifice, tranquil
regarded
Lovely and dire on the lips he loved that smile of a
goddess,
Saw the daughter of Zeus in the woman,*

(*Ilion*, CWSA, Vol. 2, p. 396)

This beauty is not subtle like Urvasie's or tempestuous like Pentheslea's, but it has a vividness, an ensnaring brilliance which, though physical in its manifestation, is superhuman in its character. We can almost see her, a typical Greek beauty, by the few but poignant lines of Sri Aurobindo.

Helen is great due to her love, her sacrifice and her unsophisticated nature. Beauty did not make her proud or self-conscious or arrogant; she was almost a superhuman being,

because such rare beauty could not manifest in a common mortal.

Priyumvada is the natural woman; her beauty was like the dawn. It was “An empire for the glory of a God.” (*Love and Death*, CWSA, Vol. 2, p. 114). We find

*Wonderful melancholy in her eyes
Grown liquid and with wayward sorrow large.*

(*ibid.*, p. 115)

In her we find a deep love for earth; her nature answers the elemental beauty of life most spontaneously and intensely. Therefore she cries before her death:

*I have not numbered half the brilliant birds
In one green forest, nor am familiar grown
With sunrise and the progress of the eves,
Nor have with plaintive cries of birds made friends.*

(*ibid.*, p. 117)

She is the girl when earth herself was young and love was unstained. She shares this primal purity; she is one with physical nature and its lyrical beauty; with her we enter a new hierarchy.

So far we have mentioned only superhuman women, but now we shall consider the human types. Here too we find Sri Aurobindo revealing his genius in his concept of the perfect woman. The perfect woman is not necessarily the ideal woman; she is perfect in her own domain, inevitable in her own sphere of existence.

Vasavadutta is the typical heroine of romance, and she discloses in her love the heart of the eternal woman, in spite of her sophisticated bearing. She is great in her own surroundings and here Sri Aurobindo has explored to the full the possibilities of romantic love. She has all the fire and grace of the common heroine with a difference — a difference caused by the Aurobindonian touch. He avoids vulgarity and commonness and he endows the Sanskrit tradition with a fineness of approach and presentation. Here is a typical example; Vasavadutta speaks of Vutsa Udayana:

*I have heard
Only a far-flung name. What is the man?
A flame? A flower? High like Gopalaca
Or else some golden fair and soft-eyed youth?*

(*Vasavadutta*, CWSA, Vol. 4, p. 669)

Although love is the bedrock of a woman’s character, we see in Sri Aurobindo this love revealed in many ways, conditions, intensities and heights. The love of Urvashi differs entirely from that of Vasavadutta or Priyumvada; each of these shows one aspect of love in her character, in the trend of her

personality, manifest in the given circumstance.

The character of Andromeda is a rich contrast to all heroines we have examined so far. She is sweet, but her nature has the gift of compassion which we miss in Vasavadutta. Though sprung from a royal lineage, Andromeda is not sophisticated; she appears to be untouched by the surrounding royal pomp and she, by her own will, builds her fate and becomes instrumental to her own union with Perseus. But with Vasavadutta, environment plays a decisive role in building her character and her outer mask of royal indifference. Vutsa comes to her and by his presence dissolves the mask. But Andromeda goes to Perseus as a result of her own act of compassion.

Andromeda is the instrument of a greater power: Athene. She has a higher calling; she has a larger nature, already half-divine in its capacity for self-sacrifice. She says:

*If there is any god in the deaf skies That
pities men or helps them, O protect me !
But if you are inexorably unmoved
And punish pity, I, Andromeda
Who am a woman on this earth, will help
My brothers.’*

(*Perseus, the Deliverer*, CWSA, Vol. 3, p. 404)

By this trend of nature, she grows greater than those around her and becomes worthy of Perseus, himself half-divine.

But we have another ideal in Penthesilea in Ilion. Not tenderness, but courage, force, chivalry and all such elements of martial nature are in her. She glories in battle, in the conflict of men, in the spilling of blood, in the victory that comes after long struggle.

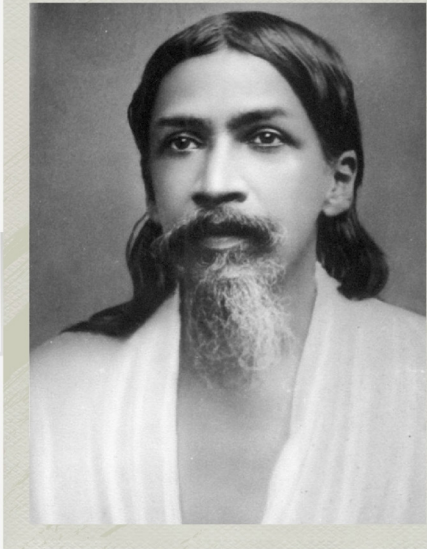
Penthesilea is not like other heroines, meek and gentle. Here Sri Aurobindo has given us another portrait of the ideal woman. And, without her, much of the vividness of feminine nature would have been lost. She equals the greatest of the Trojan heroes and by her dauntless prowess becomes equal to Achilles himself not only in spirit but in physical skill as well.

She is a menace to the Greeks. She is armed with a puissance, which is hard to encounter; she truly is the Vibhuti of the great world-mother Mahakali, as Andromeda is the instrument of Pallas Athene. The divine afflatus gives Penthesilea all her glory, her passion, her fierce love. Listen:

*But in her speed like the sea or the stormwind
Penthesilea
Drove towards the ranks of the foe and her spear-
shafts hastened before her,
Messengers whistling shrilly to death; she came like
a wolfhound
Called by his master’s voice and silently fell on the
quarry.*

(*Ilion*, CWSA, Vol. 2, p. 469)

Her great march, her titan strides we hear in these magnificent hexametrical lines; we feel the inexorableness of her untamed nature and revel in the glory of her vibrant womanhood.



**I am expressing spiritual
truth or spiritual
experience through poetry.**

- Sri Aurobindo (CWSA, 27: 260)



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In Savitri we reach the peak of womanhood. She has all the qualities we have traced so far, and many more. She is the integral, the complete woman, as far as her basic foundation is concerned. We see in her all opposite trends harmonised and blended.

We see in her the will, the courage, the love, the compassion, the passion and the divine anger all manifest as the many aspects of her divine humanity. **She is apparently human in overt presentation; but she is the immanent divine Shakti, who has taken on herself the task of uplifting humanity and to greaten the stride of cosmic evolution.**

Her sweetness is intense, her love is boundless, but she also possesses limitless knowledge and unimaginable freedom. It is difficult to class her as one type of woman, for we find in her a will and courage far greater than Penthesilea's or Andromeda's; we see in her a love which no Priyumvada, Urvasie or Helen could match; we see in her a sacrifice which we can never find except in fairy tales.

But as presented by Sri Aurobindo she or her life is not a fairy tale but a cruel and heart-rending struggle which brings home to us the full import of her character. We find in her a greatness which no woman could reach. All is in her — not as something extraordinary, but as something natural.

She, it appears to us, is oblivious of her greatness, her superhuman stature; so much is she merged with the earthly substance and so intense is her love for the world. Especially we are struck by the opposites shown us in Books Ten and Eleven and in the Epilogue. In the first two we discover her great personality, her will, her amazing perseverance against colossal odds. She reveals herself as the World-Mother who annihilates death and obtains from the Supreme the consent of Satyavan's revival. In the epilogue we find her human again with almost no overt trace of the former divinity. Her advent was to earth a revelation:

A new epiphany appeared in her.

(Savitri, CWSA, Vol. 34, p. 357)

And superhuman were the elements of her base:

*A mind of light, a life of rhythmic force,
A body instinct with hidden divinity
Prepared an image of the coming god.*

(ibid., p. 357)

In her daily life:

*Her hours were a ritual in a timeless fane;
Her acts became gestures of sacrifice.*

(ibid., p. 360)

All these examples disclose her supernal origin. But she never loses her link with earth; she is the wonderful bridge between the unseen and this world. Sri Aurobindo describes her thus :

*A deathless meaning filled her mortal limbs;
As in a golden vase's poignant line
They seemed to carry the rhythmic sob of bliss
Of earth's mute adoration towards heaven
Released in beauty's cry of living form
Towards the perfection of eternal things.*

(ibid., p. 373)

Savitri implies the heightening of human qualities into something essentially divine, not by some explicit revelation but by some subtle, hidden suggestion, some trace, some outline that shows the all-beautiful by a sign. But this is one aspect of her nature. She also defies fate thus:

*My will is part of the eternal will,
My fate is what my spirit's strength can make,
My fate is what my spirit's strength can bear,
My strength is not the titan's, it is God's.*

(ibid., p. 435)

Mark the strength, the inborn will, the challenging vehemence that comes from the soul and not from the ego. Here is a naked self-knowledge; here is what constitutes a divine being. We cannot but acknowledge and bow to her greatness. Penthesilea's strength amazes us, but Savitri's overwhelms and captivates us with its magnitude, its calmness, its unchanging quality.

But we have yet a greater revelation when Savitri overcomes Death by her transcendent power. She casts her light on Death thus:

*Light like a burning tongue licked up his thoughts,
Light was a luminous torture in his heart,
Light coursed, a splendid agony, through his nerves;
His darkness muttered perishing in her blaze.*

(*ibid.*, p. 667)

Here is Savitri as the World-Mother herself, there is no veil; she stands before us august and inviolable. We can only feel her grandeur in the annihilation of Death as a wide cosmic gesture from her supreme summits. A little later the voice of the Eternal comes down to us thus:

*O beautiful body of the incarnate Word,
Thy thoughts are mine, I have spoken with thy voice.
My will is thine, what thou hast chosen I choose.
All thou hast asked I give to earth and men.*

(*ibid.*, p. 698)

Such in her variety is Woman in the concept of Sri Aurobindo. She has her depths, her mysteries, her heights, her inscrutable charm. She has unforeseen powers, uncharted seas of passion. We cannot estimate her in her totality, so great is her many-sided magnificence.

She is goddess in one aspect and intensely human in the other. Her nature is the meeting-ground of these two. She lays bare the power of love, not as an ineffective romantic



BUT THE GOD ANSWERED TO THE WOMAN'S HEART:

**“O living power of the incarnate Word,
All that the Spirit has dreamed thou canst create:
Thou art the force by which I made the worlds,
Thou art my vision and my will and voice.
But knowledge too is thine, the world-plan thou knowest
And the tardy process of the pace of Time.**

Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri*, 34: 693



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element, but as a great creative intensity, capable of changing even the direst opposition, capable of rising to heights no other power can attain.

Savitri is the summing-up par excellence of these qualities. **She is the Divine Shakti in a human form;** *she is also the princess of love, she is again the yogi and yet again the fighter against Death. Her power of love does not annihilate but saves, her love awakes the deepest soul, her love achieves what no power on earth can achieve; the certitude of earth-transformation.*



A Splendour That Lit Up The Suns

Narendra Murty

Editor's note: In this article reproduced from Volume VI, Issue 5 of *Renaissance*, the author ingeniously connects the three paths of Yoga – Action, Love and Knowledge – with some of the most important works in world literature that speak of the highest seeking of the spirit. He reminds that if there is a highest point of meeting between Literature and Yoga, it has to be in the works of Sri Aurobindo.

If we take the central emphasis of Sankara's *Mayavada* or Buddha's teachings on suffering, the impression that we get is: This life is imperfect; this life is nothing but delusion (*moha*) or *dukkha*. Real happiness is elsewhere – whether in the merger with Brahman or in the extinction of the ego in Nirvana. In spite of the lofty ideal that is put forward before us of *Brahman* or *Nirvana*, the essential idea that leaves its imprint on our minds is, “not this life, but elsewhere; not life on earth but the ultimate felicity is to be found in some other-worldly plane of Brahman or Nirvana.”

YOGA – SĀDHANĀ IN LIFE ON EARTH

But the approach of Yoga is different. For Yoga, life on earth is an opportunity for doing *sāadhanā*. For Yoga, life on earth is not a cursed life. But a school where the spirit of man struggles against all odds and comes out glorious in the victory of the Spirit over Matter. **Or to take the approach of the Gīta, life is a Kurukshetra, a battlefield where the human Soul has to fight for its redemption.**

Thus for the Yogin, life is a school, a battlefield or a laboratory where he performs his experiments with the various instruments of his being – body, emotions and intellect to discover the higher planes of consciousness and to achieve the final union with the Divine. For the word Yoga is derived from the Sanskrit *yuj*, meaning to join, to unite.

This is the approach of Yoga. Not an escape, but a fight. Not to devalue but to divinise. For the world is enveloped by the Lord, says the Isha Upanishad. Yoga is the *sāadhanā* that is required to be performed in life on earth itself and not in some celestial plane.

Over the centuries, numerous yogins and sādhanaks have left us the records of their inner journeys, their experiences of the higher planes. They have expressed what they had experienced – to whatever extent it is possible to express using the human language – of those rarefied heights and have conveyed to us their inspirations, visions and glimpses of those higher states of consciousness.

Though the expression in language can never convey the immediate experience which is too private and intimate – but for seekers like us they can act as invaluable sign posts on our own journey to the extent we have acquired the *adhikāra* to receive such knowledge. Sri Aurobindo himself made the point when he said:

Even when Supermind finds expression it would carry its meaning only to the man who knows; as the Veda puts it, “Words of the Seer which reveal their mystery only to the Seer.” One can't express the Supramental Truth but something of it can come through. (*Evening Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, recorded by A. B. Purani, 12-10-1926)

This is how life, Yoga and literature are related. It must be emphasised that here we are not talking about ordinary literature but about spiritual or mystical literature which is a record of spiritual experience.

The study of human nature reveals that there are three great motive forces in human life: will, emotions and the *intellect*. These are the three forces that impel us to move, impel us to do anything. The three corresponding modes of expression of these forces are through the body, heart and the head. Accordingly, three paths of Yoga have emerged based on these three motive forces. The path of Action (Karma Yoga), the path of Devotion (Bhakti Yoga) and the path of Knowledge (Jnana Yoga).

THE PATH OF ACTION IN LITERATURE

In the Western spiritual tradition, this quest has often taken the form of a craving which makes the seeker a pilgrim, a traveller, a wanderer in search of a fabled land, a land of joy and peace. So, the spiritual seeker goes on a journey, undertakes hardships, faces challenges and finally reaches his destination – a blessed place of Grace and peace.

In spiritual literature, the most well-known expression is be found in Dante's *Divine Comedy* where the poet undertakes an arduous, difficult journey through the multiple, labyrinthine circles of Hell (Inferno) to emerge on the foothill of the mountain of Purgatory, and thereafter he climbs the mountain and higher into the clouds thereby reaching Paradise to gain the beatific vision of God.

Another expression of the same kind of travel, search and pilgrimage can be found in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* where Christian, the traveller, makes the arduous

journey from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. The whole story is rich in allegory and symbolism where Christian is shown carrying a heavy burden on his back (the burden of his sins) as he makes progress towards his goal, the Celestial City.

He encounters various situations and locations such as the Slough of Despondency, the Hill of Difficulty, the Valley of Humiliation, a town called Vanity and he also encounters several characters along the way who either create problems for him or come to aid him. The various characters he meets on the way are Evangelist, Help, Sloth, Mistrust, Charity, Discretion, Envy, Watchful etc. Facing the different trials and challenges, Christian finally reaches the Celestial City.

Again, in Sufi literature, we come across Farid-ud-din Attar's magnificent allegorical poem *The Conference of the Birds* where a group of birds set out in search of a mythical king of the birds for which they have to cross seven valleys. The valleys are significantly named as the Valley of the Quest, Valley of Love, Valley of Bewilderment, Valley of Knowledge and so on, which are nothing but progressive stages in the spiritual quest.

Coming to the spiritual tradition of India, we find one of the most potent expressions of the path of Action in the magnificent teaching of *Karma Yoga* in the Bhagavad Gita. The setting is the battlefield of Kurukshetra where the Divine teacher Krishna imparts the teaching of *Karma Yoga* to his disciple Arjuna who is paralyzed by the enormity of the challenge facing him. A way of life is given out for the warrior Arjuna which has to be practiced in every moment of life. The uniqueness of the Gita lies in the fact that work in the world itself has been given as a spiritual practice.



THE PATH OF DEVOTION IN LITERATURE

“One single moment of the madness of extreme love of God brings us eternal freedom,” declared Swami Vivekananda. The path of Love is one where God is the Beloved and the yearning soul is the lover. If we do not have a first-hand experience of this kind of love, the next best thing for us is to sit on the shore of this vast ocean of love where the great lovers of God have drowned themselves and left behind some exquisite poetry to record their emotions.

Such love poetry is an expression of an all-consuming love where the lover completely annihilates his own individuality in the intoxication of Divine Love. In Sufi poetry, the imagery that has been used is of a moth that burns itself in the flame to become one with the flame. Rumi says:

*Fly straight into the candle, this burning so dear
No coolness can tempt us out of its flame...*

The first objection that comes from our rational mind is, how can we become so detached from worldly things that we are willing to burn in this all-consuming love? Here Swami Vivekananda gives us an extremely valuable lesson: “Bhakti Yoga does not say ‘Give up.’ It only says, ‘Love – love the Highest!’ And everything low naturally falls off from him, the object of whose love is the Highest.” Rumi expresses this indifference to worldly things in exquisite poetry:

*Come to the orchard in Spring.
There is light and wine, and sweethearts
In the pomegranate flowers.
If you do not come, these do not matter.
If you do come, these do not matter.*

Kabir has given the essence of the path of Love with his declaration:

*When I was, God was not;
Now only God is, and I am not.
Narrow is the path of Love;
Here two cannot go.*

Now we may find all this talk of self-annihilation in this all-consuming Divine Love extremely threatening to our existence. For us, it is almost like death. Or some kind of insanity, madness. Rumi agrees that it is madness. He says:

*Let the lover be disgraceful, crazy, absentminded.
Someone sober will worry about things going badly.
Let the lover be.*

In Indian tradition, apart from Kabir, we find an ecstatic outpouring of divine love in the songs of Meera, Nanak,

Surdās, Tukaram, Ramprasad, Alvars and many such saints of the Bhakti movement.

It is usually put forward that the path of love is the easiest of the paths because emotions come to us naturally and most of us are emotional by nature. So making use of the emotions to reach the Divine is the easiest way. But going through these expressions of the “mad,” God-intoxicated lovers, you can judge for yourself whether you are capable of this kind of abandon and surrender to the Divine. This is a far cry from our give-and-take and transactional kind of love. Can you be mad? Can you be intoxicated like this? Only then is the path of Love for you.

THE PATH OF KNOWLEDGE IN LITERATURE

The path of Knowledge takes the route of the intellect but ultimately it strives to go beyond the intellect to realize the Truth which is a transcendental experience. The method to go forward is study and receiving guidance from an authentic guru who himself has realized that state of divine consciousness.

In Christian literature, the most profound expression is found in the *Sermon on the Mount* of Jesus. It contains the essence of spirituality. In the *Epistles* of St. Paul, we find the clearest statement of Christian faith and belief and the foundations of Christian theology. Thereafter in the works of St. Augustine like *Confessions* and *The City of God* we find a synthesis of the paths of Knowledge and Devotion.

Then in the *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas Aquinas, we find a synthesis of the Aristotelian worldview with Christian theology. A brave attempt to understand the Divine through the head! However, the greatest mystic and Yogi of the Western world is a lesser-known personality who went by the name of Plotinus. His *Enneads* is a mystical and spiritual classic and, in my opinion, the highest achievement of Western mysticism. If there is any Western figure who comes anywhere close to Sri Aurobindo, it has to be Plotinus. Sri Aurobindo said it as much when he declared, “Plotinus was not a mere philosopher, – his philosophy was founded on yogic experience and realization” (CWSA, Vol. 25, p. 522).

In Buddhism, apart from Nagarjuna’s *Madhyamaka Karika* and the *Lankavatara Sutra* of the Yogacara school, we see the finest expression of the higher states of consciousness in the *Prajnaparamita Sutras* of Mahayana Buddhism. And in Hindu metaphysics, we have the *Upanishads* and the legendary Sankara’s *Bhashyas* on them, as well as the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Brahma Sutras*, and many more. Then we have the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda’s complete works in nine volumes.

And finally, we have the thirty-six volumes of the complete works of Sri Aurobindo. It is a monumental achievement and an unsurpassed feat by any Master anywhere in the world – the final and ultimate destination for all who aspire to be Jnana Yogis. To bring down the higher states of consciousness into

the language of the intellect and to take to mystical poetry wherever prose proved inadequate to the task, is a feat that only Sri Aurobindo could have performed. We have to have some level of *adhikāra* to fully understand what he wrote and that is why it has been said that it requires tremendous brain power to understand the works of Sri Aurobindo.

SRI AUROBINDO’S LITERATURE

If there is a highest point of meeting between Literature and Yoga, it has to be in the works of Sri Aurobindo. Because that is where he recorded what he experienced in his Yogic *Sādhanā* and left a huge body of work for the future generations of seekers.

Speaking about *The Life Divine*, he said during his Evening Talks, “The Life Divine is not philosophy but fact. It contains what I have realised and seen” (12-10-1926). And he took to poetry when prose could not capture what he had to convey. One is reminded of what Krishnaprem once wrote in a letter to Dilip Roy, “Poetic expression can sometimes deal with realms in which philosophy cannot breathe... our philosophic dialectic, logic etc., are far too coarse to deal with the higher levels of reality” (*Sri Aurobindo came to me*, p. 338)

That is why Sri Aurobindo had to write *Savitri*. Book II and Book VII of *Savitri*, *The Book of the Traveller of the Worlds* and *The Book of Yoga* respectively, are magnificent expressions of the different planes of consciousness and the Yogic ascent. We can never get to know what Sri Aurobindo actually experienced in his Yogic *sādhanā* – the planes of the Overmind or Supermind. If we have to get any glimpses, any whiff of that supernal air, then we have to delve deep into the pages of *Savitri*.

Sri Aurobindo considered *Savitri* important enough to devote to it more than forty years of his life. In *Savitri*, literature touches the ethereal and rarefied air of the highest Himalayan peak of human experience. That is why the Mother herself said:

Savitri is a revelation, it is a meditation, it is a quest of the Infinite, the Eternal. To read Savitri is indeed to practice Yoga... (as recorded by Mona Sarkar in Sweet Mother)

To explore more on the relation between Life, Literature and Yoga, let us turn to *Savitri* and explore what Sri Aurobindo had to say about spiritual literature itself where we find him speaking about the Rishis who were the composers of the Upanishads:

*Others escaped from the confines of thought
To where Mind motionless sleeps waiting Light’s
birth*

The Upanishadic Rishis who escaped from the confines of thought and in the passive stillness of the Mind waited for the higher Reality to reveal itself (Light's birth).

*And came back quivering with a nameless Force,
Drunk with a wine of lightning in their cells;*

They returned to the earthly consciousness suffused with the Divine force and drunk with the wine of spiritual ecstasy which felt like lightning in their cells.

*Intuitive knowledge leaping into speech,
Seized, vibrant, kindling with the inspired word*


Giving shape in human speech their intuitive knowledge, they uttered the inspired word – the Mantra.

*Hearing the subtle voice that clothes the heavens,
Carrying the splendour that has lit the suns,
They sang Infinity's names and deathless powers...*

(*Savitri*, CWSA, Vol. 34, p. 383)

Hearing the voices of the higher planes, and carrying that Divine splendour that had the power to set suns afire, the Rishis caught in their inspired web of words, the Infinite and sang about powers that knew no death.


In the sublime poetry of Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri*, Life, Literature and Yoga come together in a perfect union and become one.



Literature, poetry, science and other studies can be a preparation of the consciousness for life.

When one does Yoga they can become part of the sadhana only if done for the Divine or taken up by the Divine Force, but then one should not want to be a poet for the sake of being a poet only, or for fame, applause, etc.

~ Sri Aurobindo
(CWSA, 27: 723)



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Life, Love and Union in Sri Aurobindo's *Eric*

Oeendrilla Guha

Editor's note: In this article reproduced from Volume VI, Issue 5, Oeendrilla Guha emphasises that most of Sri Aurobindo's dramatic works address love, but it is the kind of love that aids the giver and the recipient to prepare for a divine love. She then zooms in on Sri Aurobindo's play *Eric* about which Nolini Kanta Gupta had once written: "The marriage of love and heroism is the story of *Eric*, how heroism adds force and strength and nobility to love and how love lends grace and beauty and an other-worldly charm to force and strength." (Collected Works, Vol. 4, p. 384)

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The sheer volume and dimension of Sri Aurobindo's literary output is breathtaking, to say the least, and he inspired many to take to writing. His source of inspiration is the very fountain of the "Illimitable, beyond form or name" (CWSA, Vol. 34, p. 657). To make use of John Donne's famous conceit of "the fixed foot" and "th' other foot, obliquely run" of a compass from the poem "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning", "the fixed foot" represents Sri Aurobindo's fountain of spiritual inspiration: "A living centre of the Illimitable" (*Savitri*, CWSA, Vol. 33, p. 79). "Th' other foot, obliquely run" signifies his genius to express "the Illimitable" in all aspects of life: yoga, scriptural texts and studies, politics, literature, sociology, philosophy, to name some.

"The fixed foot" implies his "inner centre" that "oceans out" as "tones of the Infinite" (ibid, p. 323), which can be interpreted as his polymathic nature. And as a literary wizard, the other foot "obliquely" ran a lap of literature, thereby manifesting one of the "tones of the Infinite". Such a complete personality inspires not only an age but the aeonic game of existence.

He experimented with every category of literature other than the novel. He was not "a creator" of the novel (CWSA, Vol. 27, p. 547). A simple explanation to this voluntary omission is that novels "deal with the vital life of men, so necessarily they bring that atmosphere" (ibid, p. 549). He elaborates, "The difficulty is that the subject matter of a novel belongs mostly to the outer consciousness so that a lowering or externalising can easily come" (ibid, p. 725).

It can be presumed that the genre of the novel is neither philosophically or psychologically deep even though it does treat a relevant theme that deals with life and human experience. If "novels deal with the vital life of men" or "the

outer consciousness", then it is not necessarily "done from the psychic of the spiritual consciousness", hence bearing the stamp of its heightening or internalising source. The end result is "going out of the inner state of experience and stimulating the rest of the nature" (ibid, p. 725). This is an elucidation as to why he mentioned:

If novels touch the lower vital or raise it, they ought not to be read by the sadhak. One can read them only if one can look at them from the literary point of view as a picture of human life and nature which one can observe, as the Yogi looks at life itself, without being involved in it or having any reaction. (CWSA, Vol. 27, p. 730)

But since Sri Aurobindo attempted his hand at very specific genres, it can be assumed that was because he found these genres appropriate to do justice to his elevated and internalised inspiration and realisation. **The fact that he wrote plays says that he found the dramatic genre a suitable medium to give voice to his spiritual inflatus.**

Most of his dramatic pieces address love. But it is not a vital love but a love that aids the giver and the recipient to prepare for a divine love. It is of absolute importance to love a human being before loving the Divine. This means that human love has to be experienced, furthered and purified to love the Divine. In this sense, human love must progressively manifest as divine love. As M. P. Pandit observes in *How Do I Begin: A Primer of Affirmative Spirituality*, "Do not look down upon human love. Use human love to arrive at the divine Love. deepen your love by more and more self-giving. You will land in the lap of the divine Love" (2005, p. 48).

Sri Aurobindo's plays address such a prospect of pristine love. They are cathartic as they absolve the reader of the age-old concepts of negation and cessation of Life as the vortex of endless desires. Hence, the very structure of his plays promises a unity of action: human love progressively becoming divine love.

LOVE IN SRI AUROBINDO'S *ERIC*

His play *Eric* delves into the rubrics of love, hatred and revenge to show us that there is a fine line between them. And this fine line can be erased if one recognises and responds to a higher call or duty or if one opens oneself to a greater power that can validate binary. The answer of the greater power takes the form of "song."

The employment of ‘song,’ which Aristotle considered as one of the six tenets to mastering the art of writing a perfect tragedy, is common to the classical Greek tragedies and *Eric*. The ‘song’ creates a certain mood, comments on a specific human and moral issue and narrates events of the past, present and future.

For example, in *Antigone*, the chorus or Coryphaeus creates a happy mood as the sun rises on Thebes. It mentions mythical characters, who have suffered wrongful imprisonment like Antigone, thus elevating her to the status of some of the legendary figures of heroism. It also advises against excess and evil. Moral lessons are imparted:

*“Happy are they who know not the taste of evil”
or
“For mortals greatly to live is greatly to suffer.*

(Sophocles, *The Theban Plays*. Trans. E. F. Watling. Middlesex: Penguin, 1955, p. 142)

Eric is not a tragedy, imparting moral lessons. Nevertheless, Sri Aurobindo applied ‘song’ to tackle questions far beyond the grasp of the human intellect, and its sense of right and wrong in this play. Tragedy, as a dramatic genre, is the brainchild of the Greeks. But in the Indian context, it was not a genre per se. Rather, it was a mode of analysing issues pertaining to theology and philosophy. Such a mode was explored in Sanskrit literature by Kalidasa.

Sri Aurobindo elevated the ‘song’ by contending with issues that had no moral angle. For instance, scene 1 of Act 1 of *Eric* opens with a monologue delivered by King Eric, who seeks enlightenment from Thor and Odin on how to gather strength to unite Norway. He says:

*... O Thor
And Odin, masters of the northern world,
Wisdom and force I have; some strength is hidden
I have not; I would find it out. Help me,
Whatever power thou art who mov’st the world,
To Eric unrevealed. Some sign I ask.
(CWSA, Vol. 4, p. 533)*

The king is a mere mortal, and he prays to Odin and Freya for a hidden strength to contain rebel forces and bring peace and unity to Norway. He aspires to be a unifying force rather than a destructive one. He aspires to be a nation builder. And Aslaug’s song is that worded reply or “sign” for 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.
Love is the hoop of the gods
Hearts to combine.*

(*ibid.*, pp. 533-34)

Her words flow like a song, celebrating love. In *Twelfth Night*, Orsino, Duke of Illyria, contends, “If music be the food of love, play on” (Shakespeare, 349). Similarly, Aslaug’s song acts as “the food of love” because it fills Eric with hope and energy. It is as if the gods speak to him through her, feeding his entire being with a certitude that he will succeed in uniting Norway, but it is not by brandishing the sword but by spreading love.

Aslaug describes love as a “hoop” because a “hoop” or a circle has no beginning or end, reminding us that it connects hearts. This “hoop of the gods” unites Eric and Aslaug, in extension Norway and the rebel dynasty of Sigvaldson, headed by the crown prince Swegn. Aslaug is that righteous strength that Eric prays for to unify Norway and the rebel dynasty. She embodies love even though she is Eric’s nemesis as she is sent to kill him; instead, she falls in love with him.

The strength that Eric seeks from Thor and Odin to unite Norway is not born of tyranny but love, kindness and compassion:

*For unity is sweet substance of the heart
And not a chain that binds, not iron, gold,
Nor any helpless thought the reason knows.*

(*ibid.*, p. 534)

He is aware that coveting kingdoms at the point of the sword serves no purpose. He looks to snare his enemy like a lover wooing the one he loves. Eric’s love for Aslaug compels her to concede vengeance. Ergo, he does not vanquish her by wielding his sword but captivates her with his love:

*... From thy bosom my strength
Comes out to me. Mighty indeed is love,
Thou sangst of, Aslaug, once, the golden hoop
Mightier, swifter than the warrior’s sword.*

(*ibid.*, p. 616)

In this manner, Sri Aurobindo made perfect use of ‘song’ to predict the union of two individuals and their people. He also divulged a maxim, that of love as a divine and transformative Force. Eric’s love for Aslaug enriches him: he understands Swegn’s anger, wisely pardons him, shares with him his bounty and makes him the head of the Norwegian army. Eric’s love for Aslaug gives life to Swegn, whose love for his wife and sister trumps his hatred of Eric. *Eric* imparts the message

of love, that love forgives, embraces and includes. After all, Juliet famously says:

*My bounty is as boundless as the sea,
My love as deep; the more I give to thee,
The more I have, for both are infinite*

*(The Complete Works of William Shakespeare.
Oxford & IBH, 2007, p. 913)*

Thusly, Sri Aurobindo elevated the ‘song’ by superseding moral issues that were of the greatest importance to the Greek dramatists, who invariably used chorus to comment on the moral nature of the hero’s thoughts, actions and feelings. The Greek dramatists advocated a fall from moral grace to be delivered by *deus ex machina*. **Sri Aurobindo suggested opening oneself to a higher Force, becoming and remaining a medium of its expression.** The Divine is no avenging entity that comes to humanity’s succour only when it falls from moral grace. Manifestation is not a contrived plot, to be rescued by a miraculous entity that waits till the very last moment to save a life that has failed morally!

It is on record that during the last three years at St. Paul’s School, London, Sri Aurobindo “simply went through his school course and spent most of his spare time in general reading, especially English poetry, literature and fiction, French literature and the history of ancient, mediaeval and modern Europe.” (*Autobiographical Notes*: 28) His prolific reading of “the history of ancient, mediaeval and modern Europe” is displayed in his penmanship of *Eric*.

... No specific source of the plot of Eric is known. Sri Aurobindo seems to have made free use of names and events from the history of Norway in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, a period that was the subject of much mediaeval Scandinavian literature. (CWSA, Vol. 4, p. 1003)

THE ‘DRAMATIC ARC’ IN *ERIC*

His prolific reading of “the history of ancient, mediaeval and modern Europe” not only shaped content but also style. *Eric* brings to light Sri Aurobindo’s scholastic perusal of Greek and Latin literature characterised by the five-act structure or five essential sections to build “one developing action”. The play observes the traditional five-act structure, which was introduced by the ancient Greeks and proficiently applied by William Shakespeare.

The five-act framework was in prevalence till the eighteenth century after which the three-act structure of beginning, middle and end gained currency, as demonstrated in the works of Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw. But

Sri Aurobindo, going against the tide, chose to continue with the five-act structure in all his plays.

According to Gustav Freytag, the five-act play guarantees an analytically-framed plot with equidistant developments from one act to another. Act I exposes, hence called exposition or introduction, Act II offers rising action, Act III waxes into a climax, Act IV wanes into falling action, and Act V concludes with a dénouement. This precise and equidistant development is called by Freytag the “dramatic arc”.

This “dramatic arc” is clearly visible in *Eric*. Act I serves as an exposition to *Eric* because it introduces Eric and Aslaug, the latter’s murderous plot to dispose of Eric to seek revenge on the unwarranted exile of her brother, Swegn, who was banished to Trondhjem.

Act II offers rising action. In the course of this Act, Aslaug falls in love with Eric, but she knows where her duty lies. So, she sets out to carry the brilliant plan woven by Hertha, wife of Swegn, to kill Eric. Hertha, who accompanies Aslaug to Norway and gained entrance to Eric’s court as a dancing girl, divulges to Eric her relation to Swegn and Aslaug.

Eric learns from Hertha Aslaug’s plan to avenge her brother by neutralising Swegn is the rightful ruler of Norway for he is the son of Olaf, who was once “Norway’s head”. But even as she meets with Eric on that fatal night, her resolve sways: “She lifts the dagger twice, lowers it twice, then flings it on the ground.” (CWSA, Vol. 4, p. 587) She submits to her heart and professes her love for Eric, who then prepares for a war against Swegn.

Act III delivers climax. Aslaug is determined to take Eric’s life, but she is in a quandary. Between her duty to her brother and her love for Eric, she chooses the latter as she lifts her dagger twice but lowers it twice, finally laying it down on the ground.

Act IV narrates falling action because Eric does not wage a war against Swegn. He sends his trusted Gunthar to Swegn with an offer. We learn that Eric did not usurp the throne, as earlier suspected. Rather, he was elected by his peers to rule Norway. Obviously, Swegn, feeling cheated of his birthright, played an underhanded part to undermine the newly enthroned Eric, who is fully aware of the former’s root of affliction:

*The causes and the griefs that raise thee still
Against my monarchy. . .
But thou, against thy country’s ancient laws
Rebelling, hast preferred for judge the sword.*

(CWSA, Vol. 4, p. 597)

In the missive, the king of Norway promises to revoke Swegn’s banishment and grant him Trondhjem’s earldom, honours and wealth if he were to accept Eric as Norway’s rightful monarch. Swegn considers Eric’s ultimatum with his earls and decides to visit Eric.

Act V sees the *dénouement*, that of Swegn accepting Eric's offer: on finding both Hertha and Aslaug captives of Eric, Swegn yields. And Eric, on realising how demeaning it must be for Swegn to admit defeat, surprises him with an equally exalting offer of

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


(CWSA, Vol. 4, p. 613)

The unity of action in this play confines action to a set of events that are correlated as cause and effect. As one of the causes

is the wrongful banishment of Swegn, its effect is Aslaug's murderous plot to dispose of Eric. As one of the causes is Aslaug's love for Eric, its effect is Eric's gift of Trondhjem's earldom, honours and wealth to Swegn.


One can clearly distinguish the "dramatic arc" in *Eric* because Sri Aurobindo, the dramatist, accommodated the plot by progressing from one act to another while maintaining "one developing action" that is limited to a set of events that are related as cause and effect.

It is small wonder that Sri Aurobindo, the peerless dramatist, was well-versed in mediaeval Scandinavian literature and Greek literature and could compose a five-act play by stringing together Norse deities and human beings in the like of the classical Greek plays but with the soulful deliberation on issues pertaining to theology and philosophy that supersede right and wrong.



Poetry, drama, fiction...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.

Sri Aurobindo, CWSA, 27: 468

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