

DSE: Indian Literature I

Perseus the Deliverer

by

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Part of the DSE Course for Sem II Students of Department of English, University of Calcutta

- **Text:**

- 'First Complete Edition' of 1955. This is a text that appeared after Sri Aurobindo's death in 1950. The text is published by and printed at Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry.
- *Collected Poems and Plays, Vol I* is the earliest available copy of the play in a book. The volume is the seventieth birth anniversary collection published in 1942, published by Nolini Kanta Gupta of Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry. Strangely this volume was printed at Government Central Press at Hyderabad.

- **Note on the text:**

- The editor of the 1942 volume states "The dramatic poem "Perseus the Deliverer" was written somewhere between the end of the nineties and the first years of the following decade."
- Further, the publisher of the 1955 volume notes "Perseus the Deliverer was originally published in serial form in the weekly *Bande Mataram* of Calcutta (1907)." However, the publisher also notes that two scenes Act II, scenes ii and iii were missing from the 1942 edition. and they were incorporated into the 1955 edition. Hence the 1955 text is considered the first complete edition.

- **Issues:** [Following should be taken as thought-prompts rather than fully developed critical arguments. Hence their value to be directly transferred to exam answers is quite minimal. More structured ones are indicated in the bibliography section.]

- **Aurobindo Ghosh vs Sri Aurobindo.**

Wikipedia is adequately informative of his early life, but the description at Sri Aurobindo Society [[LINK](#)] makes it more interesting to read. The two commonly adulated or criticised aspects of Aurobindo's life - the firebrand nationalist and the yogi - become a straitjacket and create problems in reading his 'literary' works. For example, the Wikipedia article refers only to *Savitri* as his literary work, describing it as "an epic *spiritual* poem" [emphasis added]. Arguably the Wiki reflects the common knowledge quite rightly. However, on closer inspection we may find that out of approximately 15000 pages of Aurobindo's extant complete works following estimated distribution of his literary works:

- (a) 1700 pages of poems, plays and short stories,
- (b) 700 pages of translated literary works
- (c) 800 pages of cultural commentary including the piece on Bankim that hailed him as "Rishi",

(d) 1100 pages on poetry and art.

That is, excluding *Savitri*, Aurobindo wrote more than 4000 (c.26% of his works in print) pages of literature and literary criticism. Moreover, it is necessary to take note that while it is true that his original pieces mostly [except *Savitri*] belong to the early phase, his literary curiosity and engagement is quite evident in the later stages as well. He has specific opinions on poetry of Toru Dutt, Romesh Chunder Dutt, Harindranath Chattopadhyay [remember Barfi and Sidhu Jyatha in Satyajit Ray's films? Check out the Wiki on him to meet a myriad-minded man], Sarojini Naidu and Manmohan Ghose in 1930s, by when his image of the retired reclusive yogi has been firmly established. So, it is time that we start giving literature its due in his oeuvre and stop considering it as something of an early enthusiasm discarded in maturity by the yogi.

○ **Aurobindo Ackroyd vs Aurobindo**

From the above links to the early life and education of Aurobindo it becomes clear that in spite of his father's anglophilia and according arrangements for his sons, Aurobindo responded to his circumstances in a complex way. While he became increasingly critical of the British empire, he was also steeped in his Classical learning and traditional English curriculum. On 20 March 1937, Sri Aurobindo [after his retirement in 1926, he styles his name without a surname to Sri Aurobindo] states "I don't follow the *सूक्ष्म* myself in English poetry. There I have done the opposite, tried to develop old forms into new shapes instead of being gloriously irregular." [LINK] Development of Aurobindo's personality during the first decade of the twentieth century - particularly between 1893 and 1908 - is usually traced to the first of these aspects. However, while reading a text like *Perseus the Deliverer* the other aspect of this interaction becomes unavoidable. If this seems to be in contradiction with the notion of Aurobindo the anglophobe it is necessary to revise our received impression of the nationalist Aurobindo who abhorred everything that the English contact engendered.

A classic manifestation of this fault line between these two aspects of Aurobindo's life can be observed in two images used on the cover pages of two volumes of Complete Works. The image of Aurobindo that appears on the cover of the collected plays and poems, combined volumes six and seven, of Aurobindo Ashram edition is a bust profile extracted from Aurobindo's 1901 photograph with his wife. In this photo Aurobindo is in Western attire with a hint of happy smile. On the contrary, the cover of the combined sixth and seventh volume - *Bande Mataram, Political Writings and Speeches 1890-1908* has Aurobindo as the Principal of the National Educational Council. In this photo he is a stern-looking, dhoti-kurta clad, heavily-garlanded man.

We are used to the *ghare-baire* dichotomy in which the Eastern and the Western are aligned accordingly. In Aurobindo's case there seemed to be a strange reversal of this dichotomy. The Westernized image is that of a joyous private person; while the indigenous image is that of a resolute, formal and public person. Without stretching the analogy to any further speculative degree we may at least ponder over the possibility of Aurobindo's early plays and poems to be an expression of a subjective mind quite distinct from his busy engaged persona. The problem of pursuing this two-persona theory is that Aurobindo published *Perseus the Deliverer* in 1907 in

Bande Mataram, along with his firebrand nationalistic pieces. An obvious upshot of this decision to publish it along with such pieces is to encourage the readers to read the symbolism of the war of the worlds of light and darkness rather seriously.

- **The deliverer symbolism and its political import**

In the preceding section we started to presume a new set of counter-intuitive personal-public dichotomy in Aurobindo's conceptualization of the East and the West. Within that schema, the so-called literary and the imaginary in the Western mode could be seen as the expression of the joyous and the imaginative vis-a-vis the practical Eastern public image. By following that dichotomy *Perseus* could be read 'simply' as a story without any further political or symbolic import. However, this is not an unanimous opinion.

In a letter dated 25 Jan 1935 Sri Aurobindo says "I have not read much of my brother's poetry except what he wrote in England and in the early years in India before we ceased to meet. That was very cultured poetry and good in form, but it seemed to me to lack the inner force and elemental drive which makes for successful creation. I don't know whether his later work had it. ... But I think Manmohan published very little in his lifetime—nothing ever came my way." Exact date of their final meeting is difficult to ascertain. However, it seems not merely a case of coincidence that Manmohan was at work on his own epic poem *Perseus the Gorgon Slayer* by 1898.

We are informed that after Aurobindo's arrival in Bengal "Manmohan frequently went to visit him in the house of Raja Subodh Mullick where Sri Aurobindo was staying at the time, and the two brothers would discuss Greek poetry, European Art and their own poetical compositions." ([LINK](#)) Since Lotika Ghose's biography indicates that Manmohan was engrossed in the composition of his *Perseus* at this stage, it is not improbable to guess that the myth and Manmohan's plan of the epic both might have occurred in the conversation between the brothers. The coincidence becomes even more curious that Manmohan had to abandon the poem incomplete in 1914 "under official pressure consequent on unfounded allegations that it was a seditious political allegory" ["Manmohan Ghosh", *Encyclopedia of Indian Literature*, Vol 2, Ed. Amaresh Dutta. Sahitya Akademi, 1988. P. 1403].

Following extended observation by Manmohan's daughter Lotika too is quite helpful in contextualizing the British reaction:

Even his epic *Perseus* which he started writing in the last years of the 1890's was suspect, the reason being that his brother had written a drama on the same subject, [emphasis added] and this drama, when appeared in *Bande Mataram* was given a political interpretation. Andromeda was taken to symbolise India bound in chains by her own people and left on the cliffs to be devoured by the sea-monster (Britain) and was saved by *Perseus*, a demi-god, commissioned by the gods. *Perseus* had first to slay the Gorgon in the West (Western Materialism) which would otherwise end all possibility of spiritual life in man. A letter written to the poet in 1912 by N. L. Halward, who was a colleague of Manmohan Ghose at Dacca seems to point to this. « In it Halward expresses extreme regret that Manmohan Ghose

should be converting Perseus into a political poem. Halward had seen Manmohan Ghose's epic, *Perseus*, in Dacca and praised it. His letter shows that a rumour must have reached him that *Perseus* was being written with a political purpose. The subject of *Perseus* had probably become suspect because of the interpretation given to his brother Aurobindo's drama.

[*Manmohan Ghose. Makers of Indian Literature Series* by Latika Ghose. Sahitya Akademi, 1955. p.36]

I am attaching a brief discussion by Latika on Manmohan's *Perseus* for you to consider how far the conception and emphasis of this work is different from that of Aurobindo. Their choice of genre too was quite different. Though this might not be considered to be a serious difference by the late Victorians, for whom in a rather Aristotelean way Elizabethan tragedy was capable of expressing epic sentiments. Still, the coincidence of two brothers steeped in Classics to have chosen the same story for adapting into their own works around the same time. Even if Latika's work too appear in 1955, that is, the same year the text that we are reading appears including Aurobindo's *Perseus*, there is not much of the latter [except the underlined clause above] in her chapter on Manmohan's *Perseus*.

I propose to add some comments and thought-prompts on at least two more ideas: (a) Use of vocabulary - Miltonic and Shakespearean - in a general sense as well as the rhetoric of 'true' religion, and (b) the question of masculine nationalist discourse and representation of Andromeda.

Bibliography:

- A. "Use of Andromeda Myth" by C.T. Indra [Focuses on use of myth but also offers a generally critical discussion. Circulated.]
- B. "Plays of Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950): A Survey" by S Krihsna Bhatta. *Indian Literature*, Vol. 17, No. 1/2 (January-June, 1974), pp. 70-85. [Extended discussion covering many major concerns. Circulated.]
- C. "Perseus the Deliverer" by Prema Nandakumar. *Perspectives on Indian Drama in English* edited by M. K. Naik and S. Mokashi-Punekar. Madras: OUP, 1977. [Quite a comprehensive discussion of almost everything that should be usually read into the play. The book is available in the National Library and most probably in the CU Central Library. Unfortunately I don't have a copy of the chapter to share. But hopefully you all will be able to access it near future.]
- D. "Western Classics, Indian Classics: Postcolonial Contestations" by Harish Trivedi. *Classics in the Post-Colonial World* edited by Lorna Hardwick and Carol Gillespie. OUP, 2007. pp. 286-304. [This has no direct reference to either Aurobindo or *Perseus the Deliverer* but is an appropriate occasion to think through what we mean by classics and how the idea keeps on changing; an occasion to speculate with Aurobindo's work at hand. By the way, Aurobindo also adapted Indian classics, including *Vikramorvasie*. The same text that kept on appearing while reading Bankim's *The Poison Tree*. Perhaps some of you will hazard that speculative engagement along these lines. So did Manmohan by picking up Nala-Damayanti story. What might have been in their minds when they engaged with the classics?]

- E. “Conflit de Classiques, et Au-Dela: Deterritorialisations Indiennes des Classiques Grecs et Latins.” by Elena Langlais et Claudine Le Blanc. *Klincksieck*. 2012/4 n° 344. pp. 411-427. (“Conflict of the Classics and Beyond: Indian Deterritorialisations of Greek and Latin Classics in M.M. Dutta’s *Meghnadbadh Kabya*, Aurobindo’s *Love and Death*, *Illion*, *Perseus the Deliverer*”) [I am not absurdly demanding you to read a critical essay in French, but there are online resources that may help you to understand the basic argument of ‘deterritorialization’ in English. You may not elegantly quote a Google translated work, but you can surely use ideas from it.]
- F. *The Plays of Sri Aurobindo* by S.S. Kulkarni. Rajhauns Vitaran, Panaji, 1990. [This book is widely available but even its blurb stating the “author undertook this academic endeavour in order to establish each of Sri Aurobindo's works as a “literary classic”” should make you wary of its critical value. This is an abridged version of the author's doctoral thesis and the chapter on *Perseus* is available on public domain. You may find a lot of exam ‘material’ of descriptive nature, but of limited critical worth.]

[A quick browse through electronic repository Shodhganga <https://sg.inflibnet.ac.in/>, a UGC initiative to showcase Indian dissertations will surprise you by the number of researchers completing their research degrees on Aurobindo’s plays. On the one hand, it is encouraging that this might finally disseminate the knowledge of Aurobindo’s literary works. On the contrary, in my opinion, their humdrum quality and the tendency in these works to read Aurobindo’s works within the yogi-and-the-nationalist paradigm contribute to ossifying the image I have tried to push against in the first few sections of this note. So if you plan to use that resource, do that with caution and be sensible to the double-bind that might snare you.]

Attachments

1. Two covers of Aurobindo’s volumes and his 1901 photograph with his wife
2. S Krishna Bhatta’s survey article
3. Use of Andromeda Myth by C.T. Indra
4. Harish Trivedi
5. Deterritorialisations
6. Latika Ghose’s discussion of Manmohan Ghose’s *Perseus the Gorgon Slayer*
7. Dissertation chapter on Perseus

Students are encouraged to seek clarification and send their reflections or objections to anything contained above or anything referred to references list. Email (dhruva.sarkar@gmail.com) is the best form of communication. If there are more than one person sending similar kind of questions, I’ll update this document to include my response to them. I also hope to add some explanatory audio notes based on response of the students.

Please check the following link for any update. <https://sites.google.com/site/dsatclass>