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## Aurobindonian Rhetoric and the Problem of Evaluation

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### Abstract:

During the post-independence era, Indian poets writing in English showed serious issues with Sri Aurobindo's spiritual poetry; particularly its language. They felt that the language he used in his poetry did not qualify as poetic. However, their dismissal of Sri Aurobindo as a poet took the form of scathing, virulent criticisms; by means of which they attempted to mould the aesthetic taste of the budding generation of poets in India. In this paper, I attempt to discuss the problems as well as possibilities involved in interpreting poetry in general and in appreciating Aurobindonian poetry in particular. The paper does not intend to blindly justify Aurobindonian rhetoric. However, it does provide an insight into the ideational models which led Sri Aurobindo to create his unique body of poetry. In so doing, the paper tries to explore the possibilities of aesthetic tolerance which might enable Sri Aurobindo's poetry to reach out and speak for its own; instead of being written off and pushed into oblivion by the systemic politics practised by the first generation of modern Indian English poets.

**Keywords:** Sri Aurobindo, P. Lal, poetry, mantra, language, aesthetics, criticism.

### Introduction

The primary reason for the modernists to reject Aurobindonian poetry was its language and aesthetic value. However, contemporary poet and critic Makarand Paranjape in his article titled "A Poetry of Proportions: Nissim Ezekiel's Quest for the Exact Name" states that:

None of the modernist poets are major critics....they were enormously influential editors and anthologists. The anthology, not the critical essay, was their primary ideological weapon. It was through a series of influential anthologies, constituting an ongoing process of inclusion and exclusion, that the canon of Indian English literary modernism was shaped. (Paranjape. N. p)

In the lines quoted above, Paranjape gives the crux of the systemic politics that was carried out in the name of literary criticism in India during the second half of the twentieth century. The modernists in India were in a need to establish a strong base for their own poetry and decided to do so by declaring the "death" of the pre-independence poetry of Romantic-idealism. Paranjape's claim that the modernists' weapon was the anthology and *not* the critical essay hints at the lack of substantive arguments on the part of the critics with which they could nullify Aurobindonian poetry. Therefore it might have been easier for them to disparage him on the basis of taste which is a subjective aspect of a reader's response. They

intended to standardise taste in contemporary poetry on the basis of Modern English Poetry and then to strategically separate themselves from the pre-independence poets as they would not match up to the taste created by the modernists. I shall now focus on the fallacies of evaluating Sri Aurobindo and also explore the possibilities of standardising taste in poetry.

Poetry may indeed deal with the present living scene, at some peril, or even with the social or other questions and problems of the day,—a task which is now often laid on the creative mind, as if that were its proper work; but it does that successfully only when it makes as little as possible of what belongs to the moment and time and the surface and brings out their roots of universal or eternal interest or their suggestion of great and deep things. (Sri Aurobindo. *The Future Poetry* 249).

What Sri Aurobindo states here could be an answer to the modernist's opinion that Sri Aurobindo is obsolete, as his poetry does not depict the "reality" of the modern human condition. The modernists chose to delimit the duty of the poet to portraying the "din and hubbub" of life in a language that is colloquial and matter-of-fact. By standardising taste in poetry the modernists "established its hegemony over Indian English poetry, a hegemony which was, I believe, even more totalizing and oppressive than that of romantic-idealist poetry" (Paranjape N. p). However, the problem with this standardisation is that it is bound to reject Sri Aurobindo's poetry. The reason is: Sri Aurobindo followed a completely different poetic tradition for his creative expression than that practised by the modernists. It is true that Sri Aurobindo was an ardent follower of eminent Western poets and his early poetic works exhibit substantial influence of Milton, Keats, Wordsworth, Arnold and Southey. However, as his familiarity with the ancient tradition of pre-colonial India increased, he felt the need to transform his poetic style. Consequently, he followed the model of Vedic poetry in order to express his spiritual experiences which he gained from his Yogic practices. Evaluating him on criteria that are not applicable to his idea of poetry is not only unfair, but illogical— hence ridiculous. It would be essential in this case to reflect upon Sri Aurobindo's conception of poetry and its criticism in his letters written to his disciples at the Pondicherry Ashram.

### **Sri Aurobindo's Thoughts on Poetry and its Evaluation**

In his letters, Sri Aurobindo shows sound awareness of the difficulty involved in evaluating or critically appreciating poetry; as doing so involves aesthetic perception and feeling and has less to do with intellectual judgement (*Letters on Poetry and Art* 620). In a letter dated 5<sup>th</sup> October, 1934, long before the controversy against his poetry started taking place, Sri Aurobindo writes:

Most labour to fit their personal likes and dislikes to some standard of criticism which they conceive to be objective; this need of objectivity, of the support of an impersonal truth independent of our personality or anybody else's, is the main source of theories, canons, standards of art. But the theories, canons, standards themselves vary and are set up in one age only to be broken in another (*Letters* 663).

He says that a work of art has different effects on different people depending on the variations in the constitution of the mind and its way to respond. This implies that the same work can generate different responses in different readers, depending on their temperament and taste. Sri Aurobindo says that it takes time for the readers to develop a response and usually, it does not have a mechanical accuracy. Most of the poets/ critics fail to evaluate their contemporaries appropriately because their prejudices and temperament get in the way of their intuition (Letters 666).

Whereas modernists like Lal demanded his fellow poets to write in a “certain way”— so that their scattered talents would get some direction— Sri Aurobindo is found to refute that very idea of poetic possibility. He writes in one of his letters that poetry adopts its own form and the form cannot be forced upon it by any external mechanism. The Incantative or *Mantric* poetry which he tried to develop all his life depends primarily on the perfect sound-movement of words that spontaneously comes out of his soul and finally establishes poetry as the *Mantra* of the Real. His concept of poetry is thus derived from the ancient Vedic tradition and assimilated into English language to engender a new language for poetry that would be appropriate for the future. His language of poetry was deliberately different from the language that we use in ordinary speech—the language of daily speech as was being used by the modernists for their poetic expressions. Sri Aurobindo writes that language used for our daily conversation has a limited, practical utility, as its significance ends as soon as the intended idea is communicated to the receiver. As we do so, we consider words as mere carriers of our idea, thereby perfunctorily undervaluing their natural force, “much as we use any kind of common machine or simple implement; we treat them as if, though useful for life, they were themselves without life” (*Future Poetry* 14).

### **Primary “Problems” in Aurobindonian Poetry: The Stance of the Modernists**

A. N. Dwivedi, in his essay “Modernity in Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry” states that Ezekiel can be aptly called a modern poet because of his skilful handling of “current subjects” and his “masterly treatment of “immediate surroundings”. Ezekiel’s “Poverty Poem” is a depiction of the crude reality of hunger, starvation and nudity which is one of the most agonising pictures of reality in the Indian subcontinent. On the other hand, poems like “Jewish Wedding in Bombay”, “Songs for Nandu Bhendu” and “Latter-Day Psalms” convey the social, cultural and religious ethos of Bombay during his time (434). Sri Aurobindo’s poem *Savitri* does not exhibit such evident parity with his “immediate surroundings” and hence the modernists in India thought that it was justified to exclude him from the contemporary scholarship.

In the introduction to *Modern Indian Poetry in English: An Anthology and a Credo*, Lal lays out a manifesto—a set of criteria which the new poets needed to follow in order to belong to the prevalent taste of poetry which was highly emulative of their English counterparts. By asking the poets to follow a common set of rules, (which he actually enlists in the introduction!), he *does* make an attempt to initiate a homogeneous, reaction against the pre-independence poets by standardising taste which he denies later, when Sethna questions him for the same in his rejoinder to the anthology as discussed in chapter III.

The modernist Indian poet's stance towards their pre-independence predecessors is often perceived on their part as a circumstantial necessity so as to etch out their own niche within the literary milieu. However, this circumstantial necessity prevented them from evaluating a poet like Sri Aurobindo in the proper light of aesthetic judgement. Sri Aurobindo himself states in *The Future Poetry* that:

It is a matter of continual experience that even critics of considerable insight and sureness of taste are yet capable of the most extraordinarily wrong judgements, whether on the side of appreciation or of depreciation, when they have to pass a verdict on their contemporaries. (*The Future Poetry* 43)

The modern Indian poets almost purposely overlooked the fact that Sri Aurobindo, by his individual theory of poetry, was trying to create the aesthetic taste by which he is to be enjoyed. This puts a lot of responsibility on the critic as his/her analysis of a piece of poetry determines its destiny. Brian Philips observes that of late, controversies around poetry criticism is in fact more heated than aesthetic controversies on poetry—the art itself (“Poetry and the Problem of Taste” 440).

### **The Impact of Prejudiced Literary Criticism in the Post-Independence Literary Milieu**

P. Lal's acerbic comments on Sri Aurobindo's poetry was not actually triggered off by Sri Aurobindo's poetry but by some harsh comments made by Budhhadeva Bose on the modern Indian English poets. He had stated in an encyclopaedia entry that post-independence poets in India had no future. They were trying to be poetic in a language that was not their own, unlike the case with the pre-independence poets who actually grew up in an English ambience. Bose's was a prejudiced and generalised comment of course. However, this comment offended a lot many of the budding poets who were steeped in English education and who adopted the anthology as a weapon to wage a war against their predecessors. The poets thus also became critics by profession but came out with most unprofessional criticism of poetry! If we look into the introduction or prefaces by post-independence poets, we mostly see a dismissal of the older generation on the basis of taste as they provided a cluster of adjectives to define them instead of a close analysis of its rhetoric or style. Most of their comments are therefore personal prejudices which later gained the status of criticism. Sri Aurobindo was aware that people find it difficult to evaluate the poem of their contemporaries because the objectivity in developing the poetic taste and then judging the work accordingly is greatly affected by prejudice and his /her temperament. As he writes in a letter dated 2<sup>nd</sup> February, 1932:

If you send your poems to five different poets, you are likely to get five absolutely disparate and discordant estimates of them. A poet likes only the poetry that appeals to his own temperament or taste, the rest he condemns or ignores. (My own case is different, because I am not primarily a poet and have made in criticism a practice of appreciating everything that can be appreciated, as a catholic critic would.) Contemporary poetry, besides, seldom gets its right judgment from contemporary critics. (*Letters on Poetry and Art* 667).

Unbiased criticism in such cases is rare because the poets are also rivals who need to create a foothold for their own self by putting down the other. The critic's sense of responsibility is thus lost. During the second half of twentieth century, most of the anthologies that came out on poetry demonstrated a prolonged blame-game where the poets turned critics desperately insisted that the present generation of poets should stop following the poetic style of Sri Aurobindo. However, they seldom explained why they should be doing so in terms of close analysis of Sri Aurobindo's poetry. An exceptional example would be that of Sethna's friend, Professor Mendonca, who had expressed his dislike for some of Sri Aurobindo's rhetorical uses in *Savitri* and had written about them to his friend in elaboration, rather than publishing them as criticism on Sri Aurobindo's poetry. On the contrary; Lal, Ezekiel, Parthasarathy and Jussawalla seldom went for a proper critical analysis of Aurobindonian poetry. What they did was writing vitriolic comments on the poet and rejecting his entire corpus of literary works, especially poetry on the basis of a few words like "soul", "spiritual", "subtle", "deeps" and "deathless" which they did not like!

In his famous anthology, Lal randomly picks up a few lines from the epic and sets out to analyse them, without much consideration of the context, thereby missing the central point of deciphering Aurobindonian verse. Describing his experience of reading a passage from Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri* Lal writes:

Reading this passage has the effect of a gushy comical experience, with, alas, no "mystic movements" which are "deeper than the deeps" and "felt as a subtle and spiritual power". Impassioned observations such as "A free and happy and intense approach" and "Body was not there for bodies were needed not" leave me unhappy and quite unintense, and also aware very much of my own body and its necessity." (P. Lal. *Modern Indian Poetry in English VI*).

This is a perfect example of what most of the modern poets have done to Aurobindonian verse: especially *Savitri*. Its odd length of 24,000 lines make it easier for these critics to pick any phrase, line or passage from the epic and randomly put it up to the readers for consideration, without mentioning the context of the extract. Quoting a passage of twelve lines out of twenty-four thousand lines and then asking the readers whether they make any sense or not is a rhetorical question altogether! If Lal genuinely wanted the readers to decide whether Sri Aurobindo's poetry lives up to their expectation or not, he should have also provided the background information and context of the passage instead of quoting it out of the blue! Let's consider the following passage from the epic:

The Real with the unreal cannot mate.  
He who would turn to God, must leave the world;  
He who would live in the Spirit, must give up life;  
He who has met the Self, renounces self. (*Savitri* 635)

It can be interpreted even if the reader is not aware of its symbolic meaning as intended by Sri Aurobindo; unlike the one quoted by Lal which can be contextualised only when the reader has a knowledge of Book I and the preceding XIII Cantos of Book II because this passage is from Book II, Canto XIV! Comprehension would come eventually only with

adequate familiarity with Sri Aurobindo's theory of poetry which is nowhere mentioned by Lal. The problem with such unprofessional behaviour is that it defeats the purpose of literary criticism and instead, infects the readers with prejudice. To mention Brian Philips' observation vis-à-vis poetry criticism: readers of poetry journals have often confessed that the first thing they do before reading poetry is to look for the reviewer's comments! He questions: "Does this not suggest a certain unconscious frustration among readers of new poetry, a sense that basic problems of aesthetic judgement must be addressed before they can entertain the possibility of new aesthetic experience in poems?" ("Poetry and the Problem of Taste" 440).

It shall not be feasible to say that Indian readers have a bad taste in poetry as they cannot appreciate Sri Aurobindo or they are the ones who derive pleasure from reading "bad" poetry. That would advocate a similar position like Lal and his fellow poets—a highly polarised, lopsided perception of the poet. Though he writes in the context of American poetry, Philips rightly points out the angst of the readers as he explains that they all have acquired a sort of "intellectual numbness" and "insensibility which, according to him, is both a cause as well as a consequence of the lingering anxiety of the modern poets (440-441). The same is again perfectly applicable in the context of modern poetic culture in India after the 1950s, when the young poets were terribly anxious to decide what the reader ought to read as that would also decide their fate within the literati. The common Indian reader's insensibility towards Sri Aurobindo's poetry today is a decadent form of the prejudice induced into them by the post-independence Indian poets. If they had problems with mysticism and Vedic "obscurity", why didn't they bring up the early poetry of Sri Aurobindo which is not "tainted" with spirituality or mysticism? In fact, besides being the pioneer in bringing about a spiritual evolution through Overhead poetry, Sri Aurobindo was well aware of contemporary issues like Colonisation; even before its theories gained popularity in the academia. For example: the poem "The Tiger and the Deer" in which he predicts the possibility of a stage when the oppressed will no longer be intimidated by the oppressor.

The poem reveals the poet's deep awareness of the colonial condition of the country. However, he is the poet—the seer who would not only reflect the reality as it is, but also provide a ray of hope by conceiving that day in future when the oppressed would no more live in fear of the oppressor and "The slain" shall "survive the slayer". But there are very few who might actually be aware of such pieces by Sri Aurobindo, owing to the general apathy towards the poet that the modernists have induced into them. Within a span of fifty years or so, there has developed a yawning gap between Sri Aurobindo and general readers and the caustic hatred of the modernists have transformed into an indifference which is even worse than the hatred. His works have mostly been alive among his devotees and within a few scholarly circles.

### **The Issue of Contemporaneity**

While evaluating Sri Aurobindo's works, the critics had complained that he did not reflect on the contemporary "reality" of the age. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar in his essay "The Role of the Writer and the Critic Today" asks: "Is literature no more than the mimicry of life? Is criticism no more than a parasitical exercise battenning upon literature....Why settle

for the imitation, the second-hand, when we have the original itself?”(Iyengar. “Role of the Writer” 32). However, he also affirms that poetic truth should not be completely divorced from the reality of our daily experience. The uniqueness of the poet in that case lies in conveying something “far more precious, than a scientific or photographic view of Reality....it is the poet who penetrates the façade of Appearance and reveals or exposes fragments of the deeper Reality” (32). The one who takes up the responsibility of evaluating poetry, has a great task to do because he now becomes an intermediary between the poet and the common reader. As Sri Aurobindo states in *The Future Poetry*, the correspondence or dissonance between the poet and the critic decides the relation between the poet and his reader, and out of that our personal appreciation and judgement of the poet and his poetry arises (43). In case of Sri Aurobindo’s poetry, the problem is that commonly readers fail to interpret him because his poetic model is not one which the reader is familiar with. Moreover, the critics were either disparagers who themselves were unaware of the aesthetics of his poetry and hence were no better than the ignorant in this case. Their critical writings were mostly offensive rather than appreciative. There is no attempt of empathising on the part of the critic which, in fact, is the most important feature of the critic according to the *Rasa* Theory. A basic awareness of Sri Aurobindo’s rhetoric within the context of the Indian theory of *rasa* and his own theory of poetry as the *Mantra* of the Real is therefore necessitated.

### **Significance of the *Sahridaya* and *Rasika* in Evaluating Aurobindonian Rhetoric**

In fact, Indian aesthetics talks, not of the “critic”, but of the *Sahridaya*, the *Rasika*, the man who can attune himself to the heart-beats of the living body of literature, who can sense the *rasa* or characteristic quality or essence of the experience that has gone into the creation, and who can share his illumination and enjoyment with others. (Iyengar. “The Role of the Writer” 33).

The passage depicts the deep significance of the critic, who is referred to as the *sahridaya* or the *rasika* in the *Rasa* theory which was enunciated by Bharata in *Natyasastra*. The word *sahridaya* resembles the unfeigned solidarity which the critic has or should ideally have towards the work of the poet, in order to be able to appreciate his skills and correct his flaws without a feeling of malice. This solidarity need not always be a spiritual devotion. The critic should know and deliver his work with responsibility. Sri Aurobindo writes in *The Future Poetry* that “The ancient Indian critics defined the essence of poetry as *rasa* and by that word they meant a concentrated taste, a spiritual essence of emotion, an essential aesthesis, the soul’s pleasure in the pure and perfect sources of feeling” (*The Future Poetry* 262). For him, writing poetry is not an intellectual activity but an outcome of inspiration. What we refer to as the genius of a poet is actually the manifestation of something deep within him that enabled him to conceive the appropriate words and to get “the vision, the light and power from a level above the normal mind and it is the sense of the inrush from above which makes the rapture and the enthusiasm of illumination and inspiration” (262). Whereas the poet gives the necessary pitch and the form in which his work attains success, the *rasika*, the critic is the one who recognises this genius by



determining the intellectual and aesthetic judgement for the same. This overlapping indicates that there is a common, universal way of responding to similar situations across culture and time. The ancient critical tradition of India is not only less known to world but even to Indians as it is not a mandatory part of our curriculum as Western critical tradition is. Sri Aurobindo, after gaining a purely English education from his childhood till his youth, consciously adapted his poetic skill to the Ancient Indian critical tradition. His purpose was not to reject the European model of criticism as such. His aim was to bring the rich critical tradition of the ancient, pre-colonial India into the international domain of literary excellence. His magnum opus *Savitri* is the outcome of his lifelong endeavour to fulfil that purpose despite all adversities. Sri Aurobindo's assiduousness towards "the word" conforms to the *Dhwani* theory of poetry by Anandavardhana. As Mohit K. Ray writes in his book, *A Comparative Study of the Indian Poetics and the Western Poetics*:

The doctrine is based on the three-fold power of the word *Abhidha* (denotation of word), *Laksana* (the figurative power) and *Vyanjana* (the suggestive power), yielding respectively in three kinds of meaning, namely *Vacyartha* (the literal meaning), *Laksanartha* (the figurative meaning) and *Vyanjanartha* (the suggesting meaning). (Ray 114).

The Western counterpart of the *Dhwani* theory is the theory of Poetic Suggestion which was developed mainly in the "context of the Romantic-Illuminist doctrines of Blake, Coleridge, Poe through Mallarme to Yeats, which presupposed a metaphysic of phenomenal versus supersensuous reality... of correspondences and double existences" (Chari 391). However, the *Dhwani* School of poetry does not take into account the occult or magical aspect of its Western counterpart as it simply considers the different levels of meaning in a language. Besides the obvious functions of the *Abhidha* and *laksana*, this school of theory speaks of the special function of language which is of suggestion or *Vacyartha*. It enquires into the conditions in which a word gives rise to a meaning—a meaning which is more than its literal interpretation. The communicative property of words overcomes the limitations of the *abidha* and leads the hearer to the infinite possibilities of *vacyartha*, which "is the exclusive province of poetry and one that differentiates it from common discourse" (Chari 391). Poetry therefore, has the potential to give rise to that sudden moment of revelation when the suggesting meaning of a word gets revealed to the poet and is appreciated by the *rasika*, who has the capability to acknowledge his ingenuity in rendering such quality to the word. But this revelation does not come very easily to the poet, says Sri Aurobindo. He speaks of his own experience of composing *Savitri* which he developed across a span of almost forty years and still could not finish it. He writes in a letter dated 7<sup>th</sup> July 1947 that "as an infinite capacity for waiting and listening for the true inspiration and rejecting all that fell short of it, however good it might seem from a lower standard until I got that which I felt to be absolutely right" (Sri Aurobindo. *Letters* 344). He revised and rewrote *Savitri* quite a number of times unless he reached the right expression, bringing about the suggestive meaning of the words.

If a reader has the perseverance of reading *Savitri*, he/she shall realise that he Sri Aurobindo has taken so much care to give an expression to the subtlest fragments of human emotions. “She measured not her loss with helpless thoughts” is such an elusive expression! It brings up an inexplicable emotion in words, an expression—which is inevitable in nature as nothing seem to replace these words or their order in this line to express the emotion in a better manner. The line therefore gains a *Mantric* quality. The Vedic poets who were basically *rishis*, conceived *mantra* as an “inspired and revealed seeing and visioned thinking, attended by a realisation, to use the ponderous but necessary modern word, of some inmost truth of God and self and man and Nature and cosmos and life and thing and thought and experience and deed” (*The Future Poetry* 217). For the Vedic poets, seeing and hearing in case of *mantra* are not separate but one integrated act. A poetic expression can be considered as the *Mantra* of the Real only when it embodies the inmost truth and is “couched in the highest power of the very rhythm and speech of that truth” (218). To our common mindsets, the word *mantra* usually signifies the “special verses” which are “chanted” during religious ceremonies and they have supernatural capabilities and hence should not be tampered with. We have also heard of ancient *rishis* who would verbally curses would turn true just because of the sheer power their words had—the dire of the *mantra* perhaps. Hence we see the emphasis which Indian tradition has been giving to all the aspects of the Word—its sound, its vitality and its infinite possibilities.

Whereas Sri Aurobindo was misread by many of his predecessors, who circumstantially became his contemporaries as the publication of his works coincided with theirs, his disciples took the responsibility of the *sahridaya*, the perceptive reader, who has the required discipline in sensibility to unravel the mystery of the word. His disciples like Shradhdhavan and K. D. Sethna have often come up with close readings of his texts, in order to explain the inevitability of Sri Aurobindo’s diction—the result of profuse revisions and corrections which ultimately enables him to attain perfection.

### **In Search of Perfect Poetry: Sri Aurobindo’s Untiring Quest for Perfection**

Now, as we have already discussed “poetic taste” and its subjectivity, it is difficult to define what a “perfect” expression in poetry is. Sri Aurobindo was well aware of the difficulties of attaining perfection in poetry and this urged him to revise his works untiringly. In *The English of Savitri*, Shradhdhavan writes that the first Canto of Book One is the most revised portion of the entire poem. Sri Aurobindo Archives at the Pondicherry Ashram preserves more than fifty manuscripts of the first Canto and people, who have read *Savitri*, find it to be one of the most difficult sections of the poem to understand. Moreover, Shradhdhavan says that Sri Aurobindo’s use of language in this canto shows immense power, complexity and originality. She writes that in the first line of the epic: “It was the hour before the Gods awake” Sri Aurobindo fuses “multiple layers of meaning—literal, psychological, occult and spiritual—into a single flow of incomparable music” (Shradhdhavan 13). Shradhdhavan compares the powerful rhythm of this line with a bell tolling, in spite of using very commonly used words, in the required order. K. D. Sethna who is also known as Amal Kiran, had the opportunity to discuss various aspects of the

epic with Sri Aurobindo himself at Pondicherry during the late 1930s and early 1940s. While analysing the line “It was the hour before the Gods awake” in a letter, Sethna justifies the use of “awake” instead of “awoke” by the poet. Sri Aurobindo did not intend to refer to one particular event that took place in the past, but to a daily process—a routine work that repeats itself constantly. Sethna says that the poet presents us with a “religio-mythic” concept that refers to the daily awakening of Gods in Indian temples (14). Shradhhavan took classes on *Savitri* at the Savitri Bhavan, Auroville from August 2009 to October 2010. In the transcript of her class on Canto One, she states one of the unique qualities of the English language which makes it very conducive for poetry is that any word can be used as any “part of speech” that could serve any desired purpose in the sentence. In the line “The huge foreboding mind of Night, alone” the word “foreboding”, which is often used as a noun, is assigned the role of an adjective by the poet to describe the mind of the Night, which is also the subject of this sentence (16). Savitri’s impending anxiety towards waking up to that fateful day on which Satyavan death has been decided by the Gods is depicted in parallel to the anxiety of the Night as the Dawn is approaching. Sri Aurobindo’s writes:

Across the path of the divine Event  
The huge foreboding mind of Night, alone  
In her unlit temple of eternity,  
Lay stretched immobile upon Silence’ marge. (*Savitri* 1)

Shradhhavan lucidly explains the passage as she says: “But Night is not asleep; she is conscious, and she is foreboding. She is feeling that something very bad for her is approaching: the divine Event, the coming of the Dawn and the Day, with all its Light and movement, which will mean the end of her reign” (16). On reading these explanations, one might realise that Sri Aurobindo’s poetry is not an impenetrable world of vague ideas. They just need a specific understanding and duration of readership.

### Conclusion

The nationalistic fervour of the post-Independence modern Indian poets got manifested in their strategic denial of the contribution of the pre-Independence poets to Indian English poetry. What caused the contradiction in their stance towards the standardisation of taste was perhaps the fact that for them, the west was no more an alien culture. The western education system had already conditioned them to admire and internalise western culture in all aspects. It would be appropriate to state here that the west’s power lay in its culture and all its colonial subjects were enamoured by it. However, by now, ironically, they had become aliens to the indices of their own ancient culture, namely—the Vedas and the Upanishads. The ancient scriptures, as relics of a remote past, definitely gained reverence. However, the revivification of their contents through poetic practices, as practised by Sri Aurobindo, was disagreeable to them and they felt highly intimidated by it. As Edward Said famously argues in *Orientalism*, the “Occident” conceptualised itself by construing the “Orient” as a binary opposite or the “other” to itself. By the same token, it can be argued that

the post-Independence poets identified an “other” in Sri Aurobindo, so that they could carve out a “unique” identity for themselves. In rejecting Sri Aurobindo, the modernists conformed to the western standards of aesthetic taste and at the same time contradicted their own nationalist agenda of maintaining their unique identity by manifesting “Indianness” in their poetry. Hence, this discussion further problematises the standardisation of aesthetic taste in the post-Independence Indian context by questioning the very premises on which the controversies over Sri Aurobindo’s rhetoric of poetry were grounded. As readers, the only hope lies in expanding the boundaries of our aesthetic tolerance. If one reads Sri Aurobindo’s poetry for the first time along with the guidance of a *sahridaya* of the poet, who has discovered his poetic suggestions, there would be less difficulty in “understanding” a poet like Sri Aurobindo. Sri Aurobindo’s poetry highly requires this kind of pragmatic criticism so that his works become more approachable to the reader.

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