

Sri Aurobindo's Select Nonfiction: An Attempt to Deconstruct the 'Civilizing Gaze' of the West

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Abstract:

Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950), popularly known as a philosopher and politician, worked extensively to promote Indian aesthetics and poetics in his nonfiction. Despite being born under the colonial regime and brought up in a Europeanised household, he was very much Indian in spirit. After returning from England, his sole objective was to revive ancient Indian aesthetics and poetics to benefit contemporary and future readers, which made him a decolonial writer.

As an aesthete, he added the metaphor of 'akhanda rasa' (unalloyed bliss) to Indian *rasa* theory. As far as his poetics was concerned, he incorporated the aspect of 'soul value,' which went beyond thought/sense and sound. As a poet-critic, he believed that the objective of art was purification of consciousness or *chittasuddhi*.

Hence, the present paper seeks to explore his select nonfiction, where he deconstructs the hegemony of the western epistemological tradition and refutes William Archer's comment in *India and the Future* that Indian culture was 'barbaric.'

Sri Aurobindo, as a critics, believes in epistemological plurality and refers to that in *The Future Poetry*, a text on his poetics. The paper will closely examine the essays from *The Future Poetry*, *Letters on Poetry, Literature and Art*, *Early Cultural Writings*, and *The Renaissance in India* to situate Sri Aurobindo as a decolonial writer, who discounts the 'civilizing gaze' of the west and upholds ancient Indian values and civility.

Keywords: Decolonialism, Civilizing Gaze, Soul Value, *Akhanda Rasa**, *Ananda** and *Chittasuddhi**

Note: The meanings of Sanskrit words used in this paper have been explained in the Glossary section.

Paper

Being a colony then, India was under the Eurocentric epistemological tradition in the 19th century. Thomas Macaulay's introduction to English education in 1835 was meant to prove that the native knowledge system was inferior to the standard laid down by the colonizers. It was an

obvious gesture to discount the existence of the ‘other’ knowledges, to assert the British hegemony on India. The intelligentsia controlling the company was not ready to acknowledge the epistemological plurality, which, in a way, compelled the elitist Indians to send their children either to the schools run by Christian missionaries or to the UK. To make Indians civilised Europeans was a policy relating to cultural colonization, as SeifDa’Na Khoury and Laura Khoury argue that the colonial repression of knowledge relates to the “coloniality of power,” which gradually necessitates the process of decoloniality, a word slightly different from what we mean by postcolonial (5).

Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano introduced the term decolonial in “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America” in 2000, by which he did not mean promoting the culture of reaction and resistance. On the contrary, he suggested a complete ‘de-linking’ from the Eurocentric knowledge systems.

The “de” in this sense of “decolonial” is thus an “un”-- undoing, unmaking, untying colonialism from its active lifeforce, but not in a romantic way that tries to reverse or go back to an imagined pre-colonial past unmarred by colonialism. (Ruíz 4)

We also must remember that, unlike postcolonialism, decolonialism in India did not begin after the end of the colonial era in 1947. Decolonialism resists any kind of epistemic domination. According to Ruíz, the point of congruence between these two is that both are anti-colonial. G. K. Bhambra, in “Postcolonial and decolonial dialogues,” also thinks in line with Ruíz and asserts that they are only “made necessary as a consequence of the depredations of colonialism” (Bhambra 7). However, decolonialism goes beyond postcolonialism as it attempts to revive the long-lost indigenous cultural tradition of a place as that can initiate a new dialogue of geopolitics of knowledge. It is an attempt to re-inscribe other cultural traditions to demystify the dominance of eurocentricity in knowledge production (ibid 116).

Considering the dynamics of colonialism and decolonialism, the present paper seeks to explore Sri Aurobindo’s attempt to deconstruct the monolithic construction of knowledge by the imperialist intellectuals of British India. As a poet and critic, Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) revives the aesthetics and poetics of ancient India of the Vedic Sanskrit period for modern readers to prove indigenous epistemology produced by the so-called other is equally civilized and refined.

Despite being born in a Europeanised household with an English middle name Ackroyd, which was the family name of Miss. Annette Akroyd, who was present at the naming ceremony of Sri Aurobindo, he detached himself from western influences as soon as he reached his youth (see note).

As a nationalist, he believed in passive resistance, which meant non-cooperation in every sphere. He emphasised judicial, educational, executive, social, and industrial boycotts. His doctrine of passive resistance was instrumental in heralding a new dawn of self-reliance and initiating the revival of native epistemological tradition.

As a poet-critic, he revived the poetics and aesthetics of ancient India for the audience of the future. His key texts include *The Future Poetry*, *Letters on Poetry, Literature and Art*, *Early Cultural Writings*, and *The Renaissance in India*, where he discusses the “soul value” of Indian art and poetics extensively.

As a writer of the colonial period, he was aware of William Archer’s derogatory comments on Indian culture as promulgated in *India and the Future*, published in 1917 from Madras, where Archer claims that India is not yet civilized:

I am well aware that if any one of these gentlemen chose to apply a searching criticism to English life, he could, with no extravagance of paradox, retort; at many points the reproach of “barbarism” which I am compelled to level against so many aspects of Indian life, both material and spiritual. (Archer 6)

In response to William Archer’s scathing criticism of Indic culture and tradition, Sri Aurobindo highlights Sir John Woodroffe’s defence in *Is India Civilised* (1919), an essay under the same title, anthologized in *The Renaissance in India*.

In the foreword of his book, Woodroffe refers to Archer’s attack, who finds Indian culture barbarous. He also hints at Archer’s political motive, who wants India to embrace eurocentric culture as that seems practical too because of India’s subjugated political status. However, Woodroffe, as a critic, adopts a moderate standpoint and refutes Archer’s claim that Indians are too stubborn to reject their indigenous tradition and embrace western culture:

Mr. Archer, ... For his complaint is against the attachment which the Indian people show for their culture and the stubborn resistance which India makes against Western innovations. And why should She not, seeing that, rightly or wrongly, the bulk of the ancient peoples of the East have never admitted the moral superiority of Western civilization... Nevertheless European civilization, classic in its origins, has in the past displayed a greatness actively dominant in social and political life and in science and art. Whether it will continue to do so after present and coming revolutions is yet to be seen... (viii-x)

Archer promotes the material and cultural superiority of the west and subtly discounts Indian civilization. While Woodroffe, more of a pacifier, adopts a balanced approach and does not

support Archer. A little later in the same piece, Woodroffe talks of “assimilation,” not “subjection to foreign cultural influences” (xiii). He further suggests that the integration of western and eastern cultures will herald a new dawn, which will encourage a culture of peaceful coexistence, mutual respect, and ethnocentric tolerance without racial or cultural oppression. As a social historian, he knows that race and culture are intertwined. He envisions India in a state of racial and cultural freedom despite its socio-political subjugation, which may appear unrealistic because territorial colonization gradually aims at cultural/psychological colonization in the interest of institutional domination. The institution or establishment gets support from imperialist intellectuals like Archer to promote its cultural superiority.

In contrast to Archer, Woodroffe is unbiased and sensible enough to point out “the divergence between Ideals and Facts” (xxiii), which calls for a constructive debate. He also negates the popular notion that the west is blinded by materialism while the east is devoted to “unselfish idealism” (xxxv). Woodroffe’s views also anticipate Sri Aurobindo’s ideals of human unity.

The ideal is the great Confraternity of Men, beyond all nationality, but reached through the training ground of a true nationalism. We must seek to look on the world as one organism of which all the separate peoples are parts... (xxxiii)

In the concluding section of the foreword, Woodroffe ironically comments:

...as it is finely said in India *Satyânnâsti paramo dharma* (there is religion higher than truth)...as the Veda of this “barbarous” people says “Truth will conquer” (xxxv)

Woodroffe’s review of *India and the Future* offers a befitting response to Archer and justifies India’s civility and civilization.

Sri Aurobindo takes up Woodroffe’s argument in his articles published in “The Arya” and begins his defence of Indian culture, poetics, and aesthetics in the colonizers’ language. He highlights Sir John Woodroffe’s defence in *Is India Civilised*, an essay under the same title, which has been anthologized in *The Renaissance in India*, where he defends Indian culture and way of living, thereby aiming at the integration of matter and spirit:

Spiritual and temporal have indeed to be perfectly harmonised, for the spirit works through mind and body. But the purely intellectual or heavily material culture of the kind that Europe now favours, bears in its heart the seed of death; for the living aim of culture is the realisation on earth of the kingdom of heaven. India, though its urge is towards the Eternal, since that is always the highest, the entirely real, still contains in her own culture and her own philosophy a supreme reconciliation of the eternal and the temporal ... (60)

The controversial text of Archer and the subsequent defence by Woodroffe maybe considered as catalysts to flare up Sri Aurobindo's urge to uphold and establish the importance of Indian culture and aesthetics in his select essays, already mentioned earlier. Several of them were written between 1890 and 1920 and compiled as *Early Cultural Writings* in the first volume of the revised complete works. In one such essay entitled "The National Value of Art" (1909), Sri Aurobindo explains the objective of Indian art that it aims at "cittasuddhi, the purification of citta or mass of established ideas, feelings and actional habits in a man..." (439). It elevates the egoistic self to a stage of "cittasuddhi", which may be compared to the Aristotelian notion of catharsis or purgation of emotions. In his paper, "Aristotle on Poetry and Imitation," Peter Simpson rightly explains that in western aesthetics, the evocation of emotion is limited to pleasure and pain. However, the discussion does not delve deep into other types of feeling:

All the objects of the emotions, according to Aristotle, are somehow connected with pleasure and pain so that one may say that each is something that is pleasant or painful in the relevant way (285).

While in Indian aesthetics, the evocation of emotion is categorised under nine types, and the concept of "cittasuddhi", goes deeper and culminates into a profound feeling of *ananda*, which has never been referred to by the west. In the same essay, Sri Aurobindo, as a critic, further explains *ananda*, which epitomises "Joy," "Love," and "Beauty." It is pure and "unalloyed bliss", which is the summit of intuitive realization, when one experiences absolute joy or *ananda* and that adds soul value to poetry. Here is a passage from "The National Value of Art", where Sri Aurobindo discusses the metaphor of *akhanda rasa*:

According to our own philosophy the whole world came out of ananda and returns into ananda, and the triple term in which ananda may be stated is Joy, Love, Beauty. To see divine beauty in the whole world, man, life, nature, to love that which we have seen and to have pure unalloyed bliss in that love and that beauty is the appointed road by which mankind as a race must climb to God. ...But the bliss must be pure and unalloyed, unalloyed by self-regarding emotions, unalloyed by pain and evil. The sense of good and bad, beautiful and unbeautiful, which afflicts our understanding and our senses, must be replaced by *akhanda rasa*, undifferentiated and unabridged delight in the delightfulness of things, before the highest can be reached (441).

In "The Essence of Poetry," Sri Aurobindo, as a poet-critic, characterises the qualities of a rhythmic word:

The rhythmic word has a subtly sensible element, its sound value, a quite immaterial element, its significance or thought value, and both of these again, its sound and its sense, have separately and together a soul value, a direct spiritual power... (13)

The rhythmic word combines thought or sense value and sound value, which creates a soul value. He has used sense and thought interchangeably. From sound and sense, one has to move deeper towards soul value, which depicts the Truth. Talking about the style, he says that poetry determines its own form. It is not imposed; it is inspired. Revealed words are dressed in an inspired form. In “The Ideal Spirit of Poetry,” Sri Aurobindo further explains that intuitive or revealed poetry should exemplify Truth, Beauty, Delight, Life, and the Spirit (222).

Sri Aurobindo’s poetics refers to the poetics of the Vedic and Classical Sanskrit poets, who prescribe that a work of art is artistic when it evokes the experiences of *rasa** (see notes 4 & 5). *Rasa* depicts the reader’s emotional response to the text. The west could not explain in detail the concept of poetic emotion and its types, as explained by Bharat Muni in *Natyasastra*, a treatise of dramaturgy, where he says, “No composition can proceed without *rasa*.” He had categorised it under eight types (see note 3). *Rasa* is the mood, sentiment, or emotional tone that needs to be relished by the spectator. It is an act of savouring or tasting an experience of art. For Bharat Muni, *rasa* is the origin and ultimate aim of the work of art (see note 4). The later theorist, Abhinavagupta, in the 10th century, suggested the ninth *rasa*: the *shantam rasa**. Though there is a controversy about whether this *rasa* should be considered or not, that apart, this *rasa* has great significance since it is here that everything begins and ends. Abhinavagupta argues that all our experiences finally culminate into repose and serenity, denoting a blissful state of mind, free from tension, content, and near salvation, which can lead to an intuitive realisation of the Truth and evoke an unalloyed bliss or *akhanda rasa*.

Dhvani is also an important aspect of poetry. Anandavardhana in *Dhanyaloka* (an important text of *Alankarshastra*) in the 9th century discussed *rasadhvani* because the emotion evoked cannot be directly expressed; it can be suggested. Abhinavagupta says poetry offers extraordinary delight through its evocative power. It is a unity of sense or thought and sound. While Sri Aurobindo elaborates upon this and says that the poetry captures the vision in a combination of thought/sense value and sound value, culminating into soul value, by which he means an intuitive realisation of Truth in cosmos. To be precise, one can say that the soul value evokes the feeling of *akhanda rasa* or the feeling of wholeness. It widens, deepens and heightens one’s consciousness. Here is a reference to Sri Aurobindo’s sonnet, “Bliss of Identity”.

All Nature is taught in radiant ways to move,
All beings are in myself embraced ...
My body Thy vessel is and only serves
As a living wine-cup of thy ecstasy (601)

Later, all his sporadic comments and reflections on poetics were collated in *The Future Poetry*. The essays of *The Future Poetry* were initially serialized in *Arya* in thirty-two installments from December 1917 to July 1920 and published in book form in 1953. The *Letters on Art, Poetry, and Literature* also includes his discussions and opinions about poetics. His poetics is revivalistic, and it draws resources from our indigenous tradition, thereby reinforcing his status as a decolonial poet who is reluctant to embrace western traditions in the name of civility and superiority.

In another essay entitled “Hindu Drama,” (anthologized in *Early Cultural Writings*) Sri Aurobindo compares oriental and occidental dramatic literature and exemplifies our superiority over western drama. According to him, the characters in western drama lack the subtle qualities of refinement like reticence and restraint. They appear to be quite gross on the stage:

Now the average English mind is capable of appreciating character as manifested in strong action or powerfully revealing speech, but constitutionally dull to the subtleties of civilized character ... The nations of Europe, taken in the mass, are still semicivilized; their mind feeds on the physical, external and grossly salient features of life; where there is no brilliance & glare, ... The Hindu on his side distastes violence in action, excess in speech, ostentation or effusiveness in manner; he demands from his ideal temperance and restraint as well as nobility, truth and beneficence; the Aryan or true gentleman must be िमताचारः* and िमतभाषी,* restrained in action and temperate in speech. This national tendency shows itself even in our most vehement work. ...(189)

He further takes the example of the character of Bhema from *The Mahabharat* and clarifies that the passion and virility of Bhema will appeal to the taste of the western audience. Western critics will never appreciate Rama’s gentleness as an epic or dramatic quality. But the Indian audience finds both Bhema and Rama epic in their respective orbits. Bhema epitomizes savagery, while Rama embodies patience and tolerance. Bhema is belligerent; Rama is equipoised.

...The vital law governing Hindu poetics ... is fundamentally aesthetic, by the delicate & harmonious rendering of passion to awaken the aesthetic sense of the onlooker and gratify it by moving or subtly observed pictures of human feeling; it did not attempt to seize a man’s spirit by the hair and drag it out into a storm of horror & pity & fear and return it to him drenched, beaten and shuddering...aesthetic beauty, aesthetic gratification must be the whole basis of dramatic composition ... (187-193)

The excerpt above postulates his standpoint as a critic of Indian poetics and aesthetics.

As a critic, Sri Aurobindo believes that the true spirit of criticism is to find what is great or beautiful in a piece of art, not to demand what is not there. That apart, the principle of equanimity is also an essential aspect of his discussion. He does not encourage the portrayal of excess emotion. The objective, according to him, is to elicit pure bliss leading to the transformation of consciousness, which is in no way less civilized or barbaric. A barbaric mind cannot exemplify the spirit of equanimity in art. As a poet and critic, Sri Aurobindo goes beyond the limited vision of western aesthetics and introduces an all-embracing approach focusing on the ‘soul value’ of art culminating in *ananda*. The so-called ‘civilizing gaze’ of the west is confined to its narrow vision, which is insensitive to the ‘other’ perspectives and negates the ‘other’ (SeifDa’Na and Laura Khoury 1). The west also demands the ‘other’ to succumb to their

models, which Sri Aurobindo refutes and hints at epistemological pluralism in *The Future Poetry*. As an Indologist, he debunks colonial repression and returns to the ancient scriptural traditions to prove our richness and civility, which have refined our life since antiquity.

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Notes:

1. *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo* (CWSA) comprises 36 Volumes, published by Sri Aurobindo Publication Department, Pondicherry, in 2002. All the quotes are from this edition.

2. Sri Aurobindo was named Aravinda Ackroyd Ghosh at the naming ceremony held at the house of his father's friend in Calcutta. Miss Annette Akroyd arrived in Calcutta in December 1872. Therefore, it is understandable that the naming ceremony occurred sometime in December, though Sri Aurobindo was born on the 15th of August. [Source: A.B. Purani, *The Life of Sri Aurobindo*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, 2013, 5th Edition]

3. <https://egyankosh.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/35511/1/Unit-4.pdf> [“Abhinavagupta's Philosophy of Rasa”]

4. https://epgp.inflibnet.ac.in/epgpdata/uploads/epgp_content/S000013EN/P001455/M019979/ET/1519810376Paper11,Module13,EText.pdf

5. *Rasa* - In the chapter VI of *Natyasastra*, Bharat Muni says that every activity (on stage) is aimed at the creation or generation of *rasa*". He had categorised it under eight types:

1. Śṅgāram- Erotic, Love, Attractiveness. Presiding deity: Vishnu. Colour: light green.
2. Hāsya – Comic, Laughter, Mirth, Comedy. Presiding deity: Pramata. Colour: white.
3. Raudram - Furious. Presiding deity: Rudra. Colour: red.
4. Kāruṇyam - Pathetic, Compassion, Tragedy. Presiding deity: Yama. Colour: grey.
5. Bībhatsam - Odious, Aversion. Presiding deity: Shiva. Colour: blue
6. Bhayānakam - Terrible, Presiding deity: Kala. Colour: black
7. Vīram - Heroic mood. Presiding deity: Indra. Colour: yellowish
8. Adbhutam - Wonder, Amazement. Presiding deity: Brahma. Colour: yellow
9. Shantam- Peace [Introduced later by Abhinavagupta]

Akhanda Rasa- Culmination of all the different emotions in one whole [Introduced by Sri Aurobindo]

Glossary:

1. *Akhanda Rasa*- *Akhanda* means Whole, Unbroken, Undivided.
2. *Ananda*- Experience of Joy or Bliss
3. *Cittasuddhi*- Purification of Consciousness
4. *Rasa*- Emotion
5. िमताचार *and* िमतभाषी- [Mitachar- Restraint in action and Mitabhashi- Restraint in speech. Equipoised person]
6. *Shantam Rasa*- Feeling of Peace

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