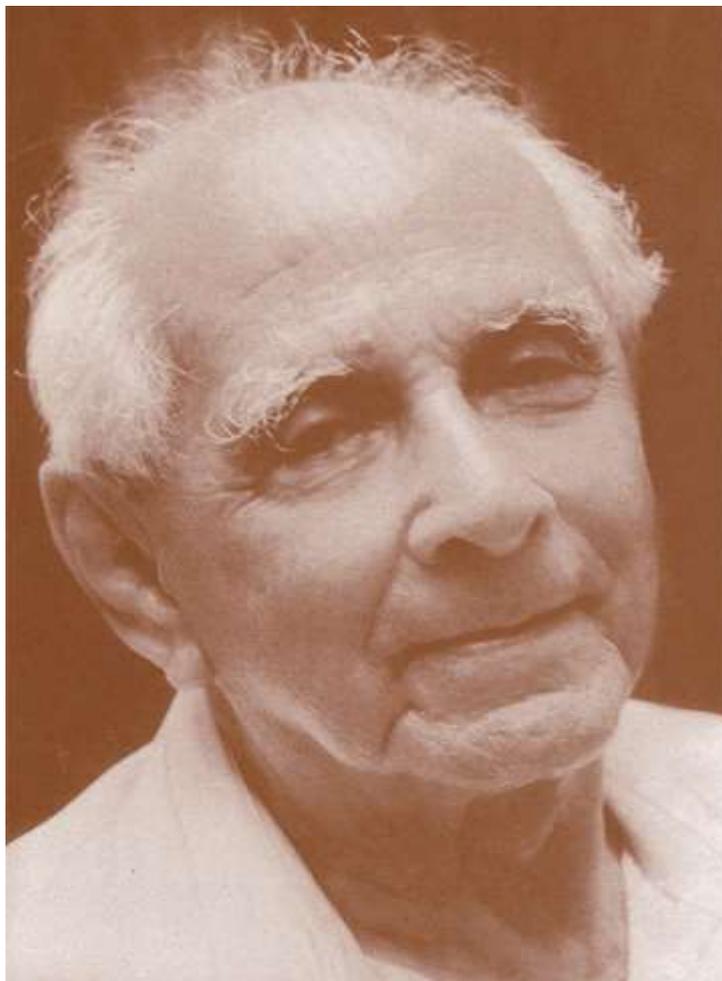


K. D. Sethna - A Poet *Par Excellence*

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K. D. Sethna 1904-2011

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Abstract

Sri Aurobindo ranks among the greatest personalities of modern India. He had an extraordinary supple intellect, a breadth of mind so extensive that there is scarcely any important field of human endeavour, which escaped his notice. Sri Aurobindo has been a great source of inspiration for the intellectuals of his times. He has many followers who are drawn to him irresistibly. They, living under the tutelage of Sri Aurobindo and serving him with devotion, imbibed inspiration and tried their hand in poetry. It came to be called Aurobindonian school of poetry and K. D. Sethna is the brightest and the most revered poet of it. Following his example, he painstakingly applied himself to his yoga to bring a faint beam of truth in his poetry. Since poetry is a vision and revelation, his poetry is a marvellous attempt to express the splendour of eternity, immutability and infinity of existence and the Creator. His poetry is not simply a message of hope but a bold declaration of both Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, a prediction full of surety and certainty for the supreme dawn of consciousness that is sure to come.

Keywords: Aurobindonian school of Poetry, *Sadhna* or devotion, Overmind poetry, Supramental plane of consciousness

Reflection of Indian Renaissance

The Indo-English poetry faithfully reflects the different phases of Indian Renaissance. In this age of fierce patriotism, in the period of the revival of ancient Indian *Vedantic* and *Upnishadic* learning, the focus of the poetry is once again upon Nature in its various dimensions and more particularly, human nature. In the background of two world wars, intellectuals think that the change of human consciousness is not relevant, and this truth has already been envisaged by the Indian wisdom thousand years ago. The Indo-English poetry is a fine amalgam of the multi shades of Indian philosophy, such as mysticism, metaphysics and spiritualism.

Most importantly, the Indian renaissance is memorable because it has given such eminent poets like Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo. In the glittering spectrum of great literary artists of the twentieth century, none is more fascinating than Sri Aurobindo. Even Rabindranath Tagore, though a senior, bowed to Sri Aurobindo's greatness and declared that future would look at him as world-teacher. Sri Aurobindo was a multi-faceted genius. Sri Aurobindo himself wished to be remembered first and foremost as a poet. If poetry is said to be a vision and revelation, then as a poet he is unique and outstanding because his poetry is enriched with an oceanic scholarship and yogic superhuman insight. His poetry is intuitive and illuminative and needs a particular mental make-up, a peculiar mood for right appreciation.

Sri Aurobindo and Sadhana

For him poetry was a means of his *sadhna* to realise the Divine and for that very purpose, he encouraged and inspired his disciples to write poetry. The most illustrious poets of this galaxy are K. D. Sethna alias Amal Kiran, Nishikanta, Nolinikant, Nirodbaran, Punja lal, Dilip Kumar Roy, Arjav, R. V. Deshpandey and Themis and some other lesser-known poets of this school.

The Aurobindonian School of poets mentioned above is a distinct category which requires a specific study. The most surprising factor is that many of them belong to different professions and have nothing to do with poetry so far. For example, Nirod was a medical practitioner. It seems that poetry is a natural medium to experience the different planes of consciousness. For them, it is a means of ascension to the realm of superamental consciousness. This large body of poetry bears a distinct stamp of Sri Aurobindo's style and his philosophy. They sing the glories of their mentors and celebrate the epiphany-the transformation of their ordinary consciousness into higher one. The poets of this group have some commonalities like all the poets have their unflinching and unshakable devotion in Sri Aurobindo and the grace of the Mother. They absolutely rely on their spiritual mentors. Though sometimes they occasionally express their doubts and disbelief in their own limited abilities, but soon they overcome it and reassert their firm faith in the grace and help of their masters.

The poet opens an inner sight in us and this inner sight must have been intense in him before he can awaken it in us. This characteristic is the hallmark, the secret of the greatness of every great poet. Sri Aurobindo says in *The Future Poetry*:

Therefore, the greatest poets have been always those who have had a large and powerful interpretative and intuitive vision of nature and life and man and whose poetry has arisen out of that in a supreme revelatory utterance of it. Homer, Shakespeare, Dante, Valmiki, Kalidasa, however much they may differ in everything else, are at one in having this as the fundamental character of their greatness. (29)

K. D. Sethna and His Poetry

K. D. Sethna is the strongest and the most luminous pillar of the magnificent edifice of Aurobindonian School of poetry. Though Sethna started writing poetry quite early even before meeting Sri Aurobindo, the virtual flowering and blossoming of his poetic genius happens under the sane guidance of his Guru. Sri Aurobindo himself profusely applauded his poetry and ranked him the best ever poet whose poetry had come from 'overhead plane'. He has given him the name-Amal Kiran means the Clear Ray. Amal takes poetry not so much as his means of self-realisation, but he considers it the only purpose of his life and God has sent him for it on earth. Writing and discussing the art of poetry with the Master, his genius has blossomed, and his critical faculties have sharpened. His aesthetic vision has grown broad and he has emerged a very proficient critic. His commentaries on various books and creative writers serve a good example of literary criticism. In the preface of "The Secret Splendour" he writes:

When I joined the *Ashram* of Sri Aurobindo in Pondicherry instead of completing my studies for the M.A. degree from Bombay University, I had already dabbled in verse -making. An earnest self-dedication to poetry came only under the guiding eye of the Master of the Integral Yoga and the benedictory hand of his spiritual co-worker whom the Ashram called the Mother. Their joint aim was not simply to find the illuminations and beatitudes of the inner life but also to fulfil by their aid all the high hopes of outer living and to initiate in the world a new age of human harmony. I was to be prepared for that age under a new evocative Sanskrit name from Sri Aurobindo: "Amal Kiran"-which he translated "The Clear Ray." (31)

The Secret Splendour

His book *The Secret Splendour* has a complete collection of his poems along with the comments of Sri Aurobindo and all the verses in this paper have been taken from this book. There is a serious and sustained effort on the part of the poet to master the craft and develop an insight into it. Amal is a lover of perfection and very much squeamish about the choice of words. He meticulously combines rhythm and content. Amal's poetic output is quite massive, and it requires a separate exclusive thesis. Therefore, only those poems have been selected which are held highly artistic and perfect by Sri Aurobindo himself.

Amal says that poetry is hard to define with one single formula. Its intrinsic nature may be considered at least fivefold. It is -

- 1-not only sight but insight
- 2-at the same time light and delight
- 3-passion building up peace
- 4-intensity held within harmony
- 5-magic leading into mystery

The above comment illustrates his critical acumen and if this criterion is the touchstone of great poetry, then his poetry proves grand and sublime.

The very first poem **Tree of Time** is the true introduction, the keynote that throws light on the subject of the subsequent poems. The poet conceives himself tree of time whose one sole branch is lit by eternity and the flowers are the fragments of deathless ecstasy. His fingers trace

On life's uncoloured air a burning cry
From God-abysses to God-pinnacles. (3)

(Further references to The Secret Splendour will have only page numbers in parentheses.)

The poet hopes for his union with his lost divinity after waking from the dreamful kinship of the earth. Then a nectar-flame shall course through his each quivering nerve. At another place, he calls himself a drunkard of infinity

A Force drunk with its own infinitude. (3)

Obviously, he single-mindedly pursues and chases the creed of the rest of the poets-to reach and realise the full potentialities of him.

The Secret Splendour poem acquires importance because it bears the title of the book. The dark inert Nature appears to be both senseless and mechanical but on a deeper thought is seen as a necessary part of the mysterious plan. An inconscient force and substance are the starting point of evolution, but it is a conscious Spirit and not an inconscient Being that is emerging in the evolution. The slow self-manifesting birth of God in Matter is the purpose of the terrestrial *Lila*. Though at first it appears as if some blind force has “made in sleep this huge mechanical world” (101), it is this very matter which hides behind its inertia all the rich possibilities of life, mind and spirit. The inconscient matter is a mask that has an outside as well as an inside lined with spiritual beauty. Secret splendour is the hidden divinity within and a great sacrifice of the Lord. The Supreme has descended itself into the abysses of inconscient but remains there as a secret splendour which is ready to come out in favourable conditions.

In **Santo Riso**, the poet describes the age-long severity of his soul- forgetfulness. He is aware fully the limitations of his human self. But soon the poet has a hope of a dreamful boat to cross his heart’s oblivion as he feels the divine Grace.

One should be aware that this phase-the period of the first world war, in history is the most turbulent and tumultuous period ridden with fear, insecurity and instability. Invariably, all these poets feel concerned and have their share of anxiety and angst but interestingly, it is peculiar to all the Aurobindonians that the temporary mood of dejection and despair soon gives way to hope and assurance of peace and harmony.

Invisible strikes a new note saying that the human eyes can never forget the visage of the infinite because they have never seen it. Forgetfulness is caused in the case of the objects seen and experienced but unseen and invisible is beyond the ken of memory.

Amal has experimented with so many styles and forms. The style depends upon the mood of the poet. Here through short sentences the magic has been created. How the erotic and sensual images turn into spiritual magnificence in the poem **Invisible** -

And though clay-eyes are dim
The lips’ lone drouth
Is sealed to a hush of heaven
By a viewless Lover’s mouth. (49)

The second image is in the poem **The Real You** –

Draw near,O Love, draw very very near,
For I would see your visage full and clear:
A distant adoration cannot ease
My heart’s unbearable burning chastities

-----O Divine
Lover, I am now stripped of all I see,
That you may lose invisibility! (53)

The sonnet **Nocturne**, in spite of the absence of the rhyme structure, has a single aspiration throughout. The poet has some memorable expressions like-secrets of love lost in clay-captured kisses; and the sky-remembrance of dew –perfumed dust. According to Sri Aurobindo, “This time you have got the blank verse all right, owing to the weight and power you have been able to put into the movement as well as the thought and language. Nothing to criticise.” (191)

But vain were music, a pathway to strange sleep
Nor woke a passion billowing through the body
In search of realms no eye-boats ever reached. (191)

The sonnet **Mukti** exhorts mankind in the manner of Wordsworth’s “The World is Too Much with us.” The true goal of humanity is to achieve the “motionless Eternity ecstatic and alone” enjoying the calm plenitudes of consciousness. In the oceanic heart of man, a wave emerges which is soon lured by the fickle time’s gilded glammers.

Amal is so fastidious in the selection of words that he used to ponder over each word till he gets satisfied. It is clear from the comments of Sri Aurobindo given as the footnote of few poems. In the first version of the sonnet **Sky-Rims** he got stuck on the last line-

Dreaming through lone sidereal silence on
To yet another *revelatory* dawn! (188)

The word *revelatory* was flat and prosaic according to Sri Aurobindo. Amal thought of replacements like revealing or ecstasy of dawn. Sri Aurobindo says- “The difficulty is that the preceding lines of the sestet are so fine that anything ordinary in the last line sounds like a sinking or even an anticlimax.” (189)

And Amal says, “After over a fortnight of groping I have myself struck upon:
To yet another alchemy of dawn
Then Sri Aurobindo said, “You have got the right thing at last.” (190)

The example is a proof how meticulous and fastidious he is about the choice of right words. The felicity of expression is worth noticing in the poem **Himalaya** -

The tides of gold and silver sweep the sky
But bring no tremor to my countenance
How shall sun-rise or moon-ebb lure, when I
Have gripped the Eternal in a rock of trance? (187)

Soul, eternity, infinity, inward hush are the frequent words in the poetic terminology of Amal. Once Sri Aurobindo says in the **Synthesis of Yoga**:

So, dazzling is even a glimpse of this supreme existence and so absorbing its attraction that, once seen, we feel readily justified in neglecting all else for its pursuit. -----the ultimate knowledge is that which perceives and accepts God in the universe and possesses it, retaining the power freely to descend as well as ascend the great stair of existence. (14)

The poem **Deluge** captures this message forcefully and lively. To the outward mind, Eternity seems to be like an unmoving painted sea of trance- trance which is lifeless and unsubstantial like an artist's dream. The bliss in this state seems shadowy. But the moment one is face to face with God and in His embrace, the phantom colours wake and the whole sea hurls from its pictured distance, drowning the eyes in a passionate world of dense infinities.

You fear clay's solid rapture will be gone
If once your love dives deep to the Unknown-
But how shall body not seem a hollow space
When the soul bears eternity's embrace? (186)

The poem **This Errant Life** beautifully explains the wonder and magic of human life. Though it is erratic, even then-

This errant life is dear although it dies; (70)

Every word, according to Sri Aurobindo, is in its perfect place in this poem and slight change will spoil the expression. Life provides a platform where man can realize his infinite potentialities. The highest one is to return to his original oneness with the Supreme. He can outgrow his weak self and experience the sky-lucent Bliss.

Invocation To The Fourfold Divine is a prayer to the four –fold powers of the Mother to dispel the darkness of ignorance. Sri Aurobindo says, “Nothing in Yoga happens without the Mother's mysterious hand somewhere in it.” (**The Mother** 4)

O Void where deathless power is merged in peace!
O myriad Passion lit to one self-fire!
O Breath like some vast rose that breaks through form!
O Hush of gold by whom all truth is heard! (86)

In **Frailty** the poet appears in a sad mood. He moans over his weak will power calling it a timid flame of prayer-the world's commotion has a dampening effect upon his soul and has chilled his spirit but soon he gathers patience and a miraculous calm of the Mother consoles him. Through the revelatory images, the poet prays to have wings to embrace the infinite sky. Thus, entering into the cosmic consciousness, he wishes to enjoy a strange sleep that draws him close to heaven by blotting all distances of space and time. Entering into cosmic consciousness is an essential condition for spiritual evolution. Amal says, “My work is not surrealist: I put meaning into everything, not intellectualism but a coherent vision worked out suggestively in various detail.” (90)

In the moments of mystic realization, he feels immense silence even when roaming in the tumultuous sea of the world, full of travails of time. The poet listens to an imperishable voice and a solitary god rises in him. In that bliss profound, the music of tranquillity profound takes place which no human grief can overthrow.

Life which but draws a golden road to death. (24)

The intensity and grandeur of thought in a poem is the result of inspiration coming from different planes of consciousness. After showing the poem to the Master, Amal always asks about the plane from which the poem has come. The poem **Two Birds** is about the two birds of the Upanishads-one represents the mental being and the other the soul aspect. Distinguishing the general mode and the typical turn of the Inner Mind's poetry from those of the Higher Mind's, Sri Aurobindo writes of the poem: “...not

from the Higher Mind-for there a high-uplifted thought is the characteristic – but probably from some realm of the inner Mind where thought and vision are involved in each other-that kind of fusion gives the easy felicity that is found here.” (132). The distinction may be illustrated briefly by the last stanza of the poem in question which is entitled Two Birds after a parable from the Upanishads.

The watchful revener below
Felt his time-tortured passion cease,
And flying upward knew himself
One with that bird of golden peace. (131)

The fourth stanza is from the intuitive plane according to Sri Aurobindo.

Lost in a dream no hunger broke,
This calm bird- aureoled, immense-
Sat motionless: all fruit he found
Within his own magnificence. (131)

The poem **Agni Jatavedas** has epic sublimity and grandeur.
An infinite rapture veiled by infinite pain (134)

Amal meticulously pursued the craft of writing poetry, for after writing every poem he asked for the opinion of his master Sri Aurobindo. Once, he asked, “Why is a poem fine?” Sri Aurobindo said, “By its power of expression and rhythm, I suppose, and its force of substance and image. As all these are there, I called it a fine poem.” (187)

If we accept the dictum of Coleridge that poetry is nothing but the best words in the best of order then we have to admit that imagery is the soul of that best order of words. In Amal’s poetry, images have been fused inseparably into the substance of the thought and feel perfectly interrelated and linked together like the limbs of an organic body, for example “unsleeping seas, heart-incense, soul-dream etc.” By the same token, epithets are coined dexterously- Earth-captive life, deep-sunk in worship, White oceanic transparent profundity, hushed intense receptivity etc.

Mystical poetry is always clothed in symbols. There is profuse use of symbols in Amal’s poetry. It is when the thing seen is spiritually lived and has an independent vivid reality of its own which exceeds any conceptual significance it may have on the surface that it is mystic. He explains:

In mystic poetry the symbol ought to be as much as possible the natural body of the inner truth or vision, itself an intimate part of the experience. Symbols may be of various kinds; there are those that are concealing images capable of intellectual interpretation but still different from either symbolic or allegorical figures- and there are those that have a more intimate life of their own and are not conceptual so much as occultly vital in their significance; there are still others that need a psychic or spiritual or at least an inner and intuitive sight to identify oneself fully with their meaning. (93)

“Flickering no longer with the cry of clay’ (106)-is very fine from the technical point of view, the distribution of consonantal and vowel sounds being perfect. Repeatedly the poet asserts that god-realization is not an impossibility, a herculean task. Rather the treasure of the Infinite is within a stretch of our hand but the key to the Infinite is hard to understand. This key is the true and genuine aspiration. The poet has beautifully exploited the famous anecdote of a fool and the moon. When asked by a fool where is the moon, someone has pointed out to the moon with one finger. The fool takes the finger as the real moon.

Vainly we grope for the key,
To the ends of the earth we run,
While just a fragile finger
Making the sign of the One
Can touch through the narrow tunnel
The spring of the secret cry
With witch the lid breaks open
The all-seeing central Eye! (229)

The Aurobindonians, often in a state of deep meditation, throw the garb of their individual consciousness and get in touch with the cosmic self. The cosmic consciousness is higher than the individual mental consciousness and the limited mental consciousness acquires height and depth when merged with the cosmic consciousness. Following this very cult Amal also measures cosmic rhythms. On this plane, the poet is very near the Infinite and experiences immense peace and tranquillity. This is the kingdom of love and perfection and Seraphs are crossing his brain.

Now cosmic rhythms are a laughter in my pulse,
For the heart stands back immense and knows no aim,
Cool core of a body of tortuous paths to power.

Amal is often disturbed to know that his poetry is found difficult and often it goes over the head of people. Even the stalwarts like Nolinikanta and Arjav fail to understand his poetry. When asked about it, Sri Aurobindo says:

It is precisely because what you put in is not intellectualism or a product of mental imagination that your poetry is difficult to those who are accustomed to a predominantly mental strain in poetry. One can grasp fully if one has some clue to what you put in, either the clue of personal experience or the clue of a sympathetic insight. -----That is the difficulty, the crux of imaged spiritual poetry: it needs not only the fit writer but the fit audience- and that has yet to be made. (91)

Of all the poets of this school, only Amal's poetry could have touched the plane of Overmind, just one level below supramental plane. Most of his poems come from the overhead plane which is called overhead poetry. According to Sri Aurobindo, the Overmind is essentially a spiritual power. Mind in it surpasses its ordinary self and rises and takes its stand on a spiritual foundation. It embraces beauty and sublimates it; it has an essential aesthesis which is not limited by rules and cannons; it sees a universal and an eternal beauty while it takes up and transforms all that is limited and particular. Sri Aurobindo says:

It is concerned especially with truth and knowledge or rather with a wisdom that exceeds what we call knowledge; its truth goes beyond truth of fact and truth of thought, even the higher thought which is the first spiritual range of the thinker. It has the truth of spiritual thought, spiritual feeling, spiritual sense and at its highest the truth that comes by the most intimate spiritual touch or by identity. Ultimately, truth and beauty come together and coincide. (115)

Humanity perhaps will acknowledge this new poetry of new consciousness in near future. While conversing with P. Raja, Amal explains his concept of overhead poetry:

Overhead Poetry is not meant to go over our heads. Really speaking, it is meant to lift our necks a little higher in order to crane further to get the mind into the overhead atmosphere. It was not a sort of an esoteric art. And there had always been clarity in the Overhead Poetry. Only the clarity would not be

of purely intellectual mind and would need a little pumping up of vision from somewhere within us. (*Amal Kiran: Poet and Critic* 73)

A limited aesthetical artistic aim is not its purpose. Moreover, neither the poet always sings of high, grand and great themes in the Overmind consciousness. Sri Aurobindo says that even Overhead poetry itself does not always deal in what is new or striking or strange; it can take up the obvious, the common, the brave and even the bald, the old, even that which without it would seem stale and hackneyed and raise it to greatness.

In the poetry of Amal, the rootedness in Earth and a flight into the infinities of sky are amazingly balanced. The poet's eyes are fixed on the infinitudes of the Sky but at the same time firmly rooted in the Mother Earth:

Each drop of beauty brings a power to slake
The fire-abyssees of the human soul
Yearning for infinite ecstasy through clay. (517)

Anie Nunnally quotes the very words of Amal for the Mother, full of devotion and faith and the trust the Mother has in him:

Amal told me that the Mother said if someone came to her even once she did two things: she linked their outer being to their psychic being and the other was that she put out an emanation of herself to go with that person for all of their lifetime. That emanation would go out in accordance with the spiritual needs of the *sadhak*. (**The Golden Path**-19)

The book has thousand poems that show how ardently Amal was preoccupied single-mindedly with the pursuit of creating poetry. There are sonnets, lyrics, some are based on the mythology and some are the poetic renderings of French poems. It is like a bouquet of various and different shades and colour and remind the words of the poet that wherever poetry has the accent which we may distinguish as “inevitable”, the simple or complex light and delight it conveys give us the sense of the writer being the mouthpiece of some more than human agency.

Besides being a poet Amal is also a distinguished critic. He has amazed even the western critics by showing his argumentative skill. He has tried his best to establish Sri Aurobindo's reputation as a great poet to the western critics. Jugal Kishor Mukherjee comments, “Amal Kiran is a distinguished poet, a literary critic of high calibre, an admirable prose-writer on a wide variety of subjects, an artist of words and a thinker and a seer. He is very sensitive to the touch of earth while, at the same time, aspiring for the high unknown.” (**The Wonder That is K.D. Sethna alias Amal Kiran** 1)

These poems, which are a clarion call to spiritual life, have the effect of rousing the reader's morale. They uplift and inspire, giving the reader the confidence to venture towards self-realisation, assuring him that it is the only thing to be done in the world. The depth of realisation and effective command over the poetic medium give an everlasting value to his poetry. Volumes can be written about the excellence of Amal's poetry. Sri Aurobindo has called him a poet par excellence and after this, he does not need anybody's praise or criticism.

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