

# Aesthetic Principles of Hegel and Aurobindo: A Comparative Study

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**Abstract**—Literature limns a picture of life which is interesting and beautiful. The proficiency of an artist lies in presenting a vibrant image of life which is convincing as well as beautiful. What makes literature interesting? Aesthetics is central in literature as only aesthetically rich literature can pass the test of time. Aesthetics has been of concern of many Eastern as well as Western critics from time to time. They advocated about aesthetics in their philosophies and considered it significant in fine arts. Sri Aurobindo and G.W.F. Hegel also gave their theories on aesthetics in literature. They expansively explained the fundamentals of aesthetics and its importance in literature. Both the critics though are from different parts of the world but have many commonalities in their views on aesthetics. This paper attempts to do a comparative study of Aurobindo and Hegel's aesthetic theory to highlight the importance of compoetics in today's time. Hegel said that literature is powerful only when it reflects the "absolute idea" similarly Aurobindo said that "mantara" in poetry is essential to present higher truth. Good poetry expresses an intriguing spectrum of concealed and subtle meaning which is understood only by sahdrya ("sensitive") reader. Aesthetics gives power to poetic imagery and thus plays a pivotal in literature.

## Introduction

Aesthetics is a branch of philosophy which critically analyses art and literature. It is a chief parameter on which worth of a literary work can be judged. Aesthetics is a part of axiology which studies nature of literature, characteristics of literature, value of literature and effect of literature on readers. Aesthetics refers to beauty which is eternal in nature and not which is physical or temporary in nature. Oxford Dictionary defines aesthetics as something "giving or designed to give pleasure through beauty" (oxforddictionaries.com). Aesthetically pleasing literature becomes eternal and immortal as its beauty gives pleasure to mankind in all times and climes. It means literature which is aesthetically sound can give ineffable pleasure and participates in eternity. Aesthetic judgment goes far beyond sensory perception as it deals with spiritual vision and aesthetic experience is a spiritual experience as it can "awaken sleeping souls. Exchange divine strength for human weakness, it impart light to inner eye" (Davidson 38). Aesthetic experience can surpass a reader from the material plane to the divine plane.

Aesthetics has a rich history in India. *Natyashashtra*, the first discourse on aesthetics was written by Bharatmuni in which he talked about eight *rasas* ("juice"). In the West, the discussion on aesthetics begins with Plato's *The Republic* (380 BC). Both in the East and the West critics have extensively talked about aesthetics taking in consideration its importance in art. This paper adopting a cross-cultural approach attempts to make a comparative study of Hegel and Aurobindo's aesthetic principles. Hegel gave lectures on aesthetics at Heidelberg and Berlin which were later compiled in a book *Lecture on Aesthetics* by Heinrich Gustav Hotho. It was later translated into English by T.M. Knox in 1975 thus making it available worldwide. Aurobindo discussed his concept of poetry in detail in *The Future Poetry* (1953). Both the critics have given their views on the nature of poetry in their magnum opuses and thus making them valuable books for scholars working in the field of aesthetics.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) was a German philosopher and a critic who is vital to German Idealism. His writings had a strong influence of German Idealism and interestingly, also of oriental philosophies especially Indian traditions and philosophies. The classical Indian texts like The Vedas, The Upanishads, and The Bhagavadgītā were translated into European language during his time and this gave him chance of reading them. He perused them in detail and thus it created a strong influence on him. The concept of *Brahma* echoes in his theory of "absolute idea". He also wrote essays like "Spirit of the Orientals" and also gave reviews on Bhagavadgītā. His contact with Indian classical texts helped him in understanding of Indian philosophy and formulation of his own theory of poetry based on it.

Sri Aurobindo Ghosh (1872-1950), a yogi, poet, nationalist, critic and a philosopher has given profound literary works which enriched and added wisdom to Indian English literature. He studied at King's College, Cambridge, England and after completing his studies in 1893 he returned to India and never left it again. Later, he established an *ashram* in Pondicherry and there he practiced internal yoga and attained *Maha*

*Samadhi*. Thus his works show a substantial influence of both oriental and occidental thoughts. His philosophy seems as a “unification and synthesis between East and West. Kant's sublime, Hegel's absolute, Schopenhauer's will, Kierkegaard's passion, Marx's matter, Darwin's evolution, Nietzsche's overman, Bergson's élan vital, all find their due representation in Sri Aurobindo's grand exposition” (newworldencyclopedia.org). He had a good understanding of the materialistic influence on mankind and its effect on their spiritual consciousness. His valuable works acts as guidance in the reconstruction of the spiritual consciousness of a modern man which has been diminishing due to various external stimuli.

Hegel and Aurobindo both believed that literature acts as a tool to modify moral nature of a man. Theodore Roosevelt aptly said “To educate a man in mind and not in morals is to educate menace to society”. To prevent this anticipated peril insightful literature is obligatory for moral correction of society. Literature which is aesthetically rich instructs and entertains human folks and empowers spiritual mind. Down the centuries, philosophers gave their perception of beauty which acted as a determining force in judging, evaluating, and appraising of literary works. Hegel and Aurobindo though belong to two different cultures, come from two different parts of the world but have something in common in their theory. When they both discuss poetry in their works a common thread runs through their thoughts. Both are original in their ideas but a similarity can be observed in their viewpoints.

Hegel was of the view that poetry is the most powerful way to communicate ideas and wisdom. He writes “word can express the entirety of the human spirit” (Knox 325). Similarly, Aurobindo also believes that “The Word has power - even the ordinary written word has power. If it is an inspired word it has still more power” (510). It has a power to influence thoughts and inner conscience. Both the philosophers consider words as a tool to communicate poetic ideas.

Both Hegel and Aurobindo supports that poetry can take its material from external world but it can become great only when it unfolds the infinite truth and spiritual vision. Hegel expounds that poetry which although deals with the external world but has the original presentation of the truth is great. He clarifies that poetry must deal with spiritual interest, not the sun, moon, or the constituents of the human body. The entire external sphere enters poetry only in relation to man's inner consciousness”. He further adds “Stars, plants and animals neither know nor experience what their law is. But man knows it. What he is, what are his surroundings and what are his powers and this knowledge comes to him through poetry” (Knox 442). This truth is acknowledged by a reader when he delves deep into poetry and understands its essence appropriately. Similarly, Aurobindo talks about the truth expressed in poetry which according to him is Supreme truth and far above scientific, philosophical and religious truth. He writes “Truth of poetry is not truth of philosophy or truth of

science or truth of religion only, because it is another way of self-expression of infinite Truth so distinct that it appears to give quite another face of things and reveal quite another side of experience”. Like Hegel he also says that “Poetry is not external it must pulsate with internal” (351) in addition to it he explains that great literature can “open to us new realms of vision, new realms of being, our own and the world's and he does it even when he is dealing with actual things.” It implies that while dealing with definite things poetry must introduce a reader to new realms and educate being about his/her existence on the earth.

In Hegel's view poetic inspiration is spiritually influenced. He believes only an artist with the quality of piercing deep in worldly experience can have spiritual experience and that can inspire his/her literary work. When a poet is spiritually inspired then only he can give an absolute picture of the “absolute idea”. Aurobindo also talks about poet's muse which is divine in his view. Poets are blessed to have mystical experience through their artistic bent of mind and thus their poetry is inspired from such experience. He proclaims, “What we mean by inspiration is that the impetus of poetic creation and the utterance comes to us from our superconscient source above the ordinary mentality so that what is written seems not to be fabrication of the brain mind, but something more sovereign breathed or poured from above” (236-37). Like Shelley, he asserts that writing poetry is a divine act and it is beyond the understanding of a man who is not spiritually awakened.

Hegel's philosophy is solely based on “absolute idea”. He refers to infinite mind as pure consciousness or an absolute idea which knows everything. He asserts that this world is the manifestation of absolute idea and the entire cosmology is the body of absolute idea. In his view, poetry which can give glimpses of “absolute idea” is great. He considers “absolute idea” as the soul of art and a medium of revelation of the Absolute. Similarly, Aurobindo gave his concept of “*mantra*”. It is,

The discovery of a closer approximation to what we might call the mantra in poetry, that rhythmic speech which, as the Veda puts it, rises at once from the heart of the seer and from the distant home of the Truth,—the discovery of the word, the divine movement, the form of thought proper to the reality which, as Mr. Cousins excellently says, “lies in the apprehension of a something stable behind the instability of word and deed, something that is a reflection of the fundamental passion of humanity for something beyond itself, something that is a dim shadowing of the divine urge which is prompting all creation to unfold itself and to rise out of its limitations towards its Godlike possibilities. (355)

Both Hegel and Aurobindo strike the same chord under different names. What Hegel calls as the absolute idea is similar to what Aurobindo means by the *mantra*. The presence of absolute idea or *mantra* is essential in poetry for aesthetic experience and for elevation of a reader to divine level. In

words of Kant, poetry surpasses from “phenomena to noumena” (Pandey 413) when poetry is enlightening and significant.

Hegel firmly states that spirituality is the basic rule of poetry. It must express spiritual truth and should appeal to spiritual vision. He says “Poetry has as its general principle spirituality and therefore it no longer turns to heavy matter like architecture. The element in which poetry moves i.e. ideas is of spiritual kind and therefore enjoys the universality of thought” (Knox 332). Aurobindo holds the analogous opinion that poetry must give “the spiritual and vital joy, the exalting power of a great breath of life” (234). He also asserts that the poetic vision must be spiritually inspired and poetry can be understood and enjoyed only by the spiritually awakened reader. Their concept of poetry is based on spirituality. They consider spirituality as the key for great poetry but here spiritual does not refer to any specific dogmas advocated by any religion; it refers to spirituality which can raise a reader above material life and can offer divine vision.

According to Hegel, “aesthetics is regarded as the science of beautiful” (Pandey 395). A work of art which successfully arouses feelings of pity, fear, joy and elation is beautiful. He differentiates between art and beauty when he talks about aesthetics. He believes “Art is simply a stage of the Absolute Spirit in its onward march to the realization of its true infinity in philosophic spirit... Beauty is the Absolute as it shines through the veil of the sense-world”. Hegel explains aesthetic experience as “a mode of human mind in which there is identity between the subject and the object, in which the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity is annihilated and in which mind contemplates itself in its freedom and as infinite and attains the stage of the Absolute Spirit” (Pandey 394). Sri Aurobindo keeps aesthetics on a lower plane, intellectual element on intermediate plane and spirituality on the top. Aurobindo explains,

The good must not be subordinated to the aesthetic sense, but it must be beautiful and delightful, or to that extent it ceases to be good. The object of existence is not the practice of virtue for its own sake but *ananda*, and delight, and progress consists not in rejecting beauty and delight, but in rising from the lower to the higher, the less complete to the more complete beauty and to delight. (Aurobindo 241 -42)

Aurobindo here means that a good work of literature must not limit to aesthetic sense or just style must give universal *ananda* and must soar up to the highest plane i.e. spiritual plane. For Aurobindo, aesthetics is the external beauty of work which affects intellectual element and instills a sense of delight but the perfect state of ecstasy is realized only when poetry offers magnificent spiritual vision. Like Hegel, he also explains that the difference between subject and object ends when one has this spiritual vision. Both Hegel and Aurobindo meant the same when they talk of aesthetic experience or spiritual element; they just use two different names.

Both the philosophers, Hegel and Aurobindo talk about the power of poetry. Hegel speaks about the poetry and explains the chief task of it. He says,

To bring before our minds the powers governing the spiritual life. In short, all that surges to and fro in human passions and feelings. All encompassing realm of human ideas, deeds, actions, fates, the bustle of life in this world and the divine rule of the universe. Thus poetry has been and is still the most universal and widespread teacher of the human race...It embraces the entire spirit of mankind. (Knox 447)

Sri Aurobindo talked at length about it. He talks about five constant powers in poetry i.e. Truth, Beauty, Delight, Life and the Spirit. He says “these are indeed the five greater ideal lamps or rather the five suns of poetry” (286) which enlighten mankind. According to him Truth, Beauty and Delight are of greatest importance among the five powers. Truth in poetry deals with both the worlds -external or material and internal or spiritual. He then clears that “Truth is not merely dry statement of facts or ideas to or by the intellect; it can be a splendid discovery, a rapturous revelation, and a thing of beauty that is a joy forever” (127-28). It means that the poetic truth is not scientific rather it is the presentation of eternal truth which is beautiful and is a persistent source of joy and delight. He adds that poetry cannot be separated from life but it is not just a mere copy of nature as “Art cannot give what Nature gives, it gives something more” (497) which suggests that poetry adds something more to ordinary life and it makes poetry aesthetically beautiful and spirit satisfying. They both reciprocate the same idea when they talk about power of poetry. They hold the similar opinion that poetry comes from life but has something unique which helps in deeper understanding about mankind and is soul satisfying.

Hegel and Sri Aurobindo extensively talk on the difference in ordinary and poetic language. Hegel strongly advocates that the language used in poetry is different from colloquial language. He even believes that “poetic diction may become alive amongst a people at a time when language is still undeveloped” (Knox 407). It means that Hegel keeps poetic diction on superior level than ordinary language. He adds that poetic expression may give pleasure only when it deviates from day-to-day language and is “fresh, elevated and spiritual” (407). Similarly, Aurobindo holds the view that “There is a force of vital style, a force of emotional style, a force of intellectual style which we meet constantly in poetry” (28). This style becomes unique with the use of poetic language. He states that ordinary speech has no life it is just a means of communication whereas poetic language is full of vibrant life and is fit to unveil “The Mantra”. He explains,

Ordinary speech uses language mostly for a limited practical utility of communication; it uses it for life and for the expression of ideas and feelings necessary or useful to life. In doing so, we treat words as conventional signs for ideas with nothing but a perfunctory attention to 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. (335)

Thus ordinary language is mere use of signs to convey day to day ideas and thoughts. Whereas, according to Aurobindo, poetry has the power of revelation as “poetry arrives at the indication of infinite meanings beyond the finite intellectual meaning the word carries” (Viswabharati, 79). He asserts that the poetic language is much more powerful in illumining the soul of mankind.

A high or a fine adequacy, effectivity, intellectual illuminativeness and a carefully tempered aesthetic satisfaction are the natural and proper powers of its speech. But the privilege of the poet is to go beyond and discover that more intense illumination of speech that inspired word and supreme inevitable utterance, in which there meets the unity of a divine rhythmic movement with a depth of sense and a power of infinite suggestion welling up directly from the fountain-heads of the spirit within us.

It means that poetic speech is deep, profound and multi-dimensional. It is laid with connotative meaning which makes it aesthetically rich. It is the highest form of speech which successfully performs its functions when it reveals the deepest truth and gives unfathomable delight to the soul.

Hegel and Aurobindo diverge at the point of versification. Hegel refused the view that versification acts as a barrier. “He argues against the versification is the mere hindrance to the free outpouring of emotions” (Knox 410). He believes that rich imagery and powerful figures of speech enrich poetry and communicate the idea more beautifully. He adds “Meter or rhyme is absolutely necessary for poetry. The flow of rhythm and the melodic sound of rhyme exercise on us an indisputable magic” (Knox 410). It means versification is important for Hegel whereas Aurobindo believed that versification is secondary to the actual function of poetry i.e. aesthetic pleasure. Hegel says, there must be use of rich imagery, and figures of speech but they must only help in fulfilling the real purpose of poetry and shall not hinder it. According to him, techniques of versification holds smaller field in poetry. They act as a means to the actual end of poetry as they help in unveiling “The Mantra” which gives aesthetic pleasure.

On another point where Hegel and Aurobindo do not agree though only partly is the subject matter of poetry. Hegel comprehensively speaks on the subject matter of poetry. He says, “Poetry is more capable than any other art in completely unfolding the totality of an event, a successive series and the changes of the heart’s movement, passions, ideas and the complete course of an action” (Knox 450). He further adds topics from a wider field which include “all spiritual and natural things, events, histories, deeds, actions, subjective and objective situations, all these can be drawn into poetry” as they “bring before our minds the powers governing spiritual life”. Hegel advocates that “Poetry is a universal art which can shape in anyway and express any subject matter” (Knox 364).

Where Hegel allows events, histories and stark realism in poetry; Aurobindo denies the subject matter which showcases the blatant realism of life in all its spitefulness and nastiness” in poetry (352). He believed that art is fundamental in spiritually uplifting the mankind so it shall not “cut out palpitating pieces from life and present them raw and smoking or well-cooked for the aesthetic digestion” (323). Aurobindo believes that poetry must be unison of “finite and the infinite” (349). He accepts “rhythmic voice of life” as an apt subject matter of poetry. He suggests that the subject matter of poetry must be such that it can help in fruition of human life into divine life. Here again they coincide in their views regarding poetry as both asserted that poetry must unravel the spiritual and the divine view.

Thus through this study we see that the two philosophers, Hegel and Aurobindo from the two different parts of the world hold almost the similar opinion on aesthetics in literature. According to them, the aesthetically rich work is created by the soul and is heard by the soul. They mutually agreed that poetry in actual has not performed its key function or its highest function, until it embraces the soul of mankind and divulges the real spirit. It shall teach and make a human being understand about his/her existence on the earth. The great work must open new realms of spiritual vision, new dominions of life, about oneself and the world. Poetry must act as a vehicle to commune a human soul from the earthly world to the transcendental world. The poets must have the experience and knowledge of the everlasting self. Their theory of aesthetics echoes the thought of Davidson that poetry “speaks of the power of the creative world. It is the force that inspires the soul of its heavenly music, bringing vitality to mind and body. It is the means by which God can be known” (Davidson 26). Thus, literature is significant in connecting external world to internal world and must be valued.

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