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Fluid Encounters Between 'East and West': Aurobindo and Mirra Alfassa in International Thought

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The 'East' and 'West' are not just distinct temporal and spatial categories but have traditionally emphasised two specific genealogies of ideas and philosophies. Western individualism and ideas of autonomy have been contrasted with communitarian living and universalism of the East; freedom of the self and materiality contrasted with societal good and spirituality; linearity contrasted with multi-dimensionality. These differences have been amplified in postcolonial scholarship and much has been written and theorised about the visibility and invisibility of these categories and the opaqueness or even hybridity produced by their encounters. In this piece, we want to reflect on how the encounter between the East and West has also produced confluence of anti-colonial ideas and a refined spirituality that has attracted global audiences. We are particularly interested in Western women spiritual seekers who travelled to India under the influence of a patron or spiritual mentor and who became pioneers in their fields and important anti-colonial thinkers. Sister Nivedita (Margaret Elizabeth Noble), Annie Besant, Mirabeau (Madeleine Slade) and The Mother (Mirra Alfassa) were some of these fascinating figures.

Here, we focus on The Mother (Mirra Alfassa), a French artist turned spiritual seeker, and her multifaceted collaboration with the Indian nationalist turned spiritual icon, Aurobindo, symbolising the conference of 'East and West'. As we demonstrate in this collaboration, the 'East' and 'West' categories were neither exclusive nor static; Aurobindo and Mirra Alfassa negotiated and often transgressed these putatively fixed categories. Invariably the distinction between East and West is constructed on the attributes of race, geography, culture and civilisational values; we argue in this article that such lines of demarcation are feeble and flexible.

By the prevalent criterion of his times, Aurobindo would represent an archetypical East, given that he was born in Calcutta, India, in 1872, to Indian parents. However, his Anglophile father sent Aurobindo, then aged seven, to the UK, where he spent the next fourteen years and finished Classics Tripos at the King's College, Cambridge. Upon returning to India in 1893, he served the Baroda princely state and endeavoured to rediscover his Eastern roots by learning Indian culture, traditions, scriptures, and languages. By the beginning of the Twentieth century, he emerged as a prominent hardliner among the leaders of the Indian independence struggle and, thus, a prime target for the British colonial administration. To evade potential deportation or long-term incarceration, in 1910, Aurobindo escaped to the French Indian territory of Pondicherry. In his new abode, he eschewed all political activities and pursued spiritual practice to emerge as one of the eminent philosophers and spiritual icons.

According to the criterion of her times, Blanche Rachel Mirra Alfassa too would represent an archetypical West, born in Paris in 1878 to Sephardic Jewish parents. She had a very cosmopolitan upbringing, received training in art at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and was part of the artistic avant-garde of Paris at the turn of the century. In 1906, she went to Tlemcen, Algeria, to study with adepts Max and Alma Theon and in the years 1911-1913, she taught in occult circles in Paris. In 1914, Mirra travelled with her husband, Paul Richard, to Pondicherry and met Aurobindo, whom she identified as her spiritual mentor. While the outbreak of the First World War compelled her to leave India and spend several years in Japan, she returned to Pondicherry in 1920 and lived there until her death in 1973. Mirra became the organisational and spiritual head of Aurobindo's organisation despite her foreign origins, race and gender, negotiating the 'East Versus West'.

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As a geographical location, Pondicherry, the meeting place of Aurobindo and Mirra, signified the convergence and contradictions between East and West. A tiny French territory surrounded by British and Indian territories enjoyed enough autonomy to manage its own affairs except for allowing anti-British activism from its territories. For Aurobindo, Pondicherry was a sanctuary, a tiny part of the East under the control of the French, who represented the non-oppressive West for him. In order to avoid attracting unwarranted French concerns over his political activities, Aurobindo focussed only on characteristically Eastern phenomena such as esoteric philosophy, Yoga and spirituality. Moreover, despite his strong anti-colonial stance, Aurobindo chose to ignore the French colonisation of the Indian territory of Pondicherry and resisted openly challenging the British administration. Thus, in order to remain free and in the geographical proximity of the East, Aurobindo embraced non-political aspects of the East, such as spirituality and Yoga. Unlike the British Indian territories, Aurobindo was not in confinement but hardly enjoyed the independence to be considered living in the 'Free East'.

For Mirra Alfassa, Pondicherry was a platform apart in the East where her being Western (French) was not a liability; instead, her elite background enabled her to gain prominence among Aurobindo and his companions. Mirra's Western-ness is based on her place of birth and childhood because, from her adolescence, she developed a great affinity for occult and Eastern traditions; and devoted most of her life to pursue a social-cultural utopia based on universal ideals of Eastern spirituality. Her real tryst with the 'East versus West' begins with her arrival in India in 1920 and her rapid rise among Aurobindo's associates. However, it is essential to underline that Mirra owed much of her recognition to Aurobindo's affirmations about her being an advanced spiritual practitioner and an equal collaborator to the development of 'Integral Yoga', a combination of Indian Vedānta philosophy with the Western evolutionary perspective (Gleig & Flores 2013, 43).

To elevate Mirra as the leader of the group, Aurobindo proclaimed: 'Mirra is my Shakti. She has taken charge of the new creation. You will get everything from her. Give [your] consent to whatever she wants to do' (Heehs 2008, 345). Furthermore, Aurobindo anointed Mirra as 'the Mother', an honorific title that commanded reverence, sanctified her role and bestowed far greater informal power and sacred aura around her. To override any dissensions among his followers about Mirra's rise, Aurobindo took a firm stand and advised the Ashram inmates to either accept the Mother as the embodiment of the divine truth or close the Ashram (Sri Aurobindo 1972, 234). By exalting Mirra as 'the Mother', Aurobindo defied the positional fixity of race, religion, gender and class and blurred the rigid cultural boundaries between West and non-West and the coloniser and colonised.

The idea of the Mother Goddess as the incarnation of divinity has been a fundamental religious tenet in India. However, more than the sacred, it was also beneficial for secular and political purposes. The idea of 'Mother India' and 'narration of the nation as Mother was the literary and cultural patent of the Bengali political generation of 1905' (Bose 2017). As a woman, Mirra could be equated with 'Feminine power', 'Mother Goddess', or 'Prakriti' in Sankhya dualism. Aurobindo exalted her, affirming 'Mirra as the embodiment of the Divine Mother and his "Shakti" (spiritual executor of his will)' (Banerji 2018, 39). In most Indian religious and philosophical writing, Shakti can be represented in four broad categories: the feminine power, the creative power of male gods and saints, the personification of this power as various Goddesses, and the three Mahadevis (Kuchuk 2022, 8). Thus, when Aurobindo referred to Mirra as 'the Mother' and 'his Shakti', he attributed all 'three main aspects of the Mother: the Individual (that is, embodied as Alfassa), the Universal, and the Transcendent' (Kuchuk 2022, 8).

Mirra successfully negotiated her transition from a European woman to the head of Aurobindo Ashram through her prior experiences in French art and occult and Eastern spirituality. She turned out to be an exceptional institutional builder in making the organisational framework and the infrastructural support to bring unprecedented growth and establishments to realise Aurobindo's philosophical visions. While she owed her initial ascent to Aurobindo, Mirra navigated her independent path to assume a much more significant role using the ostensible impediments of race, gender and European-ness to her advantage in an Eastern milieu. Her gender allowed her to assume the mantle of the Mother, bestowing privileges and making her sacrosanct. Her European-ness, specifically being French, enabled her to negotiate with local French authorities as an equal instead of a supplicant seeking political refuge in Pondicherry.

Despite the apolitical nature of Aurobindo's Ashram, Mirra was an open and enthusiastic supporter of India's anti-

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colonial movement. She celebrated the two most significant decolonial moments at Pondicherry; the independence of India from British rule in August 1947 and Pondicherry's handover from French control to the Indian state in December 1954 (Bajpai and Parashar 2023, 9). In 1968, Mirra succeeded in setting up Auroville, a universal city to which 'no nation could claim as its own, where all human beings of goodwill who have a sincere aspiration could live freely as citizens of the world and obey one single authority, that of the supreme Truth' (The Mother 1977, 7).

Mirra Alfassa represented a white European woman in a non-European social and cultural milieu, yet she managed to merge into Indian society and culture. This assimilation was never complete; her non-Indianness was always in the background, yet her Indianness always stayed in the foreground. Mirra outlived her mentor by twenty-three years, and 'she lived through the colonial and post-colonial period as more the equal partner (than the devotee) of the guru' (Jayawardena 1995, 206). Mirra not only carved a niche for herself, but she has also left behind a rich cultural and infrastructural legacy that has institutionalised the memories of 'the Mother' and her spiritual mentor-collaborator Aurobindo at Auroville in Pondicherry.

Understanding these types of East-West postcolonial encounters is critical to the history of ideas and focuses more on the agency of actors shaped by their various 'locations'. It also acknowledges that the East and West are not mutually exclusive categories, intimately shaped by and in relation to each other.

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