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**AURENG-ZEBE – JOHN DRYDEN'S HEROIC TRAGEDY  
ABOUT THE MOGUL DYNASTY**

In 1675 a tragedy written by John Dryden was performed at the Royal Theatre and its text published in the following year under the title *Aureng-Zebe*. This exotic title referred to the last Emperor of India who was descended from Tamerlane and was Dryden's contemporary.

The play followed the poet's several heroic tragedies like *The Indian Emperor, or The Conquest of Mexico* and *The Conquest of Granada* (part I and part II) and was to be the last tragedy in which Dryden used the heroic couplet. It was followed by the blank verse version of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, and a worthy rival to it, the tragedy called *All For Love, or The World Well Lost*.

Both as a stage performance and as a text, *Aureng-Zebe*, in spite of its exotic title, enjoyed popularity not only in Dryden's life-time, but also in the eighteenth century.

For the present purpose of analysing the text of the play as an image of India. I have used *The Dramatic Works of John Dryden* in V vols. edited by George Saintsbury and published by William Paterson in 1882 in Edinburgh. It had been based on Sir Walter Scott's edition of *Works* [1808]. I have also used John Dryden, *Three Plays* edited with an Introduction and Notes by George Saintsbury and published in A Mermaid Dramabook series of Hill and Wang, New York about 1958.

Though forgotten, *Aureng-Zebe* has always been considered one of the finest dramatic achievements by the Restoration Poet Laureate, though some of the rhymes showed his impatience with the traditional vehicle of the heroic tragedy which hampered the expression of more natural and violent passions, enforcing in this way the decorum of the royal and imperial courts – the usual *milieu* in which the *dramatis personae* of heroic tragedy moved and to which they belonged. Let me remind, speaking about this extinct dramatic genre, that its main concern was to present the tragedy of love and honour.

The initial situation with which the action of the drama starts is a state of civil war raised by the four sons of the seventy-year old Emperor of India, who are rival claimants to the imperial crown.

From the induction in Act I the audience learn that among the rivals to their father's Peacock Throne there are: the open, but revengeful Darah, the insolent bully Morat, the Moslem bigot Sujah and Aureng-Zebe, who

by no strong passion swayed,  
Except his love, more temperate is, and weighed.

Act I

At the moment Darah and Aureng-Zebe are fighting and Morat's forces are approaching the citadel of Agra in which the Emperor, the Empress Nourmahal and some ladies and dignitaries of the court are protected by the governor Arimant.

Both Morat and Aureng-Zebe wish to enter Agra and to be admitted to the Emperor's presence. But while Morat is coming with his army, Aureng-Zebe comes alone. Yet the Emperor does not receive either of them kindly. The further development of the action shows that the course of events is determined not only by the changing fortunes of war, but also by love.

In the custody of the Emperor there is Indamora, a captive queen of Cashmere, promised and betrothed to Aureng-Zebe. She is in love with him and he with her. But, as the Empress calls her, "this fatal Helen", though a good woman, is so exceedingly beautiful that all men one by one fall in love with her and this complicates the situation.

The Emperor is the first victim of a violent passion for her. Contrary to his promise he wants to deprive Aureng-Zebe of the lady and to make her his own wife. This enrages the Empress who turns her incestuous affection (like Phaedra to Hippolytus in Seneca's tragedy) towards Aureng-Zebe, her stepson, who recoils from her with horror. Offended by the Emperor's advances to Indamora and frustrated in her passion, the Empress decides to seize the throne herself to revenge herself on her husband and her stepson for whom she plans a slow death by poisoning.

Thus both the Emperor and the Empress turn against Aureng-Zebe who is willing to resign his power, but not his love. The Emperor prefers to give the throne to his younger son Morat and gives orders for the elder son to be imprisoned.

This cruel world of dynastic politics is contrasted with the meeting and friendship of Indamora and Melesinda, Morat's wife. But when Morat, unexpectedly defeated, meets Indamora, her beauty and charm make him dismiss his wife, decide to kill his half-brother and to make Indamora his queen.

Morat is a brutal power-seeker. But under the influence of Indamora he delays Aureng-Zebe's death by poison for one day. This makes Aureng-Zebe suspect Indamora of inconstancy and his suspicions seem to be confirmed when, after another turn in the war, he finds Morat dying and Indamora sitting by him while Melesinda is lying by his other side. Morat had saved Indamora from being killed by the Empress.

But after a lovers' misunderstanding and quarrel, the Empress's self-induced death by poison and the Emperor's rather unmotivated repentance and intervention, the lovers are reconciled.

Milesinda, the model of an Indian wife, another Patient Griselda, goes in a funeral procession to be burned alive with Morat's body.

The Emperor's words close the drama. Giving Indamora's hand to Aureng-Zebe he says to him:

The just rewards of love and honour wear,  
Receive the mistress you so long have served;  
Receive the crown your loyalty preserved.

Act V

Thus classical requirements of love and honour have been satisfied in this play about royalty. Death has fortunately spared the noble lovers, but the formal requirement that the tragedy should end in at least one death has been fulfilled by the deaths of Morat, of his wicked mother the Empress Nourmahal, of Melesinda, his unloved wife, and of Arimant, the governor of Agra who, for the love of Indamora, impersonated Aureng-Zebe in the battlefield and forfeited his own life to ensure victory over the rebels.

My main purpose in undertaking this study has been to find out how much Dryden's *Aureng-Zebe* reflects Indian reality.

Let us begin with historical events. I compared the text of the tragedy with K. M. Panikkar<sup>1</sup>, J. Bowle<sup>2</sup>, and *Aureng-Zebe*, Encyclopaedia Britannica.

Dryden has set the scene in Agra in 1660, fifteen years before the writing of his play, in the memorable year of the Restoration of the Stuarts after the Civil War, Revolution and Commonwealth in England. The date is wrong, because the historians agree that Aureng-Zebe crowned himself Emperor in 1658.

Furthermore, the circumstances preceding his coronation profoundly differed from those presented in the tragedy.

To put it briefly, Aureng-Zebe as the viceroy of the Deccan was conducting aggressive campaigns against the states of Golconda and Bijapur, in which he was halted by his father Shah Jahan in 1657.

<sup>1</sup> K. M. Panikkar, *A Survey of Indian History*, Bombay 1960, Asia Publishing House.

<sup>2</sup> J. Bowle, *The Imperial Achievement*, London 1977, Penguin Books.

But the Emperor's serious illness in September 1657 became for Aureng-Zebe and his brothers the signal for a war of succession. Aureng-Zebe easily destroyed his brothers, he pretended he did not know about his father's recovery, confined him in the fort of Agra near Delhi in June 1658 and in July proclaimed himself the Emperor of India. His father was kept prisoner until his death in 1666.

Neither was the character of the historical Aureng-Zebe as noble as Dryden makes him out to be. He killed two of his half-brothers, exiled a third. Polite, but cruel, he paraded the son of a brave Maratha chief Shivaji in cap and bells, then had him blinded and ordered his limbs to be hacked off one by one and thrown to the dogs. He suppressed people's demonstrations by having elephants trample on them.

Though an educated man and devoted to the idea of making one, great, unified Indian Empire, in practice he brought the Mogul rule to an end.

His reign became an endless chain of wars to consolidate his power in northern India and then in Rajputana, Maratha, Bijapur and Golconda. He was always absent from the centre of his power, exhausted the imperial treasury and devastated his own lands.

And, what was still worse, being an intolerant Moslem, unlike his predecessors, he began to persecute Hindus and Sikhs. He established *muhtasibs* – censors of morals, forbade Hindu fairs, restricted Hindu religious festivals, destroyed Hindu temples, idols and shrines, discouraged Hindus from joining the administration, even though they constituted the greater part of it, and looked disfavouredly upon music.

His most notable opponents were the heroic Maratha leader and then king, Shivaji, who wrote to him the famous letter of remonstrance in defence of the people of India, and the Sikh Guru Govind Singh who militarized the pacifist Sikhs after their former Guru Tegh Bahadar, who had refused to accept Islam, was beheaded and after Govind Singh's own sons were immured alive.

One of the greatest grievances of the non-Moslems in those times was a poll-tax revived from the early times of the Mogul conquest.

In spite of all his talents and ability it was Aureng-Zebe who excited religious hatred in his Empire and disrupted his realm through religious fanaticism and wars. He died defeated and brokenhearted in 1707, seven years after Dryden's own death and was the last Mogul ruler of India in name and fact.

Nothing of this is to be found in Dryden's tragedy except four real names and a general truth about a strife for power in an Oriental polygamous ruling family, in which mothers promote the interests of their sons and half-brothers kill one another on their way to power. Shah Jahan, Aureng-Zebe's father, had also ousted his father from power.



Dryden's Aureng-Zebe is the poet's original creation: an able warrior, loyal to his father, faithful in love and ready to resign the Empire for his love, but repeatedly meeting with baseness, duplicity and unnatural passion until he grows suspicious even of Indamora. In the end he thinks:

When I consider life, tis all a cheat...

Act IV

His great love, the Cashmere queen Indamora, also seems to be Dryden's own invention. Her overpowering beauty and charm, which she consciously uses on men for the benefit of her lover without, however, implying any obligations on her part, makes the elderly governor of Agra submit to her will. Even the brutal and bloodthirsty Morat begins, under her influence, to feel that military power is not the only and the highest value of life and that he might change.

She is able to remain friends even with Melesinda when Morat casts her away as his wife after he has met Indamora. Melesinda does not break off their friendship. She merely says:

Madam, the strange reverse of fate you see;

I pitied you, now you may pity me.

Act III

Though the ladies' names suggest some connexion with India, they also strongly remind one of the Restoration stage where Belindas, Dorindas and Melindas conversed with Bellairs, Dorimants and Millamants. And some external evidence seems to confirm that they constituted Dryden's attempts to create ideal and yet living women.

This is what he wrote to the Right Honourable John Earl of Mulgrave in a lengthy dedication to the printed edition of *Aureng-Zebe*, obviously referring to some criticism of these feminine characters:

That which was not pleasing to some of the fair ladies in the last act of it, as I dare not vindicate, so neither can I condemn, till I find more reason for their censures. The procedure of Indamora and Melesinda seems yet, in my judgement, natural, and not unbecoming of their characters. If they, who arraign them fail not more, the world will never blame their conduct, and I shall be glad, for the honour of my country, to find better images of virtue drawn to the life in their behaviour, than in any I could feign to adorn the theatre. I confess, I have only represented a practicable virtue mixed with the frailties and imperfections of human life. I have made my heroine [Indamora] fearful of death... I have made my Melesinda... a woman passionately loving of her husband, patient of injuries and contempt, and constant in her kindness, to the last; and in that, perhaps, I may have erred, because it is not a virtue much in use. Those Indian wives are loving fools and may do well to keep themselves in their own country... Some of our ladies know better things (*Three Plays*, p. 272).

Concealed irony seems to sound in the last sentence. I daresay the criticism directed against the heroines of the tragedy was that they were not completely perfect or as we would say artificial.

Otherwise the play fulfilled the requirements of the genre and we can distinguish in it the habitual stylistics of the heroic tragedy which are out of place in a drama about India. Jove, Proteus, Cupids, Bellerophon and Socrates are mentioned in the text and the wooing of Aureng-Zebe by his step-mother is a paraphrase of a scene in Seneca's *Hippolytus*, as Saintsbury informs us (*Three Plays*, pp. 322–323).

It seems, therefore, that Dryden was much more interested in producing a satisfactory heroic tragedy than a play presenting an event in India's history. In the dedicatory letter he stated: "It is not [...] impossible, but that I may alter the conclusion of my play, to restore myself into the good graces of my fair critics". (*Three Plays*, p. 273).

Whatever the playwright's purpose was, it is a fact that his *Aureng-Zebe* does not tell us anything about events of the period it purports to present. It does not attempt to evoke real historical characters either. The question arises as to how much there is in it of a true Indian colour.

The answer is: little. Except for the name of the title hero and the name of the Empress – Nourmahal – most court dignitaries are – true to fact – Moslem: Solyman, Mir Baba, Abbas, Asaph Khan and Fazel Khan.

Of the geographic names Agra, Indus, Ganges, Cashmere, Bengal, Indostan, Kandahar, Persia and Balasor are mentioned.

Indian jasmine is mentioned together with Syrian rose and Sabaeen springs. An Indian wife's constancy is mentioned in Act III as perhaps greater than that of a Roman wife. In the same Act Morat calls Aureng-Zebe "the preaching Brahman" and in Act V two contradictory views are presented of the custom of *suttee*, burning widows alive, which begins with "A procession of Priests, Slaves following, and last Melesinda, in white".

Indamora: Alas! What means this pomp?

Aureng-Zebe: 'Tis the procession of a funeral vow,  
Which cruel laws to Indian wives allow,  
When fatally their virtue they approve;  
Cheerful in flames, and martyrs of their love.

Indamora: O my foreboding heart! the event I fear:  
And see! sad Melesinda does appear.

Melesinda: You wrong my love; what grief do I betray?  
This is the triumph of my nuptial day,  
My better nuptials; which, in spite of fate,  
For ever joined me to my dear Morat.

Act V

This is shocking, but impressive. And it is about all that in some way refers to India. No Indian divinity is mentioned throughout the text. On the other hand Nourmahal speaks of "your better genius" and "your guardian angel" – beings connected with the Mediterranean civilization.

The practical absence of India from a play about contemporary political events in India is extraordinary. The more so that we associate India with the growing expansion of the East India Company and its interference in the affairs of the Mogul Empire.

But we must remember that neither the political events in England nor the fortunes of the East India Company in India favoured communication at that time.

When Dryden was 18, Charles I was executed and the revolutionary Commonwealth, gradually transformed into dictatorship, was firmly established. What the English merchants had got in India by that time was Shah Jahan's permission to trade in Bombay [1633] and a seizure of Madras from the French [1639].

Aureng-Zebe made himself Emperor in 1658, two years before the Restoration of the Stuarts – an event which both before and after it focussed all the English interests and attention. Then there came The Plague and the Great Fire of London while Aureng-Zebe introduced his worst "reforms" and conducted his most savage wars.

In 1675 Dryden wrote *Aureng-Zebe*. It was a year after the French occupied Pondicherry, four years before the imposition of Aureng-Zebe's tyrannical and discriminatory poll-tax on Hindus and five years before Shivaji, the heroic leader of the Marathas was killed.

In 1685 Charles II died, James II succeeded him on the throne of England and Dryden was converted to Catholicism.

George Saintsbury, the long-time scholar and editor of Dryden, seems to have believed that Dryden's source was François Bernier. He wrote in a short editorial note for the American Mermaid Dramabook edition of the poet's *Three Plays*, including the discussed tragedy: "He must have relied chiefly on the account of Bernier [1670–1671] for that of Tavernier, generally quoted as his authority, had not, I think, yet been printed in 1675" (*ibidem*, p. 266).

Detailed information on both Tavernier and Bernier is supplied by an older edition of *Larousse, Grand Dictionnaire Universel*. Jean-Baptiste Tavernier [1605–1689] was a French traveller to Western European countries, Poland, Turkey, Persia and India as far as Golconda (Hyderabad). Knighted by Louis XIV in 1669, he published *Les Six Voyages... en Turquie, en Perse et aux Indes* in 1676 i.e. as late as the publication of *Aureng-Zebe*.

The idea of seeing in him a source for Dryden's play probably arose out of the fact that Sir Walter Scott in his introduction to *Aureng-Zebe* took from Tavernier ("second partie, livre seconde") reliable information about Aureng-Zebe's war on his father (*Dramatic Works*, V, pp. 181–185).

More puzzling is Saintsbury's reference to François Bernier [1620–1688], another French traveller of the times, a physician and philosopher. This

amiable and mild Epicurean, a friend of Gassendi, Molière, Boileau and Ninon de Lenclos, not only went to India, but also became a doctor to the usurping Emperor and remained there for twelve years, so he must have had first-hand knowledge of Aureng-Zebe, his court and country.

Bernier visited England, but it was in 1685, ten years after Dryden's tragedy was staged. And his book *Voyages de Bernier contenant la description des Etats du Grand Mogol, de l'Indoustan etc.* was published as late as 1699, a year after his death.

So the puzzle remains. Saintsbury's dates 1670–1671 put after Bernier's name, are incomprehensible.

Thus two possible sources of information are left. One of them might have been "The London Gazette", since 1661 an organ of Privy Council, which used a part of the English Intelligence Service reports as political news items. It might throw light on the mystery of the Aureng-Zebe play, but I have no access to it. Besides, judging from a study *Anglia a Polska w epoce Jana III Sobieskiego* by Edward Alfred Mierzwa [Łódź 1988], I have the impression that "The London Gazette" concentrated rather on European politics.

Another source might have been the headquarters of the East India Company in London. In some ways Dryden was interested in Colonial politics. His tragedy of *Amboyne*, written in 1673, was a horror play on Dutch atrocities perpetrated on English merchants in the Moluccas to frighten them from trade with the islands which now form Indonesia.

The purpose of the tragedy, which Sir Walter Scott declared a play "beneath criticism" (*Dramatic Works* V, p. 3), was to inflame the English public opinion against the Dutch when Charles II and Louis XIV secretly planned a war against the Netherlands in which the Dutch were to flood their country in defence.

After the massacre in Amboyne [1623] the East India Company merchants withdrew to India. By the time of Aureng-Zebe's rise to power, as John Bowle writes in *The Imperial Achievement*, only "the foundations of the three Presidencies" of the Company – Bombay, Madras, and Bengal – "had been laid" (*ibidem*, p. 57). And the new Emperor, though probably in the Company's good books, was a ruler they had to be careful with.

So, even if the Company's servants gave Dryden any information about current events in India, they either censured it or at least persuaded him to avoid presenting the Emperor in an unfavourable light.

This, together with Dryden's ambition of creating rather a customary heroic tragedy than a history play, may be an explanation of the very unhistorical and un-Indian character of his play of *Aureng-Zebe*.



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**AURENG-ZEBE – HEROICZNA TRAGEDIA  
JOHNA DRYDENA O DYNASTII MOGOŁÓW**

W 1675 r. Royal Theatre w Londynie wystawił tragedię Johna Drydena, której tekst opublikowano w roku następnym pt. *Aureng-Zebe*. Ten egzotyczny tytuł odnosił się do ostatniego cesarza Indii pochodzącego od Tamerlana, który był władcą współczesnym Drydenowi.

Sztuka była ostatnią z serii bohaterkich tragedii napisanych przez Drydena przyjętym wówczas dziesięciozłogłoskowym dwuwierszem, który następnie Poeta Laureat miał porzucić dla białego wiersza dziesięciozłogłoskowego, pisząc własną wersję *Antoniusza i Kleopatry* pt. *All For Love, or the World Well Lost*.

*Aureng-Zebe* cieszył się popularnością za życia poety i w XVIII w. Analiza sztuki, przeprowadzona w celu stwierdzenia jak dalece Dryden odtworzył w niej wypadki, postacie historyczne i koloryt Indii, wykazuje, że jedynie wojna domowa między przyrodnimi braćmi Aureng-Zebe'a o tron za życia ich ojca Szaha Jahana oraz imiona pretendentów odpowiadają rzeczywistości historycznej. Bohater tytułowy, który wykorzystał chorobę ojca jako sygnał do walki o tron, udał, że nie wie o wyzdrowieniu cesarza, uczynił go więźniem, pozabijał braci, ogłosił się cesarzem i poprzez ciągłe wojny i prześladowania religijne i społeczne Hindusów i Sikhów doprowadził cesarstwo do rozpadu jako ostatni Mogoł na tronie, został przez Drydena wyidealizowany.

Perypetie tragedii zostały wyznaczone przez zmienne losy wojny i fatalną piękność i czar Indamory, królowej Kaszmiru wziętej do niewoli i przyrzeczonej za żonę przez starego cesarza Aureng-Zebowi. Jej piękność powoduje komplikacje akcji. Zakochany w niej cesarz chce ją odebrać synowi, co powoduje spisek cesarzowej. Morat, brat i rywal Aureng-Zeba, także się w niej zakochuje. Ostatecznie jednak cesarz oddaje Indamorę i koronę Aureng-Zebowi. Tragizm tragedii polega na śmierci cesarzowej, jej syna, jego wiernej żony Melesindy i gubernatora Agry, poświęcającego życie w sprawie Aureng-Zeba z miłości do Indamory.

O ile sztuka spełnia wymagania ówczesnej heroic tragedy jako tragedii miłości i honoru, o tyle zupełnie nie odpowiada faktom historycznym i jest niezwykle uboga w realia indyjskie.

Dawniej wskazywano jako źródła informacji Drydena przy pisaniu jej francuskich podróźników Taverniera i Berniera. Ale chronologia ich życia i pism wyklucza taką możliwość. Pozostają jako możliwe źródła "The London Gazette" lub zarząd Kompanii Wschodnioindyjskiej w Londynie. Napisana wcześniej przez Drydena propagandowa tragedia *Amboyna* o masakrze kupców angielskich na Molukach wskazuje na możliwość jego kontaktów z tą Kompanią. Ale prawdopodobnie względy na interes Kompanii przesądziły o daleko idącej cenzurze wypadków i postaci Aureng-Zeba w tragedii Drydena.