

CATHARSIS AND RASA: THE INTERSECTING THEORIES

Mrs. Nirmala Sharma
Assistant Professor of English
K. M. Govt. College, Narwana
Haryana 126116

Abstract

Natyashastra and The Poetics, the celebrated and poignant works of literature, having differences of language, time, place and culture, rule out any comparison/synthesis between them. The theory of Catharsis by Aristotle and Rasa Theory propounded by Bharata are two such theories whose relevance is undisputable and still dominate the aesthetic and literary criticism even after the lapse of centuries. Most of the striking similarities between the Poetics and the Natyashastra are not only because of dealing with the same subject matter, but also from the fact that they toe the same or an almost identical frame of reference. Their theories of drama evolve from the generalization they structured upon the identical frame of reference that constitutes of matter, means, manner and function. Aristotle as well as Bharata speaks of these four constituents of drama in their celebrated works. Aristotle uses terms like ‘imitation’, ‘language’, ‘presentation’, and ‘catharsis’ while Bharata mentions terms as pathya (text), geet (song), abhinaya (presentation) and Rasa (aesthetic pleasure). Though having conspicuous similarities, the two theories intersect each other at many points. The present study is proposed with a view to examining the great works which help to give “profound form to complex dilemmas of experience”.

Keywords: Catharsis, Rasa, Vibhava, anubhava, vyabharibhava etc.

Natyashastra and The Poetics, the celebrated and poignant works of literature, having differences of language, time, place and culture, rule out any comparison/synthesis between them. But this very drift between the two, motivates (makes) one to search for and provides the required boost to explore the similitude between the two. It is pertinent to mention here that such an attempt is both interesting and appetizing to the literary circles.

The present study is proposed with a view to examining the great works which help to give “profound form to complex dilemmas of experience” (Encyclopedia, Vol. XVII, p.17) The ultimate aim of a literary theory should and must act as a catalyst to enhance the pleasure afforded by a literary genre. Barring a few, most of the theories which decimate the readers’ bliss by ripping the work to pieces, though having sturdy logical and philosophical implications, ever touched the zenith and waned out with their rise. The other few theories which are credited with enhancing the status of literary genres still hold the weight and are equally significant in present

times. The theory of Catharsis by Aristotle and Rasa Theory propounded by Bharata are two such theories whose relevance is undisputable and still dominate the aesthetic and literary criticism even after the lapse of centuries. The theories if applied prudently, will help not only in exhuming the pleasure content by delving deep in the subtleties and complexities of a work of art but also will aid in stimulating the interest in literature.

Firstly, the similarities between Greek ideas and those of ancient Indian aesthetics are so striking that superficially one may conclude that they derive from a common source or presume any borrowing between the two as was done by Keith. The Poetics is generally believed to have been written anytime between 335 BC and 322 BC but in case of Natyashastra, the composition has been suggested sometime between the fifth century BC to the fourth century AD. In view of this controversy, it would be seemly irrational to affirm that Natyashastra –either preceded or followed the Poetics, Apart from this, there was no literary or linguistic exchange between India and Greece in those days. Analysing the facts, Keith’s argument of Bharata’s theory of Rasa “as probable as borrowing” turned out to be an unwarranted and untenable. Hence, both Bharata and Aristotle, the view taken in this article, developed their respective theories of drama independently and there is no borrowing or influence on either side.

Most of the striking similarities between the Poetics and the Natyashastra are not only because of dealing with the same subject matter, but also from the fact that they toe the same or an almost identical frame of reference. Their theories of drama evolve from the generalization they structured upon the identical frame of reference that constitutes of matter, means, manner and function. Aristotle as well as Bharta speaks of these four constituents of drama in their celebrated works. Aristotle uses terms like ‘imitation’, ‘language’, ‘presentation’, and ‘catharsis’ while Bharata mentions terms as pathya (text), geet (song), abhinaya (presentation) and Rasa (aesthetic pleasure).

Though having conspicuous similarities, the two theories insect each other at many points. Aristotle’s views in his poetics not only led to the classification of drama in tragedy, comedy, epic, etc on the basis of the content and the manner of treatment but also unfortunately in terms of superiority and inferiority –establishing tragedy the best and disparaging comedy or epic. Aristotle propounded the term catharsis meaning the cleansing or purgation of emotions of pity and fear while defining tragedy.

“the imitation of an action, serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in a language beautified in different parts with different kinds of embellishments; through action and not narration, and through scenes of pity and fear bringing about the ‘Catharsis’ of these (or such like) emotions.”

However the assumption, that tragedy alone can yield ‘catharsis’ by evocation of the twin emotions of pity and fear is unwarranted. There are plays which defy this classification in terms of tragedy or comedy. It would be arbitrary to assume that no other emotions can lead to catharsis or evoke equally great or superior feelings to catharsis or surmount catharsis. The theory of catharsis negates other emotions fit to be depicted in literature. With its pathological inclination, the theory of catharsis mars the literary enjoyment of a work of literature.

Bharata and his aesthetic principles hold the show till today. His Theory of Rasa propounded in Natya-Shastra emphasises that delightful teaching should be the aim of literature. Unlike Catharsis, the term rasa is an inclusive one, grouping person’s inherited instinctual propensities into eight basic emotions: love, humour, anger, sorrow, etc. These instinct emotions known as Sthayi Bhavas through the twin process of objectification and universalization can be

transpersonalised in the form of literature/art. Moreover, in aesthetic theory, the distinctions between genres have no value and speaks of multi emotional state at a time.

Before commencing, certainly, it would be sensible, at first, to explore the meaning and scope of the word *rasa*, what the theory of *rasa* means and why it occupies a substantial position in Indian poetics. The key concept in aesthetic theory propounded by Bharata in *Natyashastra* is *rasa*. The term ‘*rasa*’ often appears in Vedic texts, as

In *Rig Veda* the word, *rasa* is found occurring in the sense of water... soma juice...cow’s milk...and flavor. The *Atharva-Veda* extends the sense to the sap of grain and the taste, the latter becoming very common. In the *Upanishads* *rasa* stands for the essence or quintessence and self-luminous consciousness through the sense of taste is at places conveyed..... In Sanskrit other than the Vedic, the word, *rasa* is used for water, milk, juice, essence, tasteful liquid, etc. (Daniel 78)

V.B.Apte lists several meanings of the word *rasa*, “to flow”, “to make wet all over”, “to soak or saturate in liquid”, “to taste or relish”, “potion”, “water”, “flavor”, “sauce”, “fluid”, “condiment”, “happiness”, “charm”, “pleasure”, “delight”, “beauty”, “interest”, “elegance”, etc (Apte 465). The dictionary of Monier Williams records, among others, the following meanings of *rasa* as a noun: juice of plants, juice of fruit, any liquid or fluid, the best or prime or finest part of anything. Shankara emphasized the spiritual aspect of the meaning of *rasa* in *Upanishads*: “*Rasa* is here used to mean such bliss as is innate in oneself and manifests itself.....even in the absence of external aids to happiness. It emphasizes that the bliss in non-material i.e. intrinsic, spiritual, or subjective. Likely, Abhinavagupta, the influential interpreter of Bharata’s *Natyashastra* has equated the experience of *rasa* to the experiences of yogi.

In the context of Indian aesthetics, *rasa* is understood as the actors and especially the spectator’s aesthetic experience. In an aesthetic context, *rasa* is translated as ‘sentiment’. Bharata categorized these sentiments into eight: *Rati*(love), *Hasya*(laughter), *Soka*(grief), *Krodha*(anger), *Utsah*(heroic), *Bhaya*(fear), *Jugupsa*(odious), *Vismaya*(marvelous). Later on *Nirvaida*(detachment) was also added, as a dominant emotion by Bharata. Vishvanath expanded the list with the inclusion of *Vatsalya* (parental feelings) as the tenth emotion. Bharata’s well known aphoristic phrase in *Natyashastra* conceptualized *rasa*: “*Vibhava-anubhava-vyabharibhava-samyogad rasa-nispattih*” meaning *rasa* is produced(*rasa-nispattih*) from a combination (*samyogad*) of Determinants (*Vibhava*), Consequents (*anubhava*) and Transitory States (*vyabharibhava*).

Vibhava can be described as a medium through which a emotion is evoked in an actor i.e. the means by which an emotion is activated. *Vibhava* is divisible in three parts- *ashraya*, *alambhana* and *uddipana*. *Ashraya* means a person in whom the emotion is evoked. *Alambhana vibhava* is the basic stimulus referring to the person or the object with reference to whom the emotion is manifested and is directly responsible for awakening the latent sentiment. *Uddipana vibhava* means the circumstances supplements the basic stimulus and acts as an enhancer. *Vibhava* acts as a medium in the aesthetic induction implying not the production of any emotion, but only awakens the latent sentiments. Viz Arousal of feelings of love in Rama when he noticed (spotted) Sita with her *Sakhion* in Janak *Vatika* going for worship. Here Rama is *ashraya*, Sita is *alambhana* while the fragrance of flowers and enchanting environment of Janak *Vatika* constitute *uddipana vibhava* which invigorates his feelings.

All the deliberate external manifestations of feelings on the part of the actor are *anubhava*. Various gestures, glances, postures and bodily expressions which are intended to

develop vibhava come under anubhava. These, according to Bharata, are of three kinds-Vacika, Angika and Aharaya. Vacika pertains to verbal expressions (expression by words), Angika to bodily expressions while Aharaya relates to dressing sense. A spectator feels the same emotions as is being experienced by the character on the stage and is communicated from character to spectator through external expressions i.e. anubhava. e.g. The arch glances of a well attired beautiful lady, her inviting smile and feeble voice all may be regarded as Anubhava.

Vyabharibhava are concomitant feelings which rise with well defined emotions and subside with them. Despondency, weakness, apprehension, envy, intoxication, weariness, indolence, depression are some out of thirty three such feelings.

Rasa is simply the permanent emotion that was raised to its zenith by the conjugation of Vibhava, anubhava and vyabharibhava. This was the conviction of Bhatta Lollota who lived in Kashmir in the late 8th century or the early 9th century. His theory came to be known as 'Utpattivad'. He opined that rasa resided in the character who was represented, as well as in the impersonating actor, but not in rasika i.e. listener or spectator. In Lollota's view, there exists a direct cause and effect relationship between vibhava and rasa i.e. rasa is the effect of which the vibhava or aesthetic object is the cause. According to Bhatta Lollota

the aesthetic experienceis a matter of mere appearance occasioned by false identification. It is analogous to the experience of a man who experiences fear because he erroneously takes a rope for a snake..... The actor creates an illusion; he is a master of maya. The spectators are subject to his maya.....(which) is production of rasa. (Nagendra 139)

To him, the spectator only relishes rasa i.e. the sentiment located in the character enacted by the actor on the stage and projected on the spectator and not through emotion induction by the aesthetic process of activating it.

Shankuka, who lived a little later than Lollota, contended the cause-effect theory of Lollota and brings a new theory termed as 'Anumitivad.' To him, an aesthetic experience is both real and unreal just like a painted horse. When one sees a horse painted, one doesn't mistake it for the original horse, but one sees it as the representation of the original one and thus derives the aesthetic pleasure through this identification. According to Shankuka

an actor who not appears on the stage as Rama is obviously not identical with the real Rama. Nor is he 'non-Rama'. Since the spectators take him to be Rama, he is not different from Rama either. He can't be said to be 'similar' to Rama since the spectators do not know the real Rama. The cognition involved in the experience 'enacted' Rama is unique. (Daniel 98)

Since art can't imitate all the qualities of the original subject hence it is just an inference and not an imitation. For Shankuka, the inferred feelings relished by the spectator, is rasa, which he derives by establishing an illusionary identity with the impersonating actor. In a way Shankuka supplements Lollota's view and described the transference of feeling from actor to spectator.

Abhinavagupta, one of the celebrated exponents of Indian Aesthetics, emerged in the 2nd half of the tenth century, whose two works, the Abhinavabharati and Dhvanyalokocana have given posterity a deep insight into the concept of rasa. The first is a commentary on Bharata's Natyashastra and the second is a commentary on Anandavardhana's Dhvanyaloka. In these works Abhinavagupta has not only endeavored to give a learned exposition of the works of

Bharata, Anandavardhana and a number of acaryas like Lollata, Shankuka, Nayaka and Tauta but also unified the theories of the earlier thinkers into a masterful synthesis. Precipitating the muddled dichotomy of ‘Sanyoga’ and ‘nishpati’ he maintained that ‘nishpati’ stands for abhivayakti (expression) and sanyoga stands for collective bhivadis.

Abhinavagupta himself regards the actor as an instrument for conveying rasa to the spectators. The actor is not involved in the emotions of the character he plays. Moreover, the moment he starts enjoying himself and the emotion he is playing he ceases to be an actor and becomes a sahridaya (connoisseur of art). Abhinavagupta analyses the Sanskrit term for actor (patra), to substantiate this point. It means both ‘character’ and ‘carrier-pot’. The first meaning refers to the actor proper. The latter meaning implies that the actor, just as the pot is only the carrier of relish: ‘the kettle does not know the taste of the brew.’

He made a difference between day to day emotional experiences and aesthetic experience arguing that sthayibhava (permanent emotion) exists in mundane sphere while aesthetic experience shows its alaukika (supra-mundane) experiences. The universalized emotions do not affect the spectator in the same way his own emotions or those of people around him do. And this answers the puzzle how tragic drama gives positive aesthetic pleasure to an audience. This established Rasa Theory propounded by Bharata as the comprehensive, more relevant and holds the reader an esteemed one unlike Eliot.

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