



The universal experience of rasas: A comparative study of Indian and Western Poetic Theories

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Abstract

This paper investigates the philosophical and affective intersections between classical Indian and Western aesthetic traditions, with a specific focus on rasa, catharsis, and the sublime. Moving beyond a purely textual or civilizational comparison, the study examines how each system conceptualizes the emotional and sensory engagement of the audience. By placing Bharata's rasa theory in dialogue with Aristotle's catharsis and Longinus' sublime, the paper uncovers shared concerns—such as the transformative power of art, the cultivation of emotional intensity, and the elevation of the self through aesthetic experience—while also attending to their cultural and ontological differences. Through this comparative lens, the research highlights both the distinctiveness and universality of rasa as a mode of aesthetic perception, ultimately arguing for a more inclusive and cross-cultural approach to global aesthetic theory.

Keywords: Comparative aesthetics, rasa, catharsis, sublime, affect theory

Introduction

“No composition can proceed without rasa,” said Bharata, in his famous work on dramaturgy, *Natyashastra*, which dates to the first century AD. The rasa theory can therefore be understood as a theory of art that is applicable to the dramatic art in particular but to other forms of fine arts as well, for instance, music, dance, literature, painting and so on. Though its origins lie in India, the theory can be universally applied. In the context of ancient India's theories of art and literature, it is interesting to quote Max Muller, “If I am asked which nation had been advanced in the ancient world in aspect of education and culture then I would say it was India.”

Even though direct translations of the rasa theory are hard to find in the western language and culture, there are certain points of contact between Indian aesthetic theories, particularly that of the rasa, and western theories of drama and poetry. The following paper is an attempt to study the intersecting elements between Indian and Western aesthetic theories, specifically how the ideas of the rasa theory are reflected in the formulations of certain western critics as well.

The following study is divided into three parts; the first section deals with the origin and development of the rasa theory in India; the second and third sections comprise of a comparative analysis between the rasa theory and western theories of drama and poetry namely- the idea of catharsis by Aristotle and that of the Sublime by Longinus.

Rasa Theory

The term rasa in the Vedic literature derives from the root ‘ras’ which means to taste, sweet juice, sap, or essence for instance, ‘raso vai madhu’ (*Shatapatha Brahmana*) or ‘raso vai sah’ (*Taittiriya Upanishad*).

The theory of rasa was devised by Bharata Muni in *Natyashastra*, and it was further developed by the contributions of later critics like Bhatta Lollata, Bhattanayaka, and Abhinavagupta.

The classical interpretations of Bharata's famous ‘Rasa-Sutra’ explains it as: “Emotions in poetry came to be

expressed through the conjunction of their causes and symptoms and other ancillary feelings that accompany the emotions” (*Natyashastra*.) Bharata's famous sutra is, “vaibhav-anubhav-samyogat-rasanishpatti.” This means that rasa emanates from a combination of vibhavas (causes), anubhavas (effectes), and vyabhicharis (accessories). Without rasa, drama can have no appeal to the spectator: “na rasadrite kusid arthah pravartate.” He observes eight Rasas experienced by the audience, shringar, hasya, veer, adbhut, roudra, karuna, bhimbhatsa, and bhayanak. Abhinavagupta, further added santa (peace) to the list of rasas, leading to the development of the idea of nine rasas.

The rasa theory is extremely nuanced and complex, and while this introduction is by no means an exhaustive explanation, further intricacies of the theory are delved into in the sections below through a comparative analysis of certain aspects of the rasa theory with the ideas of Aristotle and Longinus.

Rasa Theory and Aristotle's idea Of Catharsis

The most striking similarity between Aristotle's *Poetics* and Bharata's *Natyashastra* is that both the authors explore the effect of performances on the audience. Aristotle studies the effect of tragedy on spectators through the concept of catharsis, which is purgation of emotion through sentiments of pity and fear. Bharata similarly, through the nine rasa focusses upon the nine kinds of emotions evoked in the audience through a performance.

Catharsis and rasasutra both present a formula to describe the emotional effect of a dramatic piece on the audience. Both assert that a dramatic work evokes emotions that lead to liberation for the spectator and privilege the emotional effect on the spectator over other aspects of the performance. The purpose of drama, according to them, is therefore to evoke an emotional response in the spectators which brings about some form of positive change.

Aristotle has borrowed the term catharsis from Hippocratic medicine where it refers to purging out harmful elements from the human body. Likewise, Bharata too, is said to have taken the term rasa from the rig -veda to refer to the elixir

extracted from the 'soma' plant that renders good health and joy on consumption.

However, a notable difference between the two theories is that Greek drama focusses on producing the cathartic effect through the protagonist, and on a single dominant emotion. Indian drama on the other hand has intertwined stories depicting a multitude of situations that evoke a variety of emotions in the spectator through the nine rasas. Devdutt Patnaik in this context opines, "The Western way of storytelling focuses on one character, one plot, one transformation and one dominant emotion. In Indian complex storytelling, multiple linear story lines are woven together into a tapestry. Here, the idea matters and through the idea one emotion rises and falls."

While the basic tenet of both the ideas remains the same the rasa theory can be considered more wholesome in this context since it considers all art forms and nine emotions arising from the same as opposed to catharsis that focusses mainly on the dramatic form, particularly tragedy, and the arousal of fear and pity.

Rasa Theory and Longinus' idea of the Sublime

Longinus is one of the greatest Greek critics after Aristotle, known for his theory of the sublime. Before Longinus, the function of poetry was to preach and delight. However, Longinus argued that, the greatness of writers and poets lies not in their ability to instruct, delight, or persuade, but in something greater- their sublimity. Longinus defines literary sublime as "excellence in language," the "expression of a great spirit" and the power to provoke "ecstasy" in the readers. According to him, the aim of a piece of art should be to produce a form of ecstasy in the audience. Rasa theory too, similarly focusses upon the nine kinds of emotions evoked in the spectators through a performance. Abhinavagupta makes a remark that, "rasa is the transcendental delightful perception of one's own nature tinged with the predominant feeling excited with the dramatic display." In both, it is eventually the reader who experiences transcendental delight.

Longinus asserts that sublimity transports the reader from the external world into a state of meditation away from distractions. It is an intense experience where the enjoyment for the reader derives from identification with the character and their emotions. The rasa theory in the same spirit argues that the blissful stage of 'Ananda' is experienced by the reader when he completely identifies with the character which evokes the feeling of existing inherently but latently in the soul.

Longinus further says that sublimity in literature arises from the combination of five sources- the grandeur of thought, strong passions, figures of speech, diction, and composition. While the first two are inborn gifts, the rest three are work of art. Bharata Muni too, elaborates upon the elements that evoke rasas in a work of art which are vibhavas, anubhavas, and vyabharis (as explained in the introduction) along with other things like figures of speech, imagery, dhvani, and so on.

Both Bharata and Longinus, through their theories of rasa and sublime, affirm that art has the capacity to capture the soul of the readers and offer a myriad of emotions that transcend the reader into a meditative state. They both further, also offer the methods to achieve the same in literary art.

Conclusion

Both Aristotle in his idea of catharsis and Longinus in the concept of Sublime focus on the response of the audience to the reception of art- drama or poetry. While Aristotle's catharsis leans towards purgation of emotions through emotions like pity and fear; Longinus' Sublime concentrates on the feeling of ecstasy or transcendentalism after consumption of a piece of art. Both theories fall in line with the basic tenets of the rasa theory in Indian aesthetics, that artistic creations be it drama, poetry, or music evoke certain emotions in the spectators. It is interesting to note how the rasa theory composed in ancient India encompasses of both emotions like fear and pity elaborated in the theory of catharsis and ecstasy and transcendentalism as mentioned by Longinus. The rasa theory therefore emerges as an all-encompassing theory that entails elements of both the catharsis and sublime as given by Aristotle and Longinus respectively.

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