

## Reading Lake Poets through the *Rasa* Aesthetics of Abhinavagupta

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### ABSTRACT

Rasa theory, very often ascribed to Bharata who was its first exponent, and *Nāṭyashastra* which is the most fundamental and significant of all texts pertaining to Rasa school, many a time tends to neglect the contribution of the Kashmiri Shaivite scholar Abhinavagupta of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Abhinavagupta, though he was not the first proponent of Rasa theory, cannot be overlooked within the whole discourse of Indian Aesthetics because of his contribution in two chief areas: Rasa theory through his work *Abhinavabhāratī* and Dhvani theory through *Dhvanyālokalochana*. This paper aims at bringing forth those aspects of Rasa theory which are to be attributed exclusively to the unsung hero Abhinavagupta viz. the concept of *Sahridaya*, *Shānta Rasa*, obstacles (*vighna*) to Rasa realization etc. An attempt has been made to explain and illustrate these aesthetic principles through selected poems of Lake poets – Wordsworth, Coleridge and Keats, which would probably be more helpful to the beginners of English literature.

### KEYWORDS

Aesthetics; Rasa; Lake Poets; *Sahridaya*; *Shānta Rasa*.

Abhinavagupta, basically a follower of Dhvani school in the early 11<sup>th</sup> century, is known not for having given any original precept in Indian Poetics but for his commentary on Rasa and Dhvani school. Abhinavagupta, son of Narsimhagupta, was born in Kashmir during the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century in an illustrious Brahmin family. His *Abhinavabhāratī*, which elaborates and substantiates the views of Bharata in *Nāṭyashāstra*, enjoys more popularity than his *Dhvanyaloklochana* – a critique of Anandvardhan's *Dhvanyālok*. The commentary on *Kāvyaakautuka* of Bhatta Tota, who was his direct master in poetics, is now lost.

As far as Rasa theory is concerned, "It was Abhinavagupta, who enriched the theory by elucidating its philosophical foundations and by analysing the aesthetic dimension of the theory in terms of the nature, effect and cognition of literary experience." (Kapoor 16) His commentary on Anandvardhan's *Dhvanyāloka* constitutes one of the most important works of Dhvani school. He accepts and elaborates the core of Bhatta Nayaka's aesthetic ideas i.e. the concept of generalization but he rejects Nayaka's concept that aesthetic experience is fruition rather than knowledge. According to Abhinavagupta, Rasa and Dhvani schools are indissolubly merged and Rasa is not revealed but suggested.

Aesthetic gustation is nothing but a perception sui generis, differing from all others.

The treatise *Abhinavabharati* can be divided into four broad sections: (a) Contest of the views of Bhattalollata, Bhattanayaka and Srisankuka on Rasa and Rasanishpatti. (b) Abhinavagupta's views on the process of Rasa realization (c) Theory of Shānta Rasa (d) Obstacles in Rasa realization

Abhinavagupta mentions the aphorism (*Rasasutra*) of Bharata and describes how three of his purvacharyas have interpreted the sutra. Bhatta Lollata held that while Vibhāva, Anubhāva and Vyabhichāri are either ingeniously described or set forth vividly by mime, they cooperate together in the conjunction of Rasa. Sankuka gave the similitude of painting to explain the enlightenment of poetic emotion. Bhatt Nayaka gives two functions – *Bhāvakatva* and *Bhojakatva* – without which the aesthetic experience of Rasa cannot be enjoyed.

### Abhinavagupta's Views

Abhinavagupta seems to be disagreeing with and contesting the views of his precursors. He begins his commentary by saying: "Let us then state the true nature of Rasa purified of previous mistakes." (Gnoli 52)

#### (1) The Concept of *Sahridaya*

For him, the ultimate aim of poetry is Rasa. However, the first criteria that he lays down before discussing the process of aesthetic experience is the competence of the spectator. "He should possess a purity of imagination which can look at the thing described with full absorption." (Sreekantaiyyah 317) Abhinavagupta calls such a qualified spectator "*adhikārin*". Only such a *sahridaya*, says he, can attain *Rasanishpatti*.

Such a keen spectator, according to him, possesses the power for a "second perception" of the persons/events on stage which is beyond the literal perception. This "second perception" consists of a "transfer" (*sankramana*). In the real world, each person and thing has a stipulated time and place. We are all spatiotemporally defined entities. But when the play is being enacted on the stage, for an *adhikārin*, he as well as the character is spatiotemporally detached from his real life and for some time, "transfers" into a different world. He, at the given moment, deals not with X or Y of the given time but with Shakuntala of Dvapara era. Sreekantaiyyah writes: "The relation of time and place which is a personal characteristic of these two individuals is lost. This account should be applied to all the Vibhāvas and Anubhāvas of the drama." (318)

This is to say that the *sthāyibhāvas* are already present in the actor and the spectator in subtle form as latent impressions and wake through suitable causes. When a spectator forgets his personal worldly joys and sorrows and fixes his mind on the play with absorption, the Vibhāvas, Anubhāvas etc. get related in a general way and without any delay, they become objects of aesthetic experience. This is what is called *hridayasamvāda* (rapport of the heart). This is how Abhinavagupta puts it:

"... Therefore, this idea to be confronted with real experience is nourished by the combination of actors etc. In this combination, indeed – in that the real limiting causes (*niyamhetu*) i.e. time, space, the particular cognizing subject etc. neutralize each other and then completely disappear so that by the virtue of the spectator's uniformity of perception (*ekagahanatā*), it readily nourishes the Rasa... This form of consciousness without obstacles is called *Chamatkāra*." (Gnoli 58-59)

In poetry, such a "second perception" happens when a qualified reader transcends

the words of the poem and connects to the objects/persona therein.

This can be explained well with the example of Wordsworth's "Daffodils". As described in the last stanza, when the poet lies in "tranquillity" in his couch, the flowers flash in his "inward eye". The sight of beautiful flowers becomes Vibhāva in the poem. The speaker, presumably the poet in this case, can be called a "qualified spectator" or *adhikarin* in this case, since he possesses the quality of a "second perception". In the condition of solitude, when he regresses to his experience five years back, the poet-spectator transcends the limits of time and space and reaches to that very moment where he had encountered the flowers for the first time. He experiences the joy kindred to that he had experienced previously. Wordsworth writes: "And then my heart with pleasure fills / And dances with the daffodils." Thus, when his consciousness unites with that of the aesthetic object, there is *hridayasamvāda* and he experiences the same joy again. This causes the *Rasāsvāda* (relishing of Rasa). This state of consciousness is called *Chamatkāra* i.e. an uninterrupted state of enjoyment of Rasa) by Abhinavagupta.

According to Mohan Thampi (*Indian Aesthetics* 346), a *sahridaya* has two basic qualifications:

1. He is a keen observer of situations and feeling-patterns in life and has a sufficient fund of experiences without which he cannot make necessary inferences. The *sahridaya* has a mirror-like sensibility cleansed, refined and purified by his constant acquaintance with poetry. Whenever we use our mental faculties for any purpose higher than that of mere animal existence, we have to admit the necessity of training. Without this, one is bound to miss much of what is there in a highly complex work of literature.

2. The *sahridaya* is not just a passive reader. The word *pratibhā* (intuitive talent) is used to denote both the creative imagination of the poet and the receptive sensibility of the competent reader. The *sahridaya* not only enjoys the poem but also discusses its merits and faults and formulates the basic principles of poetic creation and appreciation. In F R Leavis' words, he is a complete reader.

One finds that Wordsworth's creation of Daffodils as well as his theory of poetic creation, which is a result of his self-analysis of self-experience is not possible without the combination of above-mentioned principles.

## (2) Shānta Rasa

Shānta rasa implies a state of calm or equilibrium. The credit for adding this ninth rasa goes to Abhinavagupta. According to him, this rasa is unique from the other eight because all the eight rasas emerge from it and finally merge into it. It is considered the original or natural state of mind. He identifies it as the 'perception of truth'.

The dominant emotion which develops into Shānta rasa is Nirveda. The realization of God, the transience of the world including mankind is the objects which awaken the sentiment of peace. This rasa is responsible to provide a feeling of ecstasy, serenity and peace. Shānta rasa is regarded as the one rasa which can transform life from violence to peace, from darkness to light, from ignorance to awareness and from mortality to immortality. The universe realized as unsubstantial becomes the *ālambana*.

Disinterest in the sensual pleasures (*trishna, kshaya*), indifference to friends and foes alike, meditation and steadfastness of action are the Anubhāvas. Joy, reminiscence, reasonableness and unmade are the sancharis. Horripilation, perspiration, cool tears and change of voice are the Sattvika bhāvas of Santa rasa. It represents complete harmony between

the mind, body, soul and the universe. It is a clear and cloudless steady-state that gifts a person eternity and takes a whole life to achieve it.

The sthayibhāva of Shānta Rasa is *Shama* or the state of calm. Some have called *nirveda* (apathy) that arises from the knowledge of the truth as its sthāyibhava. What is remarkable about this particular Rasa is that all the eight sthāyibhavas can become the sthāyibhava for Shānta Rasa. For example, one can move from *Krodha* towards Shānta Rasa or from *Utsāha* towards Shānta Rasa or even from *Hāsyā* towards Shānta Rasa. According to Abhinavagupta, this state of tranquillity or equanimity arises from the knowledge of the truth, detachment or *vairāgya*, purity of mind etc. Thus, these become the Vibhāvas (determinants). The Anubhāvas for this Rasa are *yama* (self-control), *niyama* (restraint) and “the property of highest happiness.” Its Vyabhichāris include disgust with the world (*nirveda*), remembrance, firmness of mind, purity in all four stages (ashramas) of life, rigidity, horripilation etc. This is how Priyadarshi Pattnaik puts it: “Disgust with the world is usually what leads to the abatement or the rejection of desire. The purity of mind must persist through firmness of mind so that Shānta can be reached.” (238)

Sreekantaiyyah states: “When the activity of all emotions is over, all the sorrows end, desire subsides and the ego dissolves, the boundary of Shāntarasa is reached.” (373) This is appropriately reflected in Wordsworth’s poem *Tintern Abbey*. The speaker in the poem, who after many years visits the bank of Wye, feels a different kind of serenity in the presence of Nature whom he considers as his “nurse, guide and guardian.” All his joys and sorrows merge into the divine presence of Nature. Wordsworth writes:

“..... That blessed mood,  
In which the burthen of the mystery,  
In which the heavy and the weary weight

*Of all this unintelligible world,  
Is lightened:—that serene and blessed  
mood.....”*

A similar kind of aesthetic experience is made felt in Coleridge’s poem “Frost at Midnight” where the speaker, weary of all woes, is sitting in “extreme silentness” on a winter night with his baby being cradled beside him. The atmosphere is so tranquil that he can even hear the baby’s breathing clearly. The poem is full of words that evoke an atmosphere of perfect stillness and tranquillity – “secret ministry”, “solitude”, “slumbers peacefully”, “calm indeed”, “meditation”, “hush of nature”, “deep calm” etc. This leads to the aesthetic realization and Coleridge writes:

“... With an eye made quiet by the power  
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,  
We see into the life of things.”

Keats’s poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn” is an example of how various emotions like Beauty, Joy, Truth – all merge to give rise to Shanta rasa.

“When old age shall this generation  
waste,  
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other  
woe  
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom  
thou  
say’st,  
“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is  
all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to  
know.”

### (3) Obstacles in realization of Rasa

Abhinavagupta gives seven obstacles that hinder the process of realization / experience of Rasa which are listed by Sethuraman as follows:

- Unbecomingness of perception or lack of verisimilitude (*sambhavanaviraha*)

- Immersion in temporal or spatial determinations which are exclusively one's own or of the other
- The fact of being at the mercy of sensations of pleasure etc which inhere solely in one's own person
- Defective state of the means of perception (vaikalya)
- Lack of evidence
- Lack of pre-eminence
- Allowing admission to doubts

## Conclusion

It can be said that Abhinavagupta, in his treatise, has elucidated and demystified Bharata. The views of Bharata in *Natyashāstra* are very fundamental and significant but at the

same time he is vague and complex. For instance, the aphorism of Rasa has been stated but not completely explained by Bharata. This task has been taken up by Abhinavagupta. He elaborates upon the sutra and adds significant aspects to it viz. Competence of the spectators, spatio-temporal detachment, rapport of the actor-spectator etc that contribute significantly to the process of Rasanishpatti. Besides, he also adds the ninth Rasa i.e. Shānta Rasa to the list and describes the obstacles that ought to be overcome for Rasa realization. In this way, Abhinavagupta's commentary concretizes and strengthens the theory of Rasa. Reading the poetry of Lake poets from the perspective of Rasa theory can become an interesting endeavour and an illustration of the mingling of East-West poetics at work.

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