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G. B. Mohan Thampi

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“*Rasa*” as Aesthetic Experience

THE THEORY of *rasa* as formulated by Bharata and later explicated and enriched by Anandavardhana and Abhinavagupta constitutes the Central Tradition in Indian aesthetics.¹ Poetry is a multidimensional phenomenon which cuts across many levels of human experience. A correct understanding of the theory of *rasa* enables us to keep all these dimensions and levels simultaneously in view. This paper aims at a brief restatement of the theory in its essentials.

John Dewey has said: “We have no word in the English language that unambiguously includes what is signified by the two words ‘artistic’ and ‘aesthetic.’ Since ‘artistic’ refers primarily to the act of production and ‘aesthetic’ to that of perception and enjoyment, the absence of a term designating the two processes taken together is unfortunate.”² *Rasa* is a term which designates both these processes and also the objective embodiment of the first which causes the second. The term *rasa* has, indeed, a bewildering variety of meanings. The dictionary records, among others, the following meanings: Sap, juice, water, liquor, milk, nectar, poison, mercury, taste, savor, prime or finest part of anything, flavor, relish, love, desire, beauty. The meanings range from the alcoholic *soma*-juice to the Metaphysical Absolute—the *Brahman*. In different periods new meanings evolved out of earlier ones and in different disciplines *rasa* acquired different connotations. In the Vedic period, when the ebullient primitive spirit of the Aryan race was awakening to the splendors and glories of nature, the connotations were concrete. *Rasa* meant

water, cow’s milk, mercury, *soma*-juice, etc. Gradually flavor, taste and tasting were associated with the word. In the Upaniṣadic age—the age of intellectual sophistication—the concrete grew into the abstract and *rasa* became the essence, the essence of everything, the essence of the universe itself. In dramaturgy and in poetics the word acquired the special meaning of that unique experience we have when we read a poem or witness a play. Indian aesthetic thinking is primarily audience- or reader-oriented and the center of much discussion is the response of the readers. But we should bear in mind that the word *rasa* denotes, apart from the reader’s aesthetic experience, the creative experience of the poet and the essence of the totality of the qualities which make a poem what it is.

Attempts to define beauty have not yielded very convincing results because by its very nature beauty yields only to a circular definition if we ignore the intimate relation of the subject and the object in its apprehension. The Indian theorists were not entangled in a futile discussion of the subjectivity or objectivity of beauty partly because their term *rasa* is an inclusive one. Bharata has employed the metaphor of seed → tree → fruit to synthesize all the elements in the poetic process.³ Poetry is a process which begins with the seed-experience of the poet and with the poet’s struggle to give it a name and local habitation. This embodiment of his experience in words, in its turn, evokes in the mind of the competent reader an experience similar to that of the poet. Thus the term *rasa* emphasizes the

continuity of the poetic act from the birth of the seed-experience in the poet through its objectification in the body of a poem to the consummation in the reader's enjoyment.

Every human being is born with a set of inherited instinctual propensities. His thoughts, actions, and experiences constantly generate impressions which sink back into the subconscious mind ready to be revived on the conscious level. These impressions, which are called *samskāras* in Indian philosophy and psychology, are organized around emotions. The emotions are related to typical and universal situations and generate definable patterns of action. They are called *sthāyībhāva*, permanent emotions, because they always remain embedded in human organism and character. Indian aestheticians have grouped the instinctual propensities and impressions around nine basic emotions: delight, sorrow, anger, etc. Apart from these clearly organized basic emotions there are innumerable transient feelings and moods which accompany the former in any experience. They do not attain the intensity of the basic emotions nor do they last long. They are concomitant feelings, *vyabhicārin*s, which rise with well-defined emotions and subside with them. Anxiety, exultation, bashfulness, languor, etc., are examples. Thirty-three such accessory feelings are recognized though the list does not exhaust the variety of human feelings. From the theoretical point of view the questions about the exact number of the basic emotions and accessory feelings are bound to prove barren and therefore can safely be dropped.

The patterns of experience resulting from the interactions of the various states of human psyche are the basic stuff of poetry. Poetry renders these patterns concrete by objectifying them. In life some stimuli are necessary to cause emotional response in us. These stimuli may be material, existing in the environment, or ideal, existing in the mind. These human and environmental stimuli when depicted in poetry are called *vibhāvas*. The *vibhāvas* are the characters and situations which determine and define the feeling-complex to be evoked in the reader.

To use Eliot's phrase they are the "objective correlatives." The ancient mariner, his shipmates, the albatross, the sea, the moon, the slimy things in the sea, etc.—they are the *vibhāvas*.

The characters and situations depicted in a poem have unique ontological status and our perception of them is *sui generis*. The special mode in which the poetic characters exist and are apprehended is indicated by the term *alaukika*, non-ordinary. In life our reactions to persons and objects can be described in terms of attraction, repulsion, or indifference. Men and things directly and indirectly impinge on our life and on its practical interests. Therefore our responses are governed by positive or negative interests. Our attitudes of attraction, repulsion, and indifference are put aside or transcended when we contemplate a character like Hamlet. We are not concerned with the historicity of the prince; even if he had a historical existence, the fact is irrelevant to our appreciation of the poem. It has been widely observed that a character like Hamlet is more real to us than our most intimate friend. This apparent paradox is true because Hamlet as created by Shakespeare is a complete being whose total personality is revealed to us. We can have a full and round view of the prince because in his perception our view is not clouded by our egoistic interests as it is in life. The poem exists only for our perception; it exists dissociated from our everyday existence; hence our response to the poem is called *alaukika*, non-ordinary.⁴ Writers like Richards and Dewey consider that such an attitude engenders a gulf between art and life. To Richards, reading a poem is not an activity qualitatively different from that of dressing in the morning.⁵ Dewey considers that works of art only "accentuate and idealize qualities found in ordinary life."⁶ This is not the place to examine the soundness of their theories; I merely want to point out that to recognize the differentia of the aesthetic mode is not to perpetuate a chasm between life and art. On the other extreme we find the formalists like Clive Bell and Roger Fry whose starting point for aesthetics is "the personal experience of a peculiar emotion."⁷

Their reduction of the complexities of art work and of aesthetic experience to significant form and a peculiar aesthetic emotion cannot account for the variety of elements which enter the aesthetic process; nor is there any scope for internal differentiation within this precious emotion. The theory of *rasa* strikes a middle path and attempts a reconciliation of opposed points of view.

The Indian theory makes a clear distinction between the ordinary life-emotion and the emotional content of aesthetic experience. An emotion is a disturbance, an agitation in the consciousness which tends to result in action. Etymologically, emotion means "to stir and move out." In poetic experience emotions do stir and agitate our mind; but they do not move out in the form of action. Further, in poetic experience the emotional states are not simply undergone or suffered; they are perceived and tasted. The Sanskrit words which describe this process are *carvaṇa* which means masticating and *rasana* which means tasting. These words refer to the reader's imaginative reconstruction of the meanings and the identity of the poem and to his active enjoyment of the emotions even while they reverberate in his heart. In ordinary life we can control and destroy an emotion by concentrating our attention on it. A detached contemplative attitude is an enemy to the emotional disturbances of the heart. Some writers cannot tolerate the word *contemplation* to describe aesthetic experience. They think that the word is inept for suggesting the exhilaration and passionate absorption of aesthetic experience. No doubt, in ordinary parlance, the word has even the derogatory connotations of intellectual passivity and inaction. But in aesthetics this word is used only to differentiate the attitude from the practical one. In poetic experience when we "distance" the emotions, i.e., when we apprehend them as having a non-ordinary relation to us, they do not disappear; on the contrary, they gain in clarity and become relishable. The liberative function of poetry, partly, is an outcome of this nature of poetic experience. Once we are able to formulate and precisely define the emotions in a concrete and almost

tangible way we gain a kind of mastery over them. We know their nature, potentialities, internal constituents and differentiations. This helps us understand and clarify human situations and experiences with enhanced efficiency. It helps us free ourselves from being a slave to emotions which are generally chaotic, blind, and powerful. This is one of the meanings of the statement that poetry makes our insight into life keener.

It is because the ancient Indian writers and critics recognized this line of demarcation between art and life that conventions and stylization play such an important role in ancient Indian literature. Stylization is an essential aspect of art. In Indian art we do not find realistic or naturalistic movements. Realism and even naturalism have their legitimate places in the realm of art; but in the West these two movements seem to have reached a blind alley. In drama and even in the novel we find a reaction against them, (e.g., Brecht, Ionesco, the anti-novel). Further, it is because of the awareness of the demarcation between art and life that discussion on the paradox of tragic delight did not assume prominence in India. The question of why tragedy delights arises from certain fallacious assumptions about the nature and function of poetry. It plagues all those who are victims of what may be called the naturalistic fallacy, i.e., the belief that the function of poetry is to incite real life emotions in the reader. In the West it began with Plato with his notion of poetry feeding and watering the passions. Among the Indian theorists also there were some who considered that *rasas* like *karuṇa*, the pathetic, evokes sorrow in the mind of the reader. The Central Tradition, however, considers that such a view is untenable; our experience contradicts it. These theorists start from the premise that the feelings evoked in poetic experience are *alaukika*, non-ordinary, and therefore there is no question of sorrow. "*Rasa* is so-called because it is relished."⁸ "Drama always gives delight to the spectator, never sorrow."⁹ Bharatamuni devised music and dance to remove such personal feelings as may arise in the minds of untrained and uncultivated spectators.¹⁰ As poetic feelings are evoked

within a frame of detachment from our immediate egoistic interests, the question of why the depiction of suffering causes delight is irrelevant. As poetry, tragedy does not give us any delight which is qualitatively different from that given by other genres. For practical criticism the division of literature into tragedy, comedy, lyric, etc., is necessary and can be made on the basis of the content and the manner of treatment; but in aesthetic theory when we discuss the effect of poetry as poetry these distinctions between genres have no value. In aesthetic experience there is a sense of *viśrānti*, rest or composure. The apparent evocation of sorrow and other feelings is only a coloration (*anurañjana*), or resonance of the non-ordinary feelings embodied in the poem.

The Indian theorists do not share the belief of many that romantic poetry is subjective in the sense that the poet sings about his personal experiences, and that classical poetry is subjective in the sense that it is about everything except the poet's own experiences. The fact is that all poetry is objective in the sense that the poet has to objectify feelings in terms of images, characters, action, etc. The poet's own experiences can be the subject matter of his poetry; but, unless he renders them concrete by creating appropriate correlatives they will remain merely documents from his autobiography. To objectify an experience the poet has to detach it from the subject, i.e., himself; and once he objectifies it through appropriate correlatives the experience becomes universal. The personal experience of the poet becomes the transpersonal experience potentially accessible to all mankind. This twin process of objectification and universalization is comprehended by the term *sādhāraṇīkaraṇa*, transpersonalization.¹¹ This doctrine implies the elevation of the consciousness of the poet and the reader from the plane of their private everyday world to the plane of collective human experience where poetry is created and enjoyed. Indian aestheticians, generally, are of the opinion that poets should not handle contemporary themes, because it is very difficult and full of risks for the poet to keep his theme aloof from his immediate

interests. The complex pattern of significance emerging out of the present events is not usually clear for an adequately truthful portrayal. It must be made clear that the doctrine of *sādhāraṇīkaraṇa* does not necessarily compel the poet to abandon personal and contemporary subject matter. It only insists on the necessity to detach himself from the experience so that he can make the feelings inhere in the poem, and place them in a proper perspective with a view to investing them with values.

In what sense do we say that a character and his feelings are transpersonal? A person is said to possess real individuality (*svalakṣaṇya*) only when he is contemporary with us (*vartamāna*); only when he is animated by causal efficiency (*arthakriyā*), i.e., the power to produce effects in our practical life. A character in literature has no such power; it has the special *alaukika* status as a configuration of meanings. It does not raise the question of reality or unreality. For instance, the fear of the frightened antelope in *Śākuntalam* (I, ii) is a feeling uncircumscribed by time and space. The perception of this fear is different from the ordinary perceptions of fear (e.g., "I am afraid, he—my enemy, my friend, anybody is afraid") because the latter are affected by pain, pleasure, and other feelings. Aesthetic experience consists of direct perception (*sākṣātkāra*) which requires that the mind must be concentrated (*ekāgra*) and free from all obstacles (*vighna*). The antelope's fear may be said to enter directly into our hearts (*sākṣād iva nivīṣyamānam*) and to vibrate and dance before our inner eyes.¹²

The concept of *sādhāraṇīkaraṇa* does not imply that we deindividualize and depersonalize the characters and their feelings. We do not apprehend feelings in poetry in the form of some abstract universal generic essences. *Rasa* is manifested by poetic language. The Sanskrit word used is *abhivyakti*; the word has the connotation of manifestation in individualized form. The antithetical concepts involved in the doctrine are not general and particular but personal and transpersonal. It goes without saying that generalized characters and images which

do not have individuality cannot possess vividness and vitality and therefore will leave no impression on the mind of the reader. The basic feelings may be grouped under a limited number of names, but the permutations and combinations of these feelings and their manifestations are infinite and hence the infinite variety in literature. In poetry it is not enough to name feelings; it is necessary to give them a local habitation. The ancient mariner's sense of guilt and his expiation through love and repentance are no doubt instances of guilt and expiation but they have a peculiar ring which marks them off from other such instances. It is also necessary to guard against the danger of making the concepts of detachment and transpersonalization rigid and petrified, robbing art of all its warm human emotional interest. To say that aesthetic response is transpersonal does not mean that it is a cold and unemotional response. Though the feelings are evoked in the framework of transpersonalization yet they retain all their human qualities.

Another important quality of aesthetic experience is stressed in the concept of the *śānta rasa*. *Śānta* connotes tranquillity, repose, serenity, the "peace that passeth understanding." In India there were dogmatists who put a narrow interpretation on the concept and asserted that since *śānta* indicates the cessation of all conflicts and activities and since such a state cannot be represented on the stage it cannot be admitted in dramatic and poetic theory. The Central Tradition does not agree with this narrow interpretation. There is no work in world literature which can rival the *Mahābhārata* in the diversity and intensity of conflicts and tensions portrayed. The conflicts in the epic range from the schizophrenia of individuals to disastrous wars between clans. In spite of this Ānandavardhana considered that the dominant *rasa* of the epic is the *śānta*. Commenting on the hesitation of some theorists to accommodate the *śānta*, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy says: "In the first place there is really a disturbance, in the second there is the experience of a peace that cannot be described as an emotion in the sense that fear and love and

hate are emotions. It is for this reason that Indian rhetoricians have hesitated to reckon 'peace' (*Śānti*) as a flavour (*rasa*) in one category with the other flavours."¹³ But as I remarked earlier the Central Tradition upholds this *rasa* and even declares that the *śānta* is the great basic *rasa* (*mahārasa*). All feelings in aesthetic experience merge out of the *śānta* and are in the end submerged in it.¹⁴ All *rasas* are relished in a state of perfect tranquillity born out of the withdrawal of our ego from our practical interests. There is a sense of repose in consciousness (*saṃvidviśrānti*) when we are immersed in the aesthetic object to the exclusion of everything else. The feelings evoked do not struggle for an outlet. They enact themselves on the stage of our consciousness. When our desire is directed to things not in consciousness the mind is agitated. Pain is only another name for the disturbance in consciousness caused by such desires, worries, etc. But in the state of the *śānta*, the *mahārasa*, the consciousness is devoid of such agitations caused by egoistic desires.

In ordinary experience we find either emotional conflicts and the resulting tensions or passive relaxation. But in *rasa* there is a unique union of the two opposites, tension and tranquillity. The content of a poem, which is man's social experience pregnant with contradictions, evokes reverberations of feelings in the reader's heart. But the feelings and emotions do not rise and subside haphazardly; their movements are strictly controlled and disciplined by the objective structure and texture, the form of the poem. Just as the poem achieves an inseparable integration of content and form, poetic experience unites the tension born out of conflicting emotions with repose resulting from the transpersonalized attitude.

Banaras Hindu University

¹ The basic texts of the Central Tradition in Indian aesthetics are the following four: (i) *Nāṭyaśāstra*, by Bharatamuni (2d century); (ii) *Dhvanyāloka*, by Ānandavardhana (9th century); (iii) *Abhinavabhāratī*, by Abhinavagupta (10th

century), commentary on *Nāṭyaśāstra*; (iv) *Locana*, also by Abhinavagupta, commentary on *Dhvanyāloka*.

² John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, quoted from *A Modern Book of Esietics*, ed. Melvin Rader (New York, 1961), p. 180.

³ *Nāṭyaśāstra* VI, 38. p. 294. All citations from *Nāṭyaśāstra* and *Abhinavabhāratī* are from the 2d rev. ed., I (Baroda, Oriental Institute).

⁴ See also *Abhinavabhāratī*, p. 35.

⁵ I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (London, 1926), p. 16.

⁶ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York, 1934), p. 11.

⁷ Clive Bell, *Art* (London, 1913), p. 6.

⁸ *Nāṭyaśāstra* VI, p. 288.

⁹ *Abhinavabhāratī*, p. 289.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 291.

¹¹ *Sādhāraṇīkaraṇa* has been rendered in English as *generalization*; but I think the word *transpersonalization* accurately conveys the meanings. It is more suggestive than *impersonality* as it carries the positive connotation of transcending the individual's personality. The word has been used in a similar sense by Makato Ueda in his paper "Basho and the Poetics of Haiku," *JAAC*, XXI (Summer, 1963), 423-431.

¹² *Abhinavabhāratī*, p. 279.

¹³ Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "Samvega," *Figures of Speech or Figures of Thought* (London, 1946), p. 205.

¹⁴ *Nāṭyaśāstra*, pp. 334-5.