



The Theory of Rasa

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THE THEORY OF RASA

Rasa LITERALLY MEANS taste or savor, and, as used to denote the essence of poetry,¹ it signifies the peculiar experience that poetry affords us. The *rasa* school stresses this experiential or subjective side of poetic meaning.² This seems rather pointless, for ultimately everything is an experience, such as a color, taste, or emotion, and can be known as it is in itself only through direct acquaintance. Yet we have classes of similar experiences, each class being represented by a general idea of it (and by a word), and we have a descriptive knowledge of it in terms of phenomena which are found to be its natural correlates or determinants. Thus, for instance, we know what is sound directly by hearing it; indirectly or descriptively in terms of vibrations in the sounding body and air which we may know directly. This is all right so long as we do not confuse the descriptive knowledge with the direct one; do not regard sound as "nothing but" vibrations. The *rasa* school holds the essence of poetry to be a quality distinct from its determinants which are more commonly known characters, such as natural situations, human actions and emotions. (*Rasa* itself is not an emotion, as we shall see presently.) Thus poetry is not essentially an imitation of nature (which includes life and emotions) though nature is depicted in it. To check the naturalistic fallacy in poetics the *rasa* school emphasized the experiential aspect of poetic value, the qualitatively new product that must be directly experienced in order not to confuse it with an aggregate of its natural constituents. *Rasa* is regarded as extraordinary or unworldly;³ the pleasure which accompanies it as transcendental.⁴

Remembering that the essence of poetry is a distinct quality by itself which can only be known as it is through direct acquaintance, we can proceed to acquire a descriptive knowledge about it by studying its natural correlates. *Rasa* is realized when an emotion is awakened in the mind in such a manner that it has none of its usual conative tendencies and is experienced in an impersonal, contemplative mood. An emotion in this peculiar manner is caused by representations in art of those objects which excite it in nature, such as natural situations, persons of known characters, their actions and physical expressions of emotions (e.g. trembling, smiling, scowling, etc.). These representations, through words in case of poetry and through both words and concrete presentations in case of drama, are generalized and so idealized aspects of objects masquerading as particulars. They are significant neither cognitively nor conatively, for they belong to a different world. The representations have only emotive significance and the emotions appearing through their medium are not suffered in the ordinary blind and passive manner but enjoyed actively with

lucid self-awareness and knowledge of them.⁵ The secret of this extraordinary mode of experiencing emotion lies in the dissolution of the practical and egoistic side of our self in the poetic attitude and the consequent appearance of the universal contemplative self. Emotions are latent in the self in their generalized form as dispositions connected with their general, not particular, associations.

So, when generalized objects and situations are presented in poetry they awaken the generalized emotions which are felt in an impersonal and contemplative manner. They do not relate specifically to any individual person or any object. However, all this depends upon the dissolution of the practical self, and this in its turn depends upon many factors, some relating to the poetry which is to be appreciated, others to the nature of the appreciator's mind. Thus if there is too much of naturalism (i.e., topicality or verisimilitude) and too little of impersonality, the autobiographical elements, including the author's own dispositions and opinions, being manifest, there will be naturalistic responses. Again if the reader is too much of a matter-of-fact person seeking information ('news'), instruction, or sensation from poetry, his practical realistic attitude cannot wholly be suspended even by good poetry full of idealization. To counteract and cure the naturalistic attitude in the reader poetry employs, besides idealization, such devices as line and stanza structure, rhythm, and rhyme, while drama utilizes music, stage decorations, and other effects.

Rasa is realized when, because of the factors related above, the self loses its egoistic, pragmatic aspect and assumes an impersonal contemplative attitude, which is said to be one of its higher modes of being.⁶ *Rasa*, thus, is a realization of the impersonal contemplative aspect of the self which is usually veiled in life by the appetitive part of it. As the contemplative self is free from all craving, striving and external necessity, it is blissful. This bliss is of a different quality from the pleasure we derive in life from satisfaction of some need or passion. Now it may be noted that *rasa* as realization of one's contemplative and blissful self is essentially one. But this realization is associated in poetry with an experience by this self of some emotion in its generalized form. So that this self is self-aware and self-enjoying through awareness and enjoyment of an emotion which colors it. *Rasa* is therefore said to be many and a poem is said to impart a particular kind of *rasa*, e.g., of love, fear, bravery, etc., depending upon the emotion predominant in it.

This is in outline the *rasa* theory of poetry. One further point is to be noted. Emotions awakened in poetry are of two classes, one consisting of those that more or less dominate a poem, others of those that are transient and subservient to them.⁷ Thus the pervading emotion in a poem may be love, while longing, jealousy, stupefaction, anxiety, joy, sadness, anger, pity, and some others may function as transient accessories, all suggesting and sustaining love. In a good poem the different dominant emotions and their accessories are so organized that there is mutual reinforcement, balance, and harmony, a perfect adjustment of means to their ends and of parts to the whole. The emotions that may more aptly serve as dominants in poetry are those that are more elemental and powerful in man, his permanent dispositions, such as love, pity, fear, and

wonder. These emotions manifest themselves through a multiplicity of subsidiary and transient emotions and are, therefore, expressible in poetry through them. While these transient emotions appear and disappear in a poem in quick succession, a certain dominant emotion suggested by them remains steady like a pervading emotional atmosphere. The chief and over-all *rasa* of the poem is derived from a contemplation of this dominant emotion, and this *rasa* is obviously richer and profounder than the *rasa* as derived from contemplation of a lighter or simpler emotion having a few accessories or none at all. Thus it is that a long composition depicting a major emotion through a variety of accessories is richer in poetic worth than a short one which can adequately express only a few accessories and, so, only a relatively simpler dominant emotion. Even if it attempts a major emotion such as love or pity, it cannot do as much justice to it as can a long composition. Now, self-awareness which is one aspect of *rasa* (the other being awareness of an emotion) is proportionally richer and profounder the more basic or elemental is the emotion contemplated and the more adequate or thorough is this contemplation. For the deeper will be penetration through the thick layer of practical, egoistic disposition to the essential contemplative core of the self. Great poetry breaks our blind egoistic shell to reveal the universal enlightened self within.

Let us now see briefly if the main points of this *rasa* theory can be understood in the light of our generally held ideas about poetry. That poetry is an expression of emotions and that emotions are objectified and disinterestedly contemplated is widely believed. Aristotle⁸ seems to have held a similar view which we find also in Hegel,⁹ Croce,¹⁰ and Bosanquet.¹¹ That poetry affords a higher kind of emotional delight is also commonly accepted, but that this delight is the joy of self-revelation or of the truth of the higher contemplative and universal spirit in us is peculiarly Indian, though some affinities with the Scholastic theory of art can be seen. The Scholastics attribute poetic delight to the perception of some intelligible (non-conceptual) form in the emotions which is in harmony with the intelligent principle in the mind.¹² However, it appears that the Scholastic theory stresses the form of the emotion presented in poetry, its order, proportion, and harmony, which makes it intelligible (otherwise it is a confused agitation); while the *rasa* theory points to the peculiar, self-contained nature of the emotion as divested of its conative tendencies and felt for its own sake. In both theories the mind in poetic appreciation is regarded as revealing its quiet contemplative character which is essentially joyful. Hence the extraordinary kind of joy experienced in poetry. The insulation of emotions as enjoyed in poetry from their ordinary practical manifestations and enjoyment of them in a disinterested manner made possible by many factors inside and outside the poem (as described before) is another notion in *rasa* theory which is more or less recognized in the theory of "psychical distance."¹³

A further notion of some importance is the distinction in poetry between two classes of emotions, the so-called permanent or dominant and the transient. These differ in nature and function. No clear conception of this distinction is

met in contemporary poetics. Aristotle may have held a distinction of this nature. He, according to Butcher, meant by character "the permanent dispositions of the mind which reveal a certain condition of the will" and by emotion "the more transient emotions, the passing moods of feelings."¹⁴ Now since both character and emotion are represented in poetry and character is depicted through the emotions (besides thoughts and actions), it is probable that Aristotle thought the more permanent dispositions defining character to be expressible through the transient moods. C. K. Ogden perceives that certain feelings, such as doubt and belief, are emotions that do not leave behind any permanent disposition in the mind; they are dependent upon some other emotions and also give rise to them.¹⁵ This is an approximation to the idea that certain elemental emotions are expressible in art through certain subsidiary ones because in nature the latter spring from the former, being their manifestations. The importance in poetics of this distinction between two classes of emotions is obvious and many literary critics make this distinction without clearly knowing it, in their concrete expository or critical work. A. C. Bradley speaks of "sadness, mystery and waste" as the predominant notes in a Shakespeare tragedy.¹⁶ Certainly these notes are struck up by a number of minor notes.

In conclusion we may remark that the *rasa* theory offers many useful keys to the understanding of poetry. Though a good many of these have their Western parallels and have proved their worth, some have no such parallels. The latter ought to be studied with an open mind in the light of modern psychology. Such a work will prove very helpful towards a comprehensive theory of poetry.

¹ The doctrine that *rasa* is the essence of poetry starts from Bharata (first century A.D.) "No composition can proceed without *rasa*," said he in his famous work on dramaturgy, *Natyashāstra*. Abhinavagupta (10th century), the most important thinker in Indian aesthetics, held this doctrine: "There is no poetry without *rasa*." (*Dhanyāloka Locana* 2.3. This book will be referred to as D.L.). Again, "The meaning of poetry is *rasa*; what is principally looked for is meaning." (*Abhinavabhāratī* (A.B.) 7.1). Visvanāth (4th c. A.D.) wrote, "A composition touched with *rasa* is poetry." (*Sāhityadarpaṇa* 1.3).

² See Bharata, *op. cit.*, 6.35; "Rasa is realization of one's own consciousness as colored by emotions." Again, "Rasa and emotion cannot be expressed directly through words, their essence being immediate experience; so they can only be suggested by words." (D.L. 1.4). "Rasa is identical with the taste of one's own blissful self." Visvanāth, *op. cit.*, 3.35.

³ A.B. 6.34; D.L. 1.18.

⁴ It is said to be "like the relish of the ultimate reality" (*parabrahmāsvādsachiva*). D.L. 2.4. Also "as the twin of this relish of *Brahmā*" (*Sāhityadarpaṇa* 3.35). Brahma is the same as *Atma*, the highest self. In yoga this is realized in its purest form as an indeterminate spirit with no object confronting it, as it transcends all subject-object duality. But in poetic contemplation the self is a subject aware of emotions and their determinants and is self-aware through this awareness of objects. This mode of self-realization is accompanied by an extraordinary kind of delight, called *sadya-paranirvṛtti*, immediate higher pleasure, by Mammata (11th c. A.D.), in *Kavyapṛakāsha* and *alaukika camatkāra*, extraordinary charm, by Abhinavagupta in D.L. 3.33. The pleasure in poetry, derived ultimately from relish of the higher self, must be different in quality from ordinary pleasure derived from satisfaction of the lower self, the practical ego, lost in and suffering emotions instead of contemplating them.

⁵ See Mammata, *op. cit.*, 4.28, where he summarizes Abhinavagupta's view of the matter.

⁶ See note 4 above. Also A.B. 6.34.

⁷ Bharata, *op. cit.*, 7.11-7.43.

⁸ S. H. Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Arts* (4th ed.). The appeal of poetry is said to be to the feelings of emotions of their egoistic elements and transformation of them into something pure and tranquil (pp. 254, 268).

⁹ *Philosophy of Fine Arts*, "Introduction."

¹⁰ *Aesthetics*, Ch. II.

¹¹ *Three Lectures on Aesthetics* (1915), Ch. I.

¹² Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism* (1946), p. 51.

¹³ See the author's paper, "Psychical Distance in Indian Aesthetics," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Dec. 1948.

¹⁴ Butcher, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

¹⁵ C. K. Ogden, *A.B.C.'s of Psychology* (1941), pp. 205-7.

¹⁶ *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (1905), p. 23.