

## **The ‘Rasa’ Theory and the Concept of the ‘Sublime’: A Universal Approach of Bharatamuni and Longinus**

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**Abstract:-** Literary works are read by the western, the eastern, the modern as well as the ancient readers. If there is any difference, it is of time, place, language, mythology, images and cultural background of a country. These differences may pose some difficulties but do not stand in the way of appreciating a literary work. In the same way, the principles of criticism whether of the East or the West are not restricted in their scope. There is a kind of universal element in them which makes them applicable to all literature. Hence, this paper is an attempt to revisit the critical theories of Rasa and of Sublime and observe the close affinity in the views of Bharata, an Indian sage- poet and Longinus, a Greek critic. Both the writers formulate rules of critical evaluation not for any specific branch of literature produced at a particular period, but they enunciate principles that are applicable to all forms of literature produced in every part of the globe.

**Key Words:** *Aesthetic emotion, Objective-correlative, Rasa, Sublime, Transcendental Experience*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Living sometime between the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE and the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE the Indian sage Bharatmuni propounded the ‘Rasa’ theory, which occupies the pride of place among the schools of Indian Poetics. His *Natyastra*, a detailed treatise and handbook on dramatic art, is the oldest extant work on Indian Poetics and deals with all aspects of classical Sanskrit theatre. ‘Rasa’ was originally considered as belonging to dramaturgy rather than to poetics proper. It was recognised as an element of decoration by the ‘Acharyas’ of the ‘Alamkara’ school, who did not assign any over-riding importance to it. It was only with the passage of time and with the progress of critical speculations that the ‘Rasa’ came to be identified as the central element of literary composition. *On the Sublime* by Longinus, on the other hand, is an important treatise of literary criticism. Longinus has been recognised as the greatest Greek critic after Aristotle and his treatise as a critical work which adopts a remarkably different standpoint from that of the most admirable utterances to be found in all literature and hence “remains towering among all other works of the class.” [1] Before Longinus it was believed that the function of poetry was to instruct and delight and that of prose to persuade. But Longinus was not convinced with this test of poetry and prose. He believed that the greatest poets and writers aimed to instruct, delight and persuade but their greatness lay in something else, i.e., their sublimity. The effect of a lofty passage is not to convince the reason of the reader but to transport him. The central argument of the text is: what constitutes ‘Sublimity’ in literature. Longinus also gives a detailed elucidation on five principal sources from which sublimity is derived.

### **II. RASA AND SUBLIME DEFINED**

‘Rasa’ literally means tincture, taste, flavour, relish. It has been variously translated as sentiments, aesthetic emotion etc. Even more simply ‘rasa’ can be described as the response to art. It has all the features of aesthetic experience familiar to western philosophy. It is emotion objectified or universalised and realized to a state where it becomes the object of lucid disinterested contemplation and is transfigured into serene joy. ‘Rasa’ is so called because it is capable of being relished. It is an inward experience, a state of intense satisfaction in the man of sensibility (sahridayas). His response as spectator or reader is more important than the artist’s act of creation. The greatest merit of ‘Rasa’ system is that it has erected its magnificent edifice on the solid foundation of the commonality of human feelings and emotions. Sublimity, a philosophical term, can be better defined as “the echo of a great soul” [2]. Great thoughts spring from great souls. Men with mean and servile ideas cannot attain sublimity. This is the first known instance in which greatness in literature is ascribed to qualities innate in the writer rather than his art. The author further suggests that greatness of thought, if not inborn, may be acquired by emulating the great masters of the antiquity who are the standards of excellence. The writer may derive a divine impulse from them. The true sublimity fills the reader with ineffable joy. It appeals not through reason but through imagination, not once or twice but every time it is heard or read.

### III. THE AUDIENCE ARE NO ORDINARY MEN

Longinus and Bharata wrote their theories keeping different types of audience in mind- Bharata for the spectators of a drama, while Longinus for the audience hearing an oration. But whether it is the relish of 'Rasa' or the sublime, it is the reader who gets affected and consequently, derives ecstasy and transcendental delight. The ordinary men cannot have the experience of 'Rasa' or the sublime. For Bharata, the 'Rasa' can be relished only by sensitive spectators and for Longinus, the effect of sublime can cause delight only to men of sense and literary experience. Thus, the appreciative genius of the refined reader is regarded as an essential element for the understanding of literature, which enables him to identify himself easily with the characters and situations as also with the literary artists and share their feelings.

### IV. LITERARY WORK: A TRANSCENDENTAL EXPERIENCE

The Vedic mind was richly sensitive to the beauty of the external world; to the loveliness of dawn and dusk, of forest and flowing river. If their lyrics were spontaneous it was because the beauty of this new creation was immediately noticed and savoured. Upanishadic thought extends this savouring of the world to the savouring of its transcendental origin. Affirming his strong belief in the same Longinus writes, "Nature has appointed us men to be no base nor ignoble animals; ... forthwith she implants in our souls the unconquerable love of whatever elevated and more divine than we". [3] Aesthetic theory utilises both the meanings. The aesthetic creation is savoured like a beautiful object in nature is savoured. At the same time, although the stimulus is of the objective world, the experience is almost felt to be transcendental like the sage's intuitive experience. Art thus mediates between the experiences of this world and the experiences of the transcendental.

The creation of aesthetic pleasure is the aim of literature. Longinus puts it saying that the sublime effect of literature 'transports' the reader out of himself for ecstasy. Sublimity with its power of gripping and captivating one's heart and soul, moves and uplifts the soul of the reader. It transports the reader from outside or the external world to inside and moves him from a world of distraction to concentration and the state of meditation. At this moment of intense experience, the reader's whole attention is drawn to one centre and the enjoyment of the moment lies in the identification of the reader's self with that of the character, his situations and emotions. This state of intense experience leads to self-realisation which causes joy and immense happiness to the reader. The 'Rasa' theory also remarks the same spirit as it believes that when a reader reads a poem he completely identifies himself with the character, but this identification is possible only by the spectator's or the reader's completely forgetting that the feeling projected belongs to a particular person at a particular time and place. In such a timeless experience it is his own deep-seated feeling, lying hidden in his unconscious but roused to the conscious level that the reader enjoys. Thus, the basic feeling existing inherently but latently in the soul, becomes felt and experienced under the impact of the dramatic representation or the poet's delineation. This self-realisation leads to a blissful stage or 'Ananda' and rasa experience is nothing but this 'Ananda' or bliss. Confirming this Abhinavagupta makes a pertinent remark and says that, "rasa is the transcendental delightful perception of one's own nature tinged with the predominant feeling excited with the dramatic display". [4] In the transcendental meditation of the *Upanishads* rasa "stands for the supreme reality of the universe, the self-luminous consciousness, which, when realised results in transcendental bliss." [5]

### V. A HARMONIOUS WHOLE

The effect of poetry-the sublime or the 'Rasa'- is the consequence of the total effect of numerous elements that act as constituents in the making of the poetry. Bharata names them while clearly stating in his *Natyasastra*, "Vibhavanubhavavyabhicarismyogad rasa-nispattih", [6] which means that the evocation of 'rasa' depends on the combination of the 'vibhavas' (causes or the determinants), the 'anubhavas' (visible effects following the rise of emotion) and the 'vyabhicaris' (accompanying transitory emotions). However, these are only the situational effects. The other elements that also contribute to the evocation of 'rasa' are the linguistic devices like figures of speech, imagery, four kinds of dramatic representation and even 'dhvani', i.e., the element of suggestion. Thus, according to Bharata, when there is a perfect combination of these various elements, the 'sthayi' attains the status of 'Rasa', which is relished by the spectator.

When Longinus talks of the sublime in literature, he almost touches the same ground as that of Bharata and states that sublimity comes from the combination of five sources: the grandeur of thought, strong passions, figures of speech, diction and composition. The first two sources are innate or inborn gifts of a genius while the remaining three are the products of art. Thus, art and nature both contribute to the sublime or loftiness of style. Sublimity in literature is the harmonious whole, the organic unison of the five elements, which should be appropriately assimilated in a proper proportion, for the overdoing of any of these produces false sublime. Longinus also points out that composition, "by the blending of its myriad tones brings into the heart of the bystanders the actual emotion of the speaker." [7]

## VI. CONCLUSION

T.S. Eliot, a modern poet and critic, while formulating a canon of the portrayal of an emotion in poetry, states: "The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective-correlative", in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events, which shall be the formula of that particular emotion, such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. [8] It can be immediately appreciated that Eliot's objective-correlative appears to be a direct and modern version of the 'Rasa-formula' of Bharata. After all, the entire poetic mechanism, as stressed in this formula, is oriented towards enabling the emotional content to be realised and recaptured by the gifted writer which is also the purpose of Eliot in formulating the concept of objective-correlative. As a matter of fact, the components of 'Rasa' serve as a scaffolding by which the emotional complex is supported. Thus, we can say that both Bharata and Longinus adopt a universal approach and affirm that Art universalizes emotions making them an instrument of appeal to the spectators. Literature has the power to enrapture the soul of the reader. It grips his soul and heart, not a particular reader at a particular time but all persons past, present or future. A work of art is admired and appreciated by all sensitive readers in every corner of the globe and has a permanence of appeal. Longinus stresses this philosophical vision when he says that, "these are the beautiful and genuine effects of sublimity which please always and all." [9] It is this universal applicability of the norms of criticism laid down by Longinus and Bharata which has evoked appreciation of the critical world and has assigned top position to them in the hierarchy of literary critics.

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