

A Reading of Keats “Ode on a Grecian Urn” in the Light of ‘Rasa’ and ‘Dhvani’

Dr. Habeeb C.

Assistant Professor of English, Farook College. University of Calicut.

Abstract

The east offers many challenging perspectives to critique and read the literary works like the established western tools. Rasa and Dhavani are two of the most prominent analytical tools in Sanskrit literary criticism. They are so unique that even the western literature of all times can be analysed and interpreted using them. The present paper is an attempt to read Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, one of his most famous and creative works using Rasa and Dhvani. Being one of the most sensual, imaginary and original compositions, it is his use of Bhavas, suggestive power and the subsequent pleasures/Rasas that enable Keats accomplish a constructive success in this poem. Hence reading the poem from a Sanskrit literary perspective can be an interesting experience.

Key terms.

Rasa, Dhvani. Transcience, Permanence, Sthayibhava and Suggestion.

Though the western modes of criticism and aesthetic analyses offer umpteen dimensions to analyse and critique literary materials, the east is also equally rich in offering methodologies to analyse and understand literary materials. In fact, some of the eastern literary and critical tools are quite challenging and everlasting with reference to their potential to unearth the complex and chaotic nature of the literary universe. One of such earliest perspectives is the Rasa theory, a milestone in Sanskrit aesthetics and a valid and convincing theory even today. In his preface to the book *Western and Eastern Poetics* in which K.M. Tharakan tries to compare the reader response theory of I.A. Richards with that of Abhinavagupta, he holds the view that:

The East and the West meet at many points, especially in the field of literary principles. Bharata and Aristotle agree on many principles of dramaturgy. They agree that drama is essentially an imitation of life

and that it evokes emotions. Too often it has been pointed out by Indian literary critics that Synaesthesia has much in common with Rasa Siddhanta of Abhinavagupta. But few have explored the mystery of this similarity. (6).

This paper attempts to read Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" with the help of Rasa theory and Dhvani Theory; a western text being analysed from the perspective of eastern theories. The poem offers abundant possibilities for such an application, since it is mostly constructed of emotional scenes and sensual representations. Generally speaking the ode is rich with different shades of Bhavas which are the foundational axis of the Rasa theory.

Rasa is regarded as the central doctrine of the Sanskrit aesthetics. "Judging Sanskrit criticism by the standards of universal application, there can be no doubt that rasa is the greatest contribution that India has made to world literature. For rasa is no less than the reader's reaction to His personal involvement with literature" (Mason and Patwardhan 152 153). Rasa is the supreme delight produced in the mind of the connoisseurs by a work of art, the only object of which is emotion. Bharatamuni's treatise *Natyasastra* is the basic work for the later aestheticians. Bharata is here concerned with Rasa in drama (natya), which includes dance (nartana) and music (sangita). Drama incorporates the visible element which gives ample scope for the presentation of the affairs of life and a variety of emotions. Even though *Natyasastra* is a meticulously thought out treatise Bharata has not detailed in some respects the factors involved in the production of Rasa and their subtle inter-relations. Probably he took many things for granted. Hence it became the burden of later aestheticians to explain or interpret Bharata's thoughts on the subject. It was Abhinavagupta among all the commentators of Bharata who was able to bring out a very convincing explication of Bharata's ideas on Rasa.

Rasa is the supreme delight that the emotional content of a work of art can produce in the appreciator. The emotional theme of a work of art is thus primarily responsible for Rasa. Emotion (bhava) can never be conveyed directly. It can only be suggested. The method by which the emotional content of a work is conveyed to the reader is Dhvani. The chief exponent of the concept of Dhvani is Anandavardhana who elaborates the idea in his treatise *Dhvanyaloka*.

The predominant emotional content of a work of art is called its sthayibhava. The sthayibhavas are not experienced at all times but only when there is an appropriate occasion. They lie dormant in the spectator's mind. In the context of appreciation of a work of art the sthayibhava is revived, divested of its personal association. The emotion is in an impersonal form (sadhanikrta). It is idealized or universalised. In such a state any emotion becomes a source of pure delight. This pure delight is called Rasa. Bharata mentions eight sthayibhavas. They are Rati (conjugal love), Hasa (mirth), Soka(sorrow), Krodha (anger), Utsaha (fortitude), Bhaya (fear), Jugupsa (disgust) and Vismaya (wonder). The later aesthetic psychologists added emotions like peaceful (Sama), devotional (Bhakti) etc. But only 'peaceful' has been recognized.

Bharata's Rasa sutra (aphorism) states that it is by the combination of three factors Vibhava, Anubhava, Vyabharibhava that Rasa is produced. "Vibhava anubhava vyabharibhava samyogad, rasanishpatti" (Natyasastra Chapter VI 31). Elsewhere he states that the sthayibhava surrounded by the three factors acquires the name of Rasa. "Vibhavaanubhavavyabhariparivrtahsthayibhavorasanamalabhate" (Natyasastra Chapter VII 11). The Rasas corresponding to the Sthayibhavas are Rati-Sringara, Hasa-Hasya, Soka-Karuna, Krodha-Raudra, Utsaha-Vira, Bhaya-Bhayanaka, Jugupsa-Bibhatsa, Vismaya-Adbhuta and Sama-santa. The question how the dominant emotions-(Sthayibhavas) can be roused by aesthetic or artistic means puzzled the old Alankarikas. There were different attempts by various poets and critics to give a clear cut explanation to the nature and production of Rasa. Abhinavaguptas Rasbhivvyakti-vada (Revelation Theory of Rasa) satisfies all the criteria set for a sound theory of Rasa. He accepts Nayakas concept of idealization and Anadavardhanas concept of dhvani which explains the indirect method of communication of Bhavas.

An emotion cannot be described or expressed in words. Hence it cannot be directly communicated to the reader. What the poet can and does express are only the causes and results of the emotion, that is, the situation in which the emotion is manifested. Yet, through the description of the situation the reader understands the emotion and derives that exalted delight called rasa. Thus the method by which the content of the poem gets communicated to the reader is indirect. Language, according to the later aestheticians has the power of conveying a meaning by suggestion, or indication, apart from the power of communication by overt expression. The meaning suggested by the words is called vyangyārtha. It is different from and beyond the meaning explicitly and directly conveyed by the words (vacyārtha). When the content of a poem is

emotion (bhava), the method necessarily consists in suggested meaning, or vyangyārtha, which is also called dhvani. Dhvani is the real core of the poetic method---its atman (kavyasyatma dhvani). The credit for formulating the theory of dhvani goes entirely to Anandavardhana. The title means the lusture (aloka) of suggested meaning Dhvani. By commenting on Bharata's *Natyasastra* and Anandavardhana's *Dhvanyaloka*, Abhinavagupta, in his *Abhinavabharati*, brought out the inseparable relation of bhava to dhvani, which culminates in Rasa.

"Ode on a Grecian Urn" is one of Keats' most celebrated poems. It is noted for its scenic beauty, paradoxical nature and above all Keats's philosophy of art. The poem comprises five stanzas, each evoking feelings or senses of its own. But as a whole the poem suggests the permanence of art over the transience of life. Or in other words the poem expresses the conflict between the evanescent and the abiding. To suggest this Keats uses various scenic and factual descriptions in the poem. To get a more comprehensive vision of Keats's use of the element of suggestion and the presence of Rasas one has to explicate the poem by stanzas.

Keats opens the poem with a series of amazing questions. He addresses the urn as a: "Still unravished bride of quietness" and a "foster-child of Silence and slow Time"

Through these lines the poet implies the permanence of the urn which is beyond the ravages of time, or in fact it has been preserved and protected by time as a foster parent. At the same time it is pure since it is not polluted by the human hands. The word 'quietness' may be an implication to the solace of the urn, as it is above all concerns of the transient human beings. Thus here what is suggested according to the standards of Dhvani theory is a fact or an idea and it falls under the realm of 'Vastu Dhvani'.

In the lines "Thou Sylvan historian, who canst thus express/ A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme," the coinage "Sylvan historian" plays a more important role if one regards the poem at a deeper level. At a denotative level it implies the Grecian background in the poem, but more deeply it symbolises the artistic beauty of the pastoral pictures on the urn. The pictures on the urn can survive the test of time and it is time that keeps them as a historian as they are arrested by the artist. Here the poet also highlights the superiority of the poet over the historians, as they are embellished with imaginative sense. Here again, the meanings implied are more often beyond the primary or secondary meanings and it is the suggestive potential of the

lines that gives the readers opportunities to interpret the poem from multiple challenging angles. Since, the primary and secondary senses fail to give the expected implications regularly, the interpreters have to give recourse to the indicative or suggestive power of language to derive the expected meaning and the essential conceptual framework. Here again, the suggestion continues on a factual level:

What leaf-fringed legend haunts about thy shape

Of deities or mortals, or of both,

In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?

What men or gods are these?

What maidens loth?

What mad pursuit?

What struggle to escape?

What pipes and timbrels?

What wild ecstasy?"

These lines introduced with an interrogative tone contain the wonder of the speaker over the variety of pictures on the urn. The Sthayibhava here is Vismaya-(wonder) and the rasa suggested is "Adbudha" or the sense of wonder. Though these statements are presented in a rhetorical mode, the very suggestive sense, the emotional elements and Keats' ingenuity in dealing with such subtle shades of human mind makes it a vivid descriptive passage.

A reference to 'Tempe' and 'Arcady' highlights the artistic supremacy of the urn. In the "Mad pursuit" and "Struggle to escape" one sees the fear of those who are being followed and the terror of the chase. Thus besides the factual and figurative aspects suggested in this stanza 'Vastu Dhvani' and 'Alamkara Dhvani', there are Rasas like fear and the wonder- 'Bhayanaka' and 'Adbudha'.

In the next stanza the poet focuses on some other pictures and stresses the supremacy of the imagination over reality. This is one of the fundamental themes in the poem which the poet goes on highlighting up to the end of the poem. Music is one of Keats's favourite images: "Heard melodies are sweet,/ but those unheard Are sweeter";

Here Keats suggests that the faculty of imagination is richer than reality. His use of 'melodious' reminds us of "Melodious plot of beachen green" in Ode to a nightingale. On both the occasions, there is a light touch of sadness thus a slight mood of karuna rasa suggested. It is significant that this Shoka effect is created just by referring to the presence of music; even without describing the cause and effect of the emotion. The Shellyian quote from "Ode to a Skylark," "Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thoughts" (Shelley 749) attains a special significance here. Again the lines:

"Fair youth, beneath the trees,.../Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,/Though winning near the goal" indicates 'Sringara Rasa'. In the second and third stanzas the poet expresses the superiority of the pictures on the urn over their parallels in life. However in the third stanza of the poem the emotion turns doleful when the poet describes the vain glory of human life: "All breathing human passion far above,/That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloyed." These lines are pictured as contrasts to "More happy love! more happy, happy love!/ For ever warm and still to be enjoyed,/For ever panting and for ever young." The scenes of happiness portrayed in the preceding lines convert the effect of the Karuna Rasa implied in the poet's description of the fruitless destiny of the human life to an exalted level. Here Sringara Rasa is contradicted with Karuna rasa and it is through the power of suggestion that Keats attains this antithetical emotional ambience.

The Sringara and Karuna Rasas in the two adjacent stanzas are followed by a nauseating sense in the third stanza: "A burning forehead, and a parching tongue." Besides the poet's disgust over the "Still sad music of humanity", these lines can also be viewed as a reference to the symptoms of his personal encounter with tuberculosis. The 'bhava' suggested is 'juguptsa' and the rasa is 'beebatsa'. Some critics are even of the view that these lines suggest the immediate feeling of disgust after the physical consummation of love. At any case, the emotion and facts are implied through extraordinary dimensions of suggestive poetry.

In the fourth stanza of the poem the poet portrays a sacrificial scene which has created room for endless interpretations.

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?

To what green altar,

O mysterious priest,

Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?
What little town by river or seashore,
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
Is emptied of This folk, this pious morn?

The sacrificial scene suggests that even the description of a brutal aspect has its beauty, once it is portrayed in art. The morning is pure, as they are moving to the sacrifice. The priest is mysterious as he only knows to where strange destination he leads the folk. Green in the 'green altar' symbolises something living, spontaneous or elevated. The people cannot come back as the artist has arrested them. The peaceful Citadel implies a sort of solace. Thus in comparison with other stanzas this stanza contains enormous scope of suggestion. There is a sense of wonder predominant in this stanza and the Rasa suggested is 'Adbhuta Rasa'. There is the touch of 'Santa Rasa' in the Peaceful citadel and pious morning. A sense of Bhakti or devotion is also implied in this description.

It is even suggested that the fourth stanza stands as a parallel to the earlier stanzas, that the earlier stanzas suggests the human life with its joyous and pathetic aspects, while the sacrificial scene represents its doom and destruction, thus as a whole the poem presents a total vision of human life. There is a spell of magical beauty in the description of the heifer too

In the last stanza the poet suggests his theory of art as he addresses the urn with a more dignified curiosity:

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
With forest branches and the trodden weed;
Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
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."

Here the poet suggests the inalienable relationship between truth and beauty. In the 'cold pastoral' Oxymoron a figure of speech is suggested and what emerges is 'Alamkara Dhvani'. Even the 'O' added before 'Attic shape and fair attitude' plays a vital function in the poem,. In the first instance it echoes the poet's wonder over the urn's mysterious existence, but at a more elevated level it highlights the fact that the urn has been produced in Athens one of the glorious cultural centres of the world. The final two lines in which the speaker imagines the urn speaking its message to mankind "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" is proved to be the most difficult in Keats's canon. No one is sure who speaks the conclusion "that is all Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know". It could be the speaker addressing the urn or it could be the urn addressing the mankind. If it is the speaker addressing the urn, then it would seem to indicate his awareness of its limitations. The urn may not need to know anything beyond the equation of beauty and truth. The complications of human life make it impossible for such a simple and self contained phrase to express sufficiently anything about necessary human knowledge. If it is the urn addressing man, the phrase has rather the weight of an important lesson: as though beyond all the complications of human life, all human beings need to know on earth is that beauty and truth are one and the same. The poet says that the urn is a mystery yet to be unraveled and it mocks mankind as eternity. Here he may be suggesting that the urn who has survived the test of the time is ridiculing mankind when it sees the endless passion of men for life, though they are aware of the ultimate destruction.

Thus other than anything else it is the power of suggestion employed by the poet which enables the poem to achieve its true meaning. The poem becomes one of Keats' best creations not only on account of the suggestive power but also due to various shades of rasas that the poet produces. Here the emotional environment is equally important as the different layers of indicative meaning. Moreover, it is through the indicative force of language that the poet weaves the web of emotional exaltations in the poem.

Critics have various opinions about the theme of the poem. Some critics like Cleanthe Brooks suggest that it implies a paradox and it is the poet's use of paradoxes which makes the poem unique in its form and content. The psychological critics read the poem with a reference to Keats's life. By the time when Keats wrote this

poem, he was very sure of his instant death as he had been suffering from Tuberculosis. So as he has been denied the pleasures of real life, he wanted to embrace the sweetness and delight of eternity. The poem also implies Keats's frustration over the failure of his love affair with Fanny Brown. There are wide ranges of meanings possible to each phrase in the poem if one consciously applies the concept of Dhvani in the poem. Suggestion is shown in the poem not only through words but through pictures and images. There are facts, figures and Rasas suggested in the poem. The aesthetic trance expressed in the last stanza of the poem is very close to Abhinava Gupta's concept of Santa Rasa. It is through the suggestive power of words that the tastes-Rasas in the poem are suggested. Thus we may sum up that "Ode on a Grecian Urn" belongs to Dhvanikavya. Because the true meaning intended by the poet is beyond the surface level of the poem, and here suggestion is not relegated to any other subsidiary elements but is kept dominant.

Rasa has so many-connnotations in Sanskrit that it would indeed be limiting to always apply the purely technical sense of the experience of the reader. Ananda and Abhinava used it as the nucleus of an entire new vocabulary that soon dominated the whole of Sanskrit literary criticism. Of course when Bharata says that a poem has rasa, he does not mean this literally. It is the poem's capacity to elicit a deep response from a sensitive reader. Rasa is after all not an objective "thing" in the real world. It is a private experience. This is perhaps why later writers tend to compare it to religious experiences for ecstatic experiences are essentially private, inner happenings more or less invisible to a third party and which are liable to evaporate under rigorous questioning (J.L. Mason and Patwardhan 154 155).

As observed in the passage quoted above from the article, "Rasa" as "an imaginative experience," one may be able to trace many shades of suggestion and supreme delight in the complex poetic space of Keats' ode. But that depends on one's transparency attained through regular contemplation of poetry and one's awareness about the strange workings of the suggestive potential of language.

Works Cited

- Bharatamuni. *Natyasastra*. Vol 1 & 2 (translated into Malayalam by K.P. Narayana Pisharadi). Kerala Sahitya Academy, 1997.
- Brooks, Cleanthe. *The Well-wrought Urn*. Dobson books. 1947.

Dasgupta, S.N. . “The theory of Rasa”. *Indian Aesthetics an Introduction*. Ed. V.S. Seturaman. Macmillan. 1992.

Keats, John. *Keats: Poems published in 1820*. Ed. M. Robertson. www.gutenberg.org. accessed on 20/1/2019.

Mason, J.L. and Patwardhan. “Rasa an Imaginative Experience”. *Indian Aesthetics an Introduction*. Ed. V.S. Seturaman. Macmillan. 1992.

Raja, Kunjuni. “The theory of Dhvani”. *Indian Aesthetics an Introduction*. Ed. V.S. Seturaman. Macmillan. 1992.

Shelley, P.B. *Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. www.gutenberg.org. accessed on 21/1/2019.

Tharakan, K.M. *Western and Eastern Poetics. A Comparative Study of Reader Response in I.A. Richards and Abhinavagupta*. Prestige books. 1998.

