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Bharata Muni and Western Dramatic Theory

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Abstract: *This Paper highlights a few generalizations about the Western dramatic theory represented by Aristotle and Indian dramatic theory represented by Bharata Muni. The purpose of this paper is not to suggest that Indian theory of drama is superior to the western but is to point out their differences. Obviously there is a fundamental difference between the Western and the Indian modes of thinking. Aristotle's Western dramatic theory is based on tragedy. On the other hand Bharata Muni's dramatic theory is based on the Indian theory of Karma. In Bharata's theory "Rasa" is the sole object of dramatic representation. But there is one interesting point. Whereas western dramatic theory cannot be applied to Sanskrit drama, Bharata's theory of rasa, as S.C. Sen Gupta. has shown, can be employed with profit in appreciating the western drama. The Paper concluded by suggesting that both the Indian and the Western theories of drama as represented by Bharata and Aristotle respectively have broken down and splintered. In fact, the very idea of tradition, which had sustained these theories, has disappeared from the modern world. Its place is now occupied by individualization and experimentation.*

Keywords: Dramatic theory, Theory of Tragedy, Indian theory of Karma, Rasa, Aesthetic pleasure, bhava, vritti, pravitti, siddhi, svaras, vinoda (amusment).

I. INTRODUCTION

I think I could begin this paper by making a few generalizations about western dramatic theory. First, the western theory of drama derives from, and is conditioned by, Aristotle's *poetics.* Second, Aristotle's observations on the nature of drama are largely the outcome of his analysis of the tragic drama of his own times. His theory of drama, as such, can more properly be called the theory of tragedy. Third, the concept of tragedy is peculiarly a Greek concept. It rests on the assertion that "necessity is blind and man's encounter with it shall rob him of his eyes." And this assertion, as George Steiner adds, "is Greek, and the tragic sense of life built upon it is the foremost contribution of Greek genius to our legacy."

Such a conception of drama, it may be observed at the outset, is alien to Bharata Muni's view, which is based on the Indian theory of *karma*. According to the theory, man is not just a plaything in the hands of Fate, but the architect of his own density. His fate is determined by his own actions. 'Bharat Gupta also says "The combination called natya is a mixture of rasa, bhavas, vrittis, pravittis, siddhi, svaras, Abhinayas, dharmic instruments songs and theatre house." Obviously, there is a fundamental difference between the western and the Indian modes of thinking. And it is this difference which determines their respective approaches to drama.

The division of drama into tragedy and comedy is itself a product of western thought. This classification, as the following statement shows, is based on a dialectical view of nature :

"From this disposition of the public to express the most universal sentiments of human nature, of joy and of sorrow, by laughter and by tears, arises the great division of the drama into plays that are cheerful and plays that are sad; into comedy with all its subspecies, and into tragedy and drama with all their varieties."

This type of distinction is inconceivable in the holistic pattern of Indian thinking. Though Bharata Muni, too, speaks of ten kinds of plays, his classification is totally of a different order. It is based purely on the differences in the styles (*Vritti)* of composition, and has nothing to do with naturalistic considerations. The drama, as Bharata takes it, represents human nature "With its joys and sorrows" (1.121). Both tears and laughter play an integral part in his

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conception of drama. If it resembles anything in the western dramatic literature it is tragicomedy like Shakespeare's *As You Like It or The Mechant of Venice.*

Bharata's scheme of the dramatic plot makes it quite clear that there is no scope for tragedy in his idea of drama. The dramatic action, as he conceives it, is a sustained effort on the part of the hero to achieve a certain goal, and it ends in his success in achieving it. All Sanskrit plays, barring a few exceptions, conform to this prescription. Even when a play, as in the case of Bhasa's Urubhanga, ends in the death of the hero, it does not purport a tragic view of life. Rather, it upholds the same theory of *karma*; the death of the hero is regarded as the result of his evil deeds.

This total absence of the idea of tragedy from Bharata's view of drama renders, so far as he is concerned, most of Aristotle's dramatic theory irrelevant. In his conception of drama there is no place for Peripety, Discovery, Hamartia, or the tragic hero in short, all that is relative to tragic action. In fact, we may even claim that there is no similarity between Bharata and Aristotle. Resemblances, if any, are apparent rather than real. Take, for instance, the theory of imitation which seems to offer the strongest evidence of their kinship. Both Bharata and Aristotle state that drama is a mode of "imitation." It is also clear that in both cases "imitation" implies an imaginative reconstruction of life. But here, too there are some vital differences. First, the object of Aristotle's imitation is "action" while in Bharata's case it is emotional states (bhava). Second, Aristotle suggests that drama is born of human instinct for imitation but Bharata holds that it was deliberately created as "an object of diversion' (*kridaniyaka*). As he tells us, it is the product of the Silver Age (*tretayuga)* – the age in which "people became addicted to sensual pleasures, were under the sway of desire and greed, became infatuated with jealousy and anger, and (thus) found their happiness mixed with sorrow" (I.7-12). Thus the drama, as Bharata maintains, is an artifact just like a toy. Its purpose is to provide people with amusement and instruction :

"The drama as I have devised will give courage, amusement and happiness as well as counsel to them all (I. 111-12)."

These words, incidentally, remind one of Addison's ideal of the periodical essay which, according to him, ought to diffuse good sense through the bulk of a people, to clear up their understandings, animate their minds with virtue, dissipate the sorrow of a heavy heart, or unbend the mind from its more severe employments, with innocent amusements." At the same time, they make it clear that drama, for Bharata, is not a realistic representation of life, nor is it concerned with serious problems of human existence. There was already a well-established and well-defined system of values. It was not the task of the playwright to propound any new theory or ideas; his business was just to propagate the traditional ethic. In fact, his main role was that of an entertainer; he was expected, to use Addison's words, to "unbend the mind from its more severe employments, with innocent amusements."

That drama in Bharata's view was highly stylized presentation of life is confirmed also by his concept of the hero. His four-fold classification of the hero of a play, with well-defined characteristics, allows little scope for psychological delineation of a character. The hero is presented as a type rather than an individual.

Both action and character, which jointly or severally, play a dominant role in western dramatic theory and practice, are given but a secondary status in Bharata's system of drama. Both are "fixed or typed" and are used just as means to realization of *rasa* which, as Bharata implies, is the sole object of dramatic representation. Here it becomes also clear that what Bharata means by "amusement" (*vinoda)* is not an ordinary kind of recreation but an aesthetic pleasure. It is this emphasis on *rasa* which, to a great extent, is responsible for predominantly literary character of Sanskrit drama.
The concept of *rasa* however, is a little abstruse. In his famous *rasasutra*(VI. 31 prose) Bharata says only that rasa is produced from a Samyoga of Vibhava, amibhava and Vyabhicari bhava. It means rasa is produced from a combination of Determinants, consequents and Transitory states. This rather cryptic statement has been subjected to various interpretations, of which those of Lollata, Sankuka, Bhatta Nayaka and Abhinavagupta are most famous. But the interpretations of these scholars are biased by their respective philosophical positions and, as such, can hardly be regarded as faithful representation of Bharata's view." Bharata, as K.C. Pandey rightly observes, "was not influenced in his conception of Rasa by the philosophical implication of it, such as is presented in the Upanisadic passages like "Raso vai shah". He was concerned with it as an object, which is responsible for aesthetic experience, with showing what are the necessary constituents of it and their mutual relation, and with the means and methods of its

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presentation." Bharata himself tries to clarify his meaning through the mundane example of relishing the well-prepared food:

"……..as taste (*rasa*) results from a combination of various spices, vegetables, and other articles, and as six tastes (*rasa*) are produced by articles such as raw sugar or spices or vegetables, so the Dominant States (*sthayibhava*), when they come together with various other States (b*hava*), attain the quality of *rasa* (VI. 31 prose)."

And again:

"……..it is said that just as well disposed person while eating-food, cooked with many kinds of spices, enjoy (*asvadyanti*) its tastes (*rasa*) and attain pleasure and satisfaction, so the cultured people taste the Dominant State (*sthayibhava*) while they see them represented by an expression of the various States (*bhava*) with Words, Gestures and the Temperament (*sattva*), and derive pleasure and satisfaction (VI. 31 prose)."

From these statements we can draw the following conclusions:

1. *Rasa* is an emotive object.
2. It is produced by a proper set of "objective-correlatives."
3. It is enjoyed by the spectators as aesthetic pleasure.

Rasa is thus both the object of dramatic representation and the aesthetic pleasure experienced by the audience. Aristotle, too, underlines the emotive effect of tragedy, but his theory of "katharsis' suffers from some obvious drawbacks. First, it can hardly be explained or justified satisfactorily. Second, it is limited to the experience of tragedy, and cannot, like *rasa* be applied to other forms of literature. Third, it is purgative or curative in its function, and does not offer, like *rasa*, a positive aesthetic experience.

This is not to suggest, however, that Indian theory of drama is superior to the western; all that is intended is to point out their differences. And these differences, in my view, are worth stressing, for many scholars in the past have tried to judge Sanskrit drama by the canons of western dramatic criticism. This approach, as in the case of A. Beriedale Keith, is bound to end in disappointment and dissatisfaction. The Sanskrit drama can be judged properly only in the light of Bharata's theory.

But there is one interesting point. Whereas western dramatic theory cannot be applied to Sanskrit drama, Bharata's theory of *rasa*, as S.C. Sen Gupta has shown, can be employed with profit in appreciating the western drama.

II. Conclusion

It is, however, necessary to recognize that both the Indian and the western theories of drama, as represented by Bharata and Aristotle respectively, have broken down and splintered. In fact, the very idea of tradition, which had sustained these theories, has disappeared from the modern world. Its place is now occupied by individualization and experimentation. We have no longer any theory like that of Bharata or Aristotle; all that we have are literary fads and fashions, which go on changing from time to time. The drama in the west has moved far away from Aristotle's concepts ; the 'absurd" plays of

Ionesco or Beckett patently defy and repudiate his theory. Bharata's theory, too, passed away with the decline of classical Sanskrit drama, and was not revived again. But still there is one element in each theory which has stood the test of time and which is likely to retain its relevance in the future- the idea of tragedy in Aristotle and the concept of *rasa* in Bharata.

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