

**PHILOSOPHY OF ART AND INDIAN AESTHETICS**

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ABSTRACT

“It has always been acknowledged by those who have cared for literature that at least a part of the reader’s judgements on a work, provided he reads it as a literary work, will be concerned with its aesthetic qualities.”

–Stein H. Olsen

Language or oral form (vernacular) is considered a gift from God across the globe because of the magnificent engineering of the organs of articulation among humans. In India especially since goddess Saraswati is called “Vac Devi” which means the goddess of the word (speech and sound) it might come across as a liberated emancipated space for one to belong to when one communicates orally judging from an ecofeminist standpoint. So oral in a way might be seen as the space of nature as opposed to culture in the ontological framework of things. In a poststructuralist-postmodern-world we may have come to terms with the deferment and multiplicity of meaning to things but it is imperative to also keep a humanist perspective (no matter the dubiousness the word has come to be connotative of today post *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*) to things apparently as one of the perspectives among a plethora of others. Just as the oral space symbolises this ideal place which is less constructivist and more natural as opposed to the written, so it may be claimed does the idea underlying Aestheticism. It seems to occupy a space where culture and nature in terms of Cartesian dualism are at par. But some have argued otherwise for coming from a privileged-elitist place Aestheticism may have backhanded embedded ideological biases to offer. The paper delves into the nuances of Aesthetics, its proximity to Indian Aesthetics, and how the two thought-lines inadvertently bridge the gap between the culture/nature dualism in the manner of the ecofeminists.

Keywords: *Philosophy of Art, Indian Aesthetics, Humanist perspective, Contemporary Continental Philosophy, Ecofeminism, New Aestheticism, Ontological framework.*



Domination as an ideology and practice is the concern at the heart of ecofeminism. Its perpetuate incarnate reality is recognizably evident in the alarming imbalances in gender relations, its reverberations across ontological landscape, often varying in hue in accordance with its relation with factors such as ethnicity, culture, class, as well as the natural world. Ecofeminism identifies the roots of such dominations in factors such as hierarchy, misogyny, androcentrism, anthropocentrism, so on and so forth. Karen J. Warren emphatically established that the Western world's beliefs, values, attitudes, and assumptions of itself and its inhabitants as shaped by an oppressive patriarchal conceptual framework is instrumental in explaining, justifying, as well as maintaining the relationships of domination and subordination especially men's domination of women. Warren enlists the features of this conceptual framework in detail as under: (1) value-hierarchical thinking, i.e., "up-down" thinking which places higher value, status, or prestige on what is "up" rather than on what is "down"; (2) value dualisms, i.e., disjunctive pairs in which the disjuncts are seen as oppositional (rather than as inclusive), and which place higher value (status, prestige) on one disjunct rather than the other (e.g., dualisms which give higher value or status to that which has historically been identified as "mind," "reason," and "male" than to that which has historically been identified as "body," "emotion," and "female"); and (3) logic of domination, i.e., a structure of argumentation which leads to a justification of subordination (Warren 20).

The dimensions of the Contemporary Continental Philosophy come close to the Indian Aesthetics. In other words, the ideas on Aesthetics propounded by the thinkers such as Martin Heidegger, Walter Benjamin, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Emmanuel Levinas, and Mikel Dufrenne resounds a familiar echo in Bharatamuni's theory of aesthetic, the Rasa Theory, that appears in *Natyashastra*. Bharata distinguished the real life lived psychological states and emotions (the sthayibhavas) from the aesthetic sentiments or the universalized enjoyed emotions (the rasas). There are forty-one psychological states according to Bharatamuni, out of which only eight (love, amusement, compassion,

anger, energy, fear, disgust, astonishment) are durable while the rest thirty-three are transient. When these eight states are depicted in drama (since Bharatamuni was primarily talking of natya and literature) they are incorporated with a certain level of aesthetic value and become rasas. These eight aesthetic emotions are erotic love (sringara), amusement and laughter or comic (hasya), grief or pathetic (karuna), fury (rudhra), heroic spirit (vira), fear or terrible (bhayanaka), revulsion or odious (bibhatsa), and wonder or marvellous (adbhuta). And out of these sthayibhavas only four are original while the others arise from these germinal ones, namely, erotic love, fury, heroic spirit, and revulsion. Bharata defines rasa as "vibhava, anubhava, vyabhicari bhava, yoga nishpatti." He distinguished the psychological states into four, namely, the Determinants or Stimulants (vibhava), the Consequents (anubhava), the conscious reaction (vyabhicaribhava), and the total effect (sthayibhavas). These four states interact to create different rasas and it is the total effect or the sthayibhavas that dominate the rest. In the often quoted analogy then rasa is produced through a combination of psychological states like the coming together of the various ingredients in any prepared food item. The term rasa, according to G.K. Bhat who translated *Natyashastra* from Sanskrit, has twofold significance for: "It means the 'aesthetic content' of literary art and also 'aesthetic relish' which the reader-spectator enjoys" (Devy 6). Bharata propounded that only an expert who has seasoned taste can experience the aesthetic. He called such an expert, the rasika, whose knowledge in terms of arts, receptiveness or open mindedness along with honesty equipped that person to critically appreciate the work of art in terms of aesthetic experience. Bharata's aesthetics then is primarily based on the sensory and emotional which locates it on the nature side of the Cartesian dualism of culture/nature but since it also stresses the erudition or the demioergos it can be considered as qualifying a space where culture/nature dualism is at par. Bharatamuni's aesthetic emotions of drama also remind one of Ben Jonson's simplification of characters into humours or types.

Another key name in Indian Aesthetics is that of Abhinavagupta who offered a commentary on



Bharatamuni's *Natyashastra* called the *Abhinav-bharati*. Proficient in yogic practices he suggested that the eight rasas, as previously enumerated by Bharatamuni, are like gods to which he added the ninth rasa, the *santa rasa*, which he saw as the centre from where all the other rasas emerge and resolve, and which he understood as Siva himself. Abhinavgupta's *santa rasa* was less transitory than the other mundane rasas and represented a tranquil-peaceful state of mind. He allocates all the eight rasas to the realm of the mundane and therefore matter while he places the ninth at an elevated position of spiritual realm. But one must notice how following the tradition of Kashmiri Shaivism as opposed to the Shaiva Siddhanta he places the nine rasas in the tradition of non-dualism, therefore bridging the gap between the culture/nature or the God/mundane Cartesian dualism.

In both Bharatamuni's rasa theory and that of Abhinavgupta (equipoise aesthetic or the aesthetic of realisation) the significance of the mind of the reader-spectator is of utmost importance. The concept of *sthayibhavas* must be discussed here. Indian Aesthetics is similar to western aesthetics which values art for art's sake. Bharatamuni and Abhinavgupta, two key names in the Indian Aesthetics saw *rasa* as the aim of a work of art. They saw the ability to experience aesthetic emotions or *rasas* as a result of the presence of *sthayibhavas* in the reader-spectator whose emotions are excited through witnessing the work of art embedded with the *vibhava*, *anubhava*, *vyabhicari bhava*, or the heartfelt emotions of the poet-creator and therefore the reader-spectator of the work of art becomes the *sahrdaya* of the poet.

It is pertinent to note here that while for Bharatamuni the *rasika* is able to experience the aesthetic pleasure because of qualities like honesty, open-mindedness, the real life emotions that have the potential of being excited, and the knowledge of the arts, and therefore the role of what input the poet puts in a work of art in terms of *vibhava*, *anubhava*, and *vyabhicaribhava*, Abhinavgupta placing the poet and the reader at par states that the experience of aesthetic pleasure takes place primarily in the mind of the reader-spectator because of *sthayibhavas* that lie dominant in every individual

though they can be more predominant in some individuals and less dominant in others. The idea brings to mind the concept of primary and secondary imagination. But it must also be mentioned that Abhinavgupta too stressed the importance of constant exposure of the individual to arts along with a poetic heart and a judge-like detachment from the personal (predicament and individuality) to become a *sahrdaya*, and enjoy a sort of universal and ultimate aesthetic pleasure. The above discussion places the *rasa* theory in Indian Aesthetics on the nature side of the culture/nature dualism and implicitly connotes its humanist aspect. Even the *Dhvani* theory in Indian Aesthetic propounded by Anandavardhana in *Dhavanaloka* which talks of the "total effect of the suggestive quality of poetic language" as distinct from the "ordinary usage of language" (Devy 31) is suggestive of this humanist aspect for it makes a distinction between external structure of the poem that forms the body and its latent-hidden meaning, the *dhvani* that forms its soul, even though it gives more importance to the suggested sense of poetry rather than the expressed sense, in the phallogocentric framework of things. So while the *gunas* constitute the implicit meaning the *alamkaras* constitute the external or the explicit.

The idea of literature having no specific purpose other than that of being art for art's sake can be traced back to Immanuel Kant who used the term 'aesthetic' that had been coined by Alexander Baumgarten in *Aesthetica* 1950. Kant remarked in the *Critique of Judgment* (1790): "There is no science of the beautiful, but only critique" (110). As a movement, aestheticism emerged in the works of Kant, Goethe, Schelling, and Schiller. According to these German writers: "...art must be autonomous (that is, it should have the right of self-government) and from this it followed that the artist should not be beholden to anyone. From this, in turn, it followed that the artist was someone special, apart from others" (Cuddon 11). Kant's idea also echoes in G. W. C. Hegel.

The idea of aesthetics in Contemporary aesthetic philosophy like the Indian Aesthetics is also centred on the sensory-emotional experience. The ideas of some prominent names within the philosophy prove it to be true, namely, Martin



Heidegger, Walter Benjamin, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Emmanuel Levinas, and Mikel Dufrenne. Martin Heidegger delves deep on the question of the origin of the work of art. He rejects the three previously existent interpretations in the tradition. These three interpretive views being, that a work of art has certain 'thingly' character; that a work of art produces sensory perception in the reader-spectator; and that a work of art is an idea and has a form. Rejecting these interpretations Heidegger propounded that the originating space for a work of art is neither art nor the artist but the artwork itself which is created with "equipmentality" (purpose) and therefore discloses it. Heidegger's perception of the space of origin of the art work is clearly humanist for it combines the sensory-emotional as well as the material and that which rests in the realm of the idea. His famous examples of the Van Gogh's painting of the worn out shoes of a peasant woman that provide an insight or a disclosure of the life and history of that woman, or that of the temple which provides the spectator with the web of experiences for the temple-work stands as a symbol of (to use his own words as quoted by McNeill) "...paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny for human being" (cultural, religious connotations) as well as a physical building standing against the violence and grace of the elements, prove the point further (283).

Walter Benjamin observed the politicization of art in the capitalistic conditions prevalent in the contemporary world where mass production and reproduction have taken a front seat. Benjamin found the reproductive abilities of the past as accelerated immensely by the new technology. The amount of time required to capture the beauty of a scene in a painting is reduced to a fraction of a minute with photography. But Benjamin associates such accelerated reproduction with the loss of originality and authenticity for he felt that this meant the loosing of the "aura" and the ritualistic value of the work of art. Clearly Benjamin was making a case for a humanist outlook for art. The act of drawing a picture edges towards the nature side of the ontological spectrum for an artist must hold the brush in his hand and exert effort, the technical

reproduction of art in the modern times is more in line with the culture side of the spectrum as it is dominated by an instrument which means a loss of human touch. He found the reproductive ability of the people in the middle Ages of engraving, etching, and of lithography in the nineteenth century in the same light. While tasks like engraving and etching or even lithography requires more human contact and is in proximity to the nature side of the ontological dualistic framework, photography is far removed from that sort of a human contact which can render new perceptions to what is being depicted, though there are those who may argue over the case of perception it is almost definite that the perception rendered through playing with the camera would always lack that human touch a handmade painting would have.

In order to understand the standpoint of Hans-Georg Gadamer it is important to briefly enumerate the concept of Kantian aesthetic judgement where he makes a distinction between the judgement of beauty and the judgement of virtue. According to Kant the judgement of beauty involves a deriving of disinterested pleasure at the perception of some natural object without any biases or selfish interests. In other words, it is an aesthetic sense that arises independent from any sensuous cognition and rational judgment. While the judgement of virtue involves the faculty of desire in order to bring the desired action into force or existence. Locating an a priori-intrinsic pleasure in aesthetic experience which Kant found more important than the empirical validity Kant proved the validity of aesthetic judgment.

Gadamer agrees with Kant in placing aesthetic appreciation of beauty over rationalistic faculties but he did not dismiss the importance of accompanying knowledge to this subjectivity because he recognised a universal cognitive element or what may also be referred to as truth as an important component in the ultimate experience of aesthetic pleasure. This universal element of cognitive truth is what makes the aesthetic taste communicable and prevents mere subjectivity according to Gadamer. For him the aesthetic experience has the power to transport a person out of the context of his own life through the power of the work of art and to bring him back to



relate to the whole of his experience. He regarded this as the transformative power of the work of art where one confronts the truth with the aesthetic experience. He stated: "In the experience of art there is present a fullness of meaning which belongs to not only this content or object but rather stands for the meaningful whole of life" (Gadamer 64). Clearly Gadamer's ideas bridge the gap between the culture/nature dualism and projects primarily a humanist outlook, for the sensory and emotional (unbiased appreciation of beauty and cognitive truth) is carried to the level of the universal is placed at par and alongside the structure or the language (the rationalistic aspects) which is a key component of art along with its politics and poetics. Gadamer makes some interesting assertions while commenting on the ontology of the work of art and truth. For Gadamer an art work is a presentation (work, creation) and not a representation so its experience cannot get exhausted in a conceptual determination. He did not see art as embodying any absolute truth for he considered the experience arising from art as temporal and specific to historical time. He saw art as laden with the power of transforming the reader-spectator and self-understanding as integral for such transformation. The true pleasure and beauty of aesthetic experience laid in this inducement of change for him. This idea echoes the concepts of *rasika* and *sahridaya* in Indian Aesthetics but for Gadamer: "The 'subject' of the experience of art, that which remains and endures, is not the subjectivity of the person who experiences it, but the work itself," and this to him was the ontological truth of art (Gadamer 103). The way a work of art is claimed to change a person through the means of addressing and questioning of the reader or the experience mainly echoes the interpretation of truth (*aletheia*) that Heidegger offers. One hears the recognizable echo when Gadamer claims that truth is unconcealment or disclosure or a transformative moment that one comes to experience during an aesthetic experience when an art work asserts its purpose and therefore its being. In his work *The Relevance of the Beautiful* he gives the analogy of the play and says that just as in a play the players need to lose their subjective consciousness and play-along similarly a work of art has its own being which is

beyond the subjectivity of the creator and induces change in the experience or the reader-spectator. The ontological function of art according to Gadamer is to bridge the gap between the real and the ideal. Therefore his idea of aesthetic also bridges the dualistic divide between culture/nature and embosses it as more humanist.

Another important name in contemporary continental philosophy Levinas described art as the shadow of the reality. He did not endorse the view that art was about real. He described it as: "...the very event of obscuring, a decent of the night, an invasion of shadow" (118). He did not see art as belonging "to the order of revelation" or "creation" (118). He regarded the images created by the artists as shadows that did not cognize truth but do have independent reality and therefore he argues: "...reality would not be only what it is, what it is disclosed to be in truth, but would be also its double, its shadow, its image" (Levinas 121). So art does not reveal but is the double of reality which asserts a magical claim on the experience. But there is passivity in this process for the image takes a hold over its onlooker rather than the onlooker taking any initiative towards it. Levinas's explanation of this as "rhythm" is particularly interesting, for it reminds one of the idea of *dhvani*, given by Anandavardhana (*Dhavanyaloka*). For Levinas this "rhythm" is not a poetic device but has to do with the way it affects the reader-spectator. Just as the *dhvani* represents the soul of the work of art to Anandavardhana so to Levinas the rhythm represents something that is beyond music, where it is a feature of sound that is not detached from the object and therefore there is musicality in every image from which arises the aesthetic pleasure for the reader-spectator, for this rhythm entails sensations that are not bound to conceptual perception. The realm of "rhythm" is indicative of the space where culture/nature Cartesian dualism seems to dissolve.

Mikel Dufrenne's idea of the aesthetic object must also be mentioned here. Dufrenne offered a phenomenological-existential aesthetics. He aimed at reviving the Greek idea of "aesthesis" which emphasised the sense experiences and feelings as opposed to rational components. Rejecting the idea of an artwork being an exalted-imaginative



experience of a creative genius he propounded that art is a mode to make sense of the human experiences and day to day reality. This existential outlook and a stress on the sensory and emotional projects his ideas' humanist outlook. His idea of the aesthetic object/art work then is that it is an "intentional object" imbued with the intention of its creator but even though it has its autonomy, the aesthetic object is the perception that the work of art induces in the reader-spectator in accord with the desired culmination of the artist. So a reader-spectator is an active agent in the process of the culmination, he does not really create the aesthetic object, but only perceives it faithfully.

In a world post the UK conference *Life. After. Theory* held in 2003 the shape that Aestheticism takes is that of New Aestheticism which cropped up as a consequence of philosophical debates in 1990s. New Aestheticism:

...emphasises the 'specificity' and 'particularity' of the literary text, seeking dialogue with it rather than mastery over it, and seeking the text as part of an on going debate, within itself and with its readers, rather than viewing it as representative of a fixed position, or as the pre-determined expression of socially conservative views. (Barry 299)

Key practitioners of new aestheticism are Isobel Armstrong, John Joughin, and Simon Malpas. While literary theory since 1970s (nineteenth century) has predominantly come to deny any autonomy to literature New Aestheticism offers it a break from the confined-ness, unlike theoretical criticisms like Marxism, feminism, psychoanalysis, and post-structuralism, which were mainly concerned with social forces, phallogocentric or sexist, the psychic drives or instincts, and the language. It was almost taken as a given since the failure of liberal humanists in 1980s that a theoretical work "spoke" only through such (listed above) combinations of social, linguistic or psychological forces instead of the unique qualities of each of these texts. This distrust of the writer and the importance of the critic was described by Paul Ricoeur (a French philosopher) as the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' in his work *Freud and Philosophy*. The 'hermeneutics of suspicion' for Ricoeur entailed: "...a

method of interpretation which assumes that the liberal or surface-level meaning of a text is an effort to conceal the political interests which are served by the text. The purpose of interpretation is to strip off the concealment, unmasking those interests."

New Aestheticism then provides a possibility of difference within the inclusive term art. A possibility of uniqueness and a choice to speak for a people or choose not to. Aesthetics is against the thoughtless homogenization for it offers a chance to view literature as a whole instead of championing difference which some have seen as an anomaly of literary theory. It can be viewed as a resistance of historicism and 'hermeneutical suspicion.'

New Aestheticism is also representative of the revival of the attitude towards aesthetic that was witnessed in the late, nineteenth century 'aesthetic movement,' in the work of poets and writers, namely, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, A. C. Swinburne, and Oscar Wilde and Walter Pater, respectively, whose outlook to literature could be said to reflect the idea of Art for Art's Sake.

In the light of such discussion aestheticism again emerges as a space that is located on the nature side of the ontological spectrum, and implicitly a means of bridging the gap between culture and nature for in giving importance to both aesthetic features and the hermeneutical suspicion would be symbolic of a break from the politics of the centre and the margin. Aesthetics then in totality, over its course of emergence, acceptance, rejection, and revival has come to sustain the litmus test of humanistic-natural tendency.

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