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LOOKING FOR THE DEFINITION OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE
RASA IN THE WRITINGS OF
SACCIDĀNANDA HĪRĀNANDA VĀTSYĀYANA¹

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1. Introduction

My aim in considering Ajñeya's attitude towards the nature of aesthetic experience is to prove the writer's participation in a debate over its essence carried on by Indian literary critics since the appearance of Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra*, that is, for almost eighteen hundred years. This subject has equally entertained Western philosophers and critics throughout their history.

I looked for Ajñeya's contribution towards an explicit definition of the aesthetic experience in his critical and literary works, from which I quote some of the writer's statements that reflect his conscious musings on this theme. These statements do not suffice, in my opinion, and so my search has furthered into the implicit definition harboured within Ajñeya's creative output. In my dissertation I carry out this search in Ajñeya's short-stories. Here I have chosen one of his poems, which deals with questions of the production and reception of a literary work, both belonging to the field of aesthetics.

1.1 Ajñeya's attitude towards Indian poetic tradition

Nothing is simple with Ajñeya. Unraveling his personality or interpreting the ideas embodied in his writings is a complex challenge for his biographers and critics. Well acquainted with Indian and Western poetic conventions, Vātsyāyana demanded from himself, and from writers contemporary to him, the highest respect for their tradition coupled to a

1 S. H. Vātsyāyana (1911-1987) – better known under his literary pseudonym 'Ajñeya'.

willingness to expand it. In *Truculent Clay* Ajñeya formulates this demand as follows:

“the poet [...] can free himself not from tradition but only from old traditions; and this by continually renewing the tradition. As long as he goes on adding to the tradition, he renews himself, frees himself. This liberation-in-process is the only freedom for a poet. [...] The poet does not write language, he writes words. This allows the poet to accept and modify the tradition of the word, while liberating himself from the tradition of the language. [...] That is how the *Rishis* used language: where the convention of language was broken but the tradition of the word enriched.”²

In the Introduction to the *Anthology of Selected Readings from Sanskrit, Prakrit, Pali and Apabhraṃśa Poetry*, Ajñeya defines the Indian poetic tradition as “a fabric woven around three strands”.³ First, absolute faith in the uttered word and its power of recreation – in Sanskrit philosophy, the concept of *vāc*. Second, the capacity to transcend history, understanding it as a “change within the framework of continuity” where a new event is always a “re-enactment of the first event of creation”.⁴ Third, the union of matter and spirit, and so the inherent couple of man with nature. While maintaining the importance of the Sanskrit concept of the creative notion of words, Ajñeya explains their function as being “an instrument of communion” between man and the deity and between man and man.⁵ “Communion” attracted my attention in the context of Ajñeya’s understanding of the aesthetic experience, because it confers a special dimension to the communication between the writer and the reader through literary works, and may explain the link between them.

2 In: *Truculent clay*, Transl. by the Author, assisted by Manas Mukul Das. New Delhi: Clarion Books, 1982

3 See: *The Indian Poetic Tradition*, Ed. by VATSYAYANA, Sachchidananda; MISRA, Vidya Nivas; Agra: Y. K. Publishers, 1983. p. 11.

4 Ibidem, p. 12-13.

5 Ibidem, p. 11.

1.2 Validity of the *rasa*-theory for modern literary criticism

Ajñeya's recognition of the achievements of ancient Indian poetics justifies my attempt to interpret his works in the light of the *rasa*-theory. In the current context I delineate the following principles of this theory: the role of *bhāvas* – the emotions, the concept of *sahr̥daya* – the recipient of art, and the universal nature of the aesthetic experience.

Bharata, the founder of the *rasa*-school, employed emotion as the pillar of his theoretical framework. Emotion is common to all humans, and so can establish a universal mode of communication between people. Their presence in the literary work assures the writer of his reader's response. In the introduction to *The Indian Poetic Tradition*, Ajñeya stresses that literary genres such as epic poetry, drama, lyrical and gnomic poetry, fables and stories in prose were all regarded as literature, *kāvya*, because they had "one central *rasa*, one dominant transformation of the particular sentiment".⁶ This "transformation" of *bhāvas* – emotions, embodied by special means in the literary work, into *rasas* – their presence in the reader's mind, is a fascinating process. Indian theoreticians of *rasa* described its culmination variously, as: rapture or aesthetic pleasure, intellectual enjoyment, mysterious delight or bliss and illumination.⁷ In my approach to Ajñeya's understanding of this state I will emphasize the words "transformation" and "communion".

The term *sahr̥daya*, was first used in the context of the reception of art by Abhinavagupta.⁸ It describes the person "whose heart has been made receptive like a mirror by constant contemplation of poetry."⁹ Bhoja used the term *rasika*, meaning "one of taste", to define this state.¹⁰ The term proposed by Abhinava was later recognized by Indian scholars and dominated their understanding of *rasa*.

6 See: *The Indian Poetic Tradition*. Ed. by VATSYAYANA, Sachchidananda; MISRA, Vidya Nivas; Agra: Y. K. Publishers, 1983 p. 22.

7 See: MASSON, J. L.; PATWARDHAN, M. V.: *Aesthetic Rapture*, Poona: Deccan College, 1970, vol. 1, p. 33-34.

8 Compare in this context Bharata's term *prekṣaka* in: *Nāṭyaśāstra* XXV.53-57.

9 See: NAGENDRA: *Dictionary of Sanskrit Poetics*, Delhi: B. R. Publishing Corporation, 1987, p. 145.

10 Ibidem, p. 136.

Also the idea of an universal aesthetic experience, *sādhāraṇīkaraṇa*, formulated in the 9th century by Bhaṭṭanāyaka, gained its popularity due to Abhinava's interpretation.¹¹ Accordingly, the reader experiences the emotive contents of the literary work in its objectified form, not limited to individual joys and sorrows. Thus, participation in the experience of beauty and the awareness of it always brings pleasure.

2. Analysis of Ajñeya's poem: *I weave a silence*¹²

First I weave a silence.
For that I choose a string of sounds.

The warp: the warp must be strong: from where to get it?
But there is someone who will change it,
Who will dip it in juices and colour it, and only then it will flourish.
I pick up a thick thread:
I am anyway tied to death; but with this thread and someone's help
I cross over time.

Next the woof: but are the colours to my liking?
And the motifs of my choice?
I feel that my mind is the shuttle, is the thread;
From here to there, from there to here; my hand does the work
Someone else's design appears.

Thus is woven the net of silence
And in me there is something, which makes me feel that I'm surrounded by it.
Believe me, it is not me.
Because when I recognize it
Then I find myself outside the net.

11 Ibidem, p. 143.

12 Translated by Teresa Bigoń. Compare: AJÑEYA: Eka sannātā bunatā huṃ. In: *Sadānīrā. Saṃpūrṇa kavitaem: Bhāga II: Kavitaem* 1957-1980; Nayī Dillī: Neśanala pabliśiṃga hauza, 1986, p. 290.

Then, something is tied which is not me but which is mine,
That is the one, who creates.
Whose voice I hear somewhere inside:
“So, are you a poet? Why do you want to pile up more words?
Well, this poem is put down!”

Oh yes. He is my only companion, my life and blood.

For whom again
I weave another silence.

In my interpretation of Ajñeya's poem I focus on his understanding of two interdependent processes: the creation of art and a receiver's response to it. The lyrical subject of the poem is the poet himself. The composition of the poem is conceived as a metaphor on weaving, denoting the process of making poetry. Moreover the terminology of weaving has been employed in Western theory of literature, for example the term “thread” denotes the main motive of a literary work. On the vocabulary level the Hindī word “*rasa*”, which I translate as “juices”, explicitly links the poem to the Indian theory of aesthetics, since the context of the word excludes its accidental appearance in Ajñeya's text. The idea of the reader, who will “colour” and thus render the motifs of the work according to his own emotive experience, is one of the principles of *rasa*-theory. Emotions have their own colours.¹³

In the first part of the poem the author presents his understanding of the link between the writer and the reader – a link that arises with the help of a poetic means employed in the literary work. The effect of the poem depends on “someone”, who adds “*rasa*” to what the poet has achieved. Ajñeya focuses on means of two kinds: “the warp” and “the woof”. The warp, a fixed and permanent thread in weaving, refers to the leading motif of the literary text. It could be compared to *sthāyibhāva* in the *rasa*-theory, where it suggests the permanent, dominating emotion presented in a literary work due to *vibhāvas*: causes of emotion and *anubhāvas*: their external manifestations. The woof moves and changes in the process of weaving and so do the motifs accompanying the main thread in the literary work. In terms of *rasa* it suits the *vyabhicāribhāvas*: the transient emo-

13 *Nāṭyaśāstra*, VI.42-43.

tions, which play a supporting role in the development of the dominating emotion. But the artist creates only a frame: the warp and the woof, as a hint of the emotive apprehension of his work – his hand is only “the shuttle” – the recipient fills this frame while experiencing beauty of art.

To document Ajñeya’s definition of the recipient’s response to art I quote passages from my translation of his short-story *In the Shadow of Taj*. The narrator of the story describes the state of the main hero:

“Anant left behind the plane of reasoning. He flowed along a river of emotions [...] the blissful excitement of a self-sacrifice overwhelmed him. He became a poet [...] the impulse arose in his mind to express this feeling in poetry.”

The hero is aware of his state. In a subsequent monologue by Anant we find:

“I [...] am a poor person, without means to live; there is no art in me, no aesthetic experience, I neither know the means of self expression nor how to use them. [...] But, is it not something to be proud of, that I can get lost in art?”

And he says to Jyoti, his companion:

“In front of us there is beauty in which we are fully engrossed, so we too are creators of beauty, we are immortal.”¹⁴

In the second part of the poem artist’s distance from his own creation appears. Ajñeya uses the in Hindī unusual word *kalpaka*, which is derived from Sanskrit. I translate it as “the one, who creates”. This word carries an idea of the transformation of a creative impulse into the poem, and its existence in it. The impulse, embodied in the artistic work, first born in the mind of a creator, can “cross over time”. The artist thus gains immortality. In the poem the author personifies this impulse. In the dedication to *Bhavantī*, Ajñeya writes: “the Earth’s truculence is not overcome, but while the artist is savaged, a form has been created. The form endures.”¹⁵

14 Compare: *Tāja kī chāyā meṃ*. In: *Chorā huā rāstā. Ajñeya kī sampūrṇa kahāniyāṃ*, Vol. 1, Nayī Dillī: Neśanala pabliśiṃga hauza, 1982, p. 372-380.

15 In: *Truculent clay*, Transl. by the Author, assisted by Manas Mukul Das. New Delhi: Clarion Books, 1982 (Translation of *Bhavantī*).

The role of the literary work is to carry the writer's impulse to the reader's experience, to communicate it to him. This invisible union between the writer, his work and the reader is as mysterious as the word *kalpaka* used by the poet.

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3. Conclusion

In the concluding section of my study I would like to bring together the main strands of Ajñeya's understanding of the aesthetic experience. The writer accepts a literary work as the carrier of aesthetic categories that appeal to the reader's sensitivity and determine his emotive response to it. The reader re-creates the work of the writer and thus participates in his poetic impulse. The aim of the literary work is to make this link possible. The aesthetical experience has the nature of "communion", understood here as the simultaneous participation in the universal and individual. By understanding the process of how *rasa* arises as "transformation", Ajñeya suggests a reinterpretation of Bharata in this sense.¹⁶ In the context of *sahr̥daya* the writer leads me to consider the recipient's ability to immerse oneself in the flow of emotions as a condition for the experience of beauty. This experience is no longer limited to the connoisseur of art, *sahr̥daya*, but is accessible to everyone who is capable of emotion.¹⁷

16 Compare with the term *niṣpatti* in Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra*, VI. 31.

17 I wish to thank Prof. Peter Schreiner and Hans Biebuyck for corrections of this manuscript.

