

The Experience of Rasa in Anita Nair's Mistress

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ABSTRACT

The concept of Rasa, initially proposed by Bharata Muni in his seminal work *Natyashastra*, is central to Indian aesthetics. It is understood to be the aesthetic experience crafted into the work by an artist to be relished by the audience; it is by function the very objective of art especially the performative forms of art.

This research enterprise, however, looks at the context of rasa as employed in a narrative art form by Anita Nair in her work *Mistress* (2005). It studies how the narrative structure, characters and themes of the novel etched against the backdrop of Kathakali offers the experience of Rasa to its readers.

Key words: Kathakali, Narrative Structure, *Natyashastra*, Rasa

1. INTRODUCTION

The quotient of Rasa largely applies to performing arts, however it may be applied to other forms of art like literature, music, sculpting and such. In this direction, as an endeavour in interdisciplinary study, this research project undertakes to study Anita Nair's novel *Mistress* (2005) to understand how Rasa maybe achieved in a work of fiction. It specifically aims to highlight how the attempt of the author is unique in achieving the same. Accordingly, it begins with a brief description of Bharata Muni's theory of Rasa as explained by S. N. Dasgupta in his essay "The Theory of Rasa" [1]. Thereafter, it introduces the author Anita Nair and the text *Mistress* under study. Further, it elaborates on the different aspects of the text like the narrative structure, characters, theme, and setting to realize the objective of this research. Conclusively, it comments on the author and the impact of the given literary creation.

2. THE CONCEPT OF RASA

Rasa meaning 'juice' or 'flavour' or 'essence', was a concept proposed by Bharata Muni in his work *Natyashastra*, an ancient Sanskrit treatise on performing arts. According to Bharata, it is the aesthetic experience produced as a result of "Vibhavanubhava-vyabhicari-samyogad, rasa-nispathih", meaning the right blend of three determinants: Vibhava, Anubhava and Vyabhicharibhava:

Vibhava is the objective condition is the objective condition producing an emotion. Vibhava may be of two kinds: Alambana and Uddipana. Alambana-vibhava means a person or persons with reference to whom the emotion is manifested. Uddipana-vibhava means the circumstances that have excited the emotion... Anubhava means bodily expressions by which the emotions are expressed...

Vyabhicari means a series of diverse emotions that feed the dominant emotion. (S. N. Dasgupta, 37) [1]

Accordingly, Bharata Muni's maxim holds that any work of art must aim at offering the experience of Rasa to its audience; the characters, setting, narrative, depiction of emotions by actors and such elements of an artistic creation should functionally transport the audience into a transcendental realm making them reflect on the spiritual and moral concerns of their individual lives. Further, it clarifies that "no emotions are called Rasa unless it is aesthetically excited" (Dasgupta, 38); that is, the sthayibhavas or basic emotions of man must be evoked by art to give the experience of Rasa to the audience. Thus, Bharata's theory of Rasa is the touchstone of skill and creativity of the artist and his work. The notion of Rasa, therefore, is central to Indian Aesthetics and continues to guide artistic creations even today.

3. ANITA NAIR AND MISTRESS

Anita Nair is a celebrated author of Indian English Writing who is known for her artistry in local colour writing, female centred narratives, portrayal of human relations and its complexities with an adept use of language. Her bestselling works include *The Better Man* (1999), *Ladies Coupe* (2001), *Lessons in Forgetting* (2012). Her novel *Mistress* published in 2005 is yet another feather in her cap of success.

The novel *Mistress* tells the story of man-woman relationships, quest for identity and freedom, the smudging boundaries in art and life and its emotional quotient. In its frame narrative, set in a riverside resort named 'Near the Nila' which overlooks the Nila river (Bharathapuzha) in North Kerala, it focuses on the lives of the major characters of the novel Koman, Radha, Shyam, and Christopher, whereas in the embedded narrative, situated in the fictional town called Arabipattanam, Tamil Nadu, it tracks the life of Koman's father Sethu and his wife Saadiya. Accordingly, it follows a parallel plot structure unfolding the two narratives alongside each other. The novel is divided into a prologue, three books with three internal chapters each which are designed on the Navarasaas (nine Rasas), and finally an epilogue.

3.1 SYNOPSIS OF MISTRESS

The narrative of the novel begins with Christopher's arrival to meet Koman, a retired Kathakali artist from Kerala. Though Christopher poses as a Travel Writer who wishes to interview Koman to gain information about Kathakali and the professional trajectory of an artist like Koman for his next book, he is in search of knowledge about his parentage. Staying at the riverside resort 'Near the Nila' owned by the Radha (Koman's niece) and her husband Shyam, Christopher hopes to develop a bond with Koman and achieve the true purpose of his visit. However, his plans are thwarted by the uncontrollable desire he develops for Radha, who herself is caught in an unhappy and obligatory marriage with Shyam. Meanwhile, the narrative digresses into the past of Koman and as also his father. With Koman one sees the unfulfilled relationships of his life, as also his relationship with art. One learns that Koman is unsettled with his identity as an artist; he isn't sure if his passion for Kathakali and efforts in reaching perfection had brought him happiness, he wonders if it was foolish of him to turn down opportunities to perform abroad. Through Koman, the narrative thus draws the attention of its readers to the pathetic condition of such artists who condemn the commercialization

of art. On the other hand, the story of Sethu and Saadiya points at the concerns of inter-religious marriages, and how religious beliefs condition man-woman relationships. Coming back to the blossoming romance between Chris and Radha, the narrative hints at the consequences of crossing lines, when you embrace the forbidden – fame and money over passion for art, desire over responsibility, faith over love. Hitting the crescendo of action and drama, the narrative steadily moves to its climax with all the characters resolving their situations in life. As for Koman, he decides that the consciousness of being an artist is gratifying enough compared to fame and material success; while Radha finds her long sought freedom in separating from both Shyam and Christopher; Shyam decides to forgive Radha for her breach of conduct and accept her along with the illegitimate child from Christopher, on the other hand, Christopher realizes that he would not have been committed to Radha in the long run leaves for France; Saadiya commits suicide and Sethu remarries to prolong his life and raise Koman.

Thus, the novel in its characters, theme, narrative structure, and setting, is a rollercoaster ride of different emotional experiences, and thereby befits the study of this research project.

4. RASA IN MISTRESS

The novel is laden with manifestation of Rasa in many ways. To begin with, its layout beginning with a prologue, followed by the narrative and concluding in an epilogue gives the effect of a dramatic text. Further, the nine chapters of the novel are based on the nine Rasas, in sequence – Sringaaram (Erotic), Haasyam (Comic), Karunam (Pathetic), Raudram (Furious), Veeram (Heroic), Bhayaanakam (Terrible), Beebhalsam (Odious), Adbhutam (Marvelous), Shaantam (Peace). Each chapter begins with the description of a rasa in the context of Kathakali and its depiction by an artist, added to it is the author's perception of the Rasa, and then it suggests how each character in the novel experiences it. For instance, in the chapter named and based on the Rasa Raudram begins thus:

Ah, and so we come to raudram. The common fallacy is to think raudam is a synonym for anger. Nothing wrong with that, for raudram wears the countenance of anger. Wrath, even. Look at this: you start with the eyes. Widen them so that they open fully, until your head title backwards, the nostrils flare, the mouth sets and your jaws clench. You must inhale as you usually do, but try and exhale through the eyes. Intensely. Powerfully. Then the cheeks will acquire a mobility of their own. (Nair, 151) [2]

Thereafter, Nair adds:

Now close your eyes and listen to the sounds that come from the trees. Do you hear that? The tuk-tuk sound? ... Are you wondering what a woodpecker has to do with raudram? Listen. Do you hear it? The notes are like a drum roll. Slow at first, then intense, as if driven by fury. And yet, the fury is not such that it makes the earth crumble or blood fall. This is the fury of passion. For, while the other birds have mating calls with which to attract their mate, the woodpecker has only its drumbeat with which to beckon and call. It is a quiet fury, not any less intense or raging in its power, but locked within you, so that only you know it. For only you hear it in your heart. Such is the fury of passion that rules you. (152) [2]

Then, the narrative opens with Shyam, Radha, Uncle, and finally Sethu and Saadiya. Here, all the characters are seen to experience raudram in their own way, triggered by basic emotions of jealousy,

rejection, deceit, and loneliness. While Shyam watches Radha welcome Christopher's flirtatious advances, he is overcome a sense of lack, jealousy and rejection; consequently he establishes his right over her in a forceful sexual act. On the other hand, Radha looks at the same as marital rape, and avenges herself by mating with Christopher. With a smile and resplendent face, she lets Shyam believe that she wanted and enjoyed his act of fury, while it was actually the mark of her silent victory in satiating her fury triggered by a sense of exploitation and weakness. However, Koman who suspects the Shyam's inevitable outburst, thinks of how deceit induces fury; brings in the mythological reference of Rama and Sugriva from the Ramayana telling the story of their deceit in winning their enemies. For him, Radha's relationship with Christopher is only a means to escape the responsibility of a failed marriage, and not love; the entire act is one of deceit. For Sethu, fury stems from the knowledge of truth; he confesses to Saadiya that he murdered his friend Balu in a fit of anger when he reveals that he was preyed upon by Maash (teacher) making Sethu realize that Maash had sexually abused him as well. Tragically for Saadiya, her increasing loneliness at home fills her of guilt for shaming her family; she is unable to tolerate the condemnation of her neighbours for living with Sethu without the social sanction of marriage. When she turns to her God and faith for comfort and peace, she is troubled even more to realize that no religion approves a life like hers; consequently she commits suicide ridden by guilt.

Thus, in Nair's narrative each character and their emotional-physical environment serve as vibhava, anubhava and vyabhicari to evoke the Rasa of Raudram which in turn reflects in the audience as well. And, in course of eight chapters, the characters have experienced all of it – the black humour of their lives; the pathetic conditions of their relationships; the fury emerging out of discontent with life and people, the courage to break norms; the resultant terror of such actions, and the disgust for oneself stemming out of guilt.

Finally, in the conclusive chapter Shaantam, the characters resolve their internal conflicts and attain a sense of peace, a relief from the weight of a dishonest marriage, of betrayal, of lust, perfection in art, and unrequited love. To begin with, Radha chooses to start afresh as a single mother finally finding the ultimate freedom she longed for by separating from Shyam and abruptly discontinuing her relationship with Christopher; Shyam decides to accept Radha's illegitimate child from Chris hoping she would start loving him; Koman realizes his need for a companion and finds his happiness in being just a performer – whether rich, famous, perfect or not, Christopher regains control of himself and is able to see that he would have failed to do justice by Radha in a long term relationship, that their affair was a chance occurrence and not one of commitment.

5. CONCLUSION

The ultimate experience of Rasa in an empathetic reading process is what Nair offers in *Mistress*. As M. Mukundan words it:

Kathakali is a complete art wherein you will find everything that is there in life. Like a true Kathakali spectacle performed by master veshakaars that lasts all night, Nair evokes in her readers wonder, delight and grief. She writes about man-woman relationships and complex Kathakali aesthetics with equal felicity. When you put down the novel, you feel as if you are walking back home in the pale early morning light at the end of a nightlong Kathakali performance. What fills your soul, then, is shaantam — the last of the nine bhavaas. [3]

The Experience of Rasa in Anita Nair's Mistress

Indeed, the dexterity with which Nair combines the technicalities of Rasa in Kathakali and in life is impeccable. It offers the readers the experience of Rasa in not just following the characters and their lives, but also in identifying with the same conditions and reflecting upon their individual lives. In this, the author must be doubly credited for achieving "rasa-nispathih" through her narrative by making her characters come alive as though in a dramatic performance. Lastly, the fact that Nair ends the narrative in an indefinite climax gives prominence to the reader's imagination; her characters be it Radha, Shyam, Christopher, and Koman in the end are seen in a state of peace within, though they only have futuristic thoughts and whether a decisive step is taken or what actually happens is left unsaid. It gives the readers a series of questions: Will Shyam offer a new life to Radha as he hopes to do? Does Radha accept Shyam's proposal or decisively separates from him to raise her child singlehandedly? What happens to the resort? Does Christopher return to France or does he get down from the train and come back for Radha? What happens to Koman and his female companion Maya, do they get married? Is Koman after all, Christopher's father? When the reader ponders over these questions, he/she may think of it subjectively and draw conclusions from one's own experience and reference. Thus, the narrative from beginning to end is sharply crafted in realizing the primary object of art - "Vibhavanubhava-vyabhicari-samyogad, rasa-nispathih"- and establishes Abhinav Gupta's argument that Rasa is not universally experienced by the spectator; it suggests that art is received and experienced by differently by the audience.

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