

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

Vol. IV & Issue I (April- 2019)

Across Space and Time: Commonalities in *Natyashastra*, *The Republic*, and *Poetics*

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DOI: 10.53032/tcl.2019.4.1.20

Abstract

By the time Chandragupta Maurya established the Mauryan Empire in 322 B.C., Plato, the Greek philosopher had already envisaged an ideal commonwealth and had captured its principles in his *The Republic*, banishing all poets from his ideal state; and Aristotle, who started off as a student of Plato, had already presented to the world a clear rebuttal to Plato in his treatise, *Poetics*. There doesn't seem to be much evidence to support the hypothesis that Bharata's *Natyashastra* written sometime between 2nd century B.C. and 2nd century A.D. was influenced by Aristotle's *Poetics*, or that, since the date of *Natyashastra*'s publication is so uncertain, *Natyashastra* in some way had an influence on *Poetics*. But this lack of evidence does not undermine the fact that in the Mauryan period (322 B.C. to 185 B.C.), there was an eager influx of Greek diplomats and explorers like Megasthenes in the subcontinent, who were not only political and economic emissaries, but also cultural ambassadors. Neither does this lack of evidence undermine the possibility of an influence, on either side of the theorists. But the case under consideration is not the existence of any physical evidence that could establish a connection, but rather that connection or no connection, Plato's *Republic*, Aristotle's *Poetics* and Bharata's *Natyashastra* have a common thread. All the three works are in some way or other an exposition on the imitative art of poetry and drama, and inevitably, each is linked to the other, if in nothing else, then at least in terms of comparative analysis.

Keywords- Comparative Literature, Imitation, Aesthetics, *Natyashastra*, Reality

While attempting a comparative analysis of the three ancient treatises, it becomes imperative to understand that Bharata's *Natyashastra* does not stand alone in isolation as Indian representative, against the Greek documents. Following *Natyashastra* is a series of commentaries and

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expositions on the manual of dramaturgy, which attempt to understand and interpret it. As such, *Natyasastra* has to be seen through the lens of all these interpretations.

Towards working out a comparison (as also contrast), between the three principal documents, I have tried to classify the comparison under the following heads: (i) what is poetry, (ii) what is the purpose/effect of poetry, (iii) how is that effect created in poetry (iv) the impact of aesthetic effect.

What is Poetry

In his *Sanskrit Criticism*, V.K. Chari recognizes poetry as not merely cognitive mode of knowledge whose aim would be contemplation, but as a “rocognitive” knowledge, because as Chari asserts, “it most generally presents what we have already known before but would like to experience again” (26). Chari’s view then draws attention to the very nature of knowledge and reality. What is reality? What is knowledge? And how is it created? Chari’s definition clearly recognizes an ontological origin of knowledge, as separate from its cognition, or rather as Chari has put it, its recognition. For A. K. Coomaraswamy, reality is “the immanence of the absolute (Brahman)” (36). And knowledge then becomes an acknowledgement of that absolute. Saraswati is the personification of word, which in turn is the expression of Brahman. Brahman, the ultimate reality, then is an abstract that can be perceived only through its manifestation. This is an echo of Plato’s theory of ideas, where the absolute and the ideal is the idea. The physical is an imitation (*mimesis*), of that idea, and poetry, an imitation of an imitation. However, where Plato and the Indian Aestheticians differ is the very premise of “reality” of poetry. For the Greek scholar, poetry is “thrice removed from reality” (qtd. in Rath, Chatterjee, Ganapathy 60), while for the Indian Aestheticians, poetry is the manifestation in words of very reality. In this sense, Aristotle is closer to the Indian theorists, as for Aristotle, poetry is an imitation of reality, and not thrice removed from reality. Aristotle also sees imitation as the natural human instinct. This is close to the Indian concept of *anukarana*, the “urge to represent”, the root cause of all literary compositions.

Thus, it can be broadly understood that for both the Greek philosophers, as well as for the Indian classical theorists, poetry is essentially a representation. Now the next point to ponder is what is poetry representing? For Plato poetry imitates the already imitated, and thus represents not reality, but merely an idea of reality. In *The Republic*, Book IX, he says, “The imitator or maker of the image knows nothing of true existence; he knows appearances only” (qtd. in Daiches 15). But for Aristotle, poetry is the imitation of physical reality, and he calls plot, which for him is the “soul” of all poetic creation including tragedy, an “imitation of the action.” The emphasis is on action. However, for the Indian Aestheticians, including Bharata, poetry, or more

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specifically “*nataka*” (qtd. in Ghosh xlix) is an expression through the medium of acting (*abhinaya*) of the inherent human emotions, the *sthayibhavas*.

What is the purpose/effect of Poetry

The purpose and effect of poetry has been a highly debatable topic both in Greek as well as Indian literary theory. There has been an ongoing discussion on the topic with theoreticians oscillating between what Chari has identified as the two basic principles: *dulce* and *utile*, i.e. the sweet or pleasant, and the useful. From these two principles come the two purposes of poetry, to please, or to instruct. For Plato, poetry should ideally instruct and relate truth about Gods and heroes, so as to educate the warriors and inculcate in them high morals and dignity. In *The Republic*, Book III, Plato asserts this need of moral implications of poetry,

Let our artists rather be those who are gifted to discern the true nature of the beautiful and graceful; then will our youth dwell in a land of health, amid fair sights and sounds, and receive the good in everything; and beauty, the effluence of fair works, shall flow into the eye and ear, like a health-giving breeze from a purer region, and insensibly draw the soul from earliest years into likeness and sympathy with the beauty of reason. (qtd. in Deutsch and Fornieri, 21)

Plato’s idea of beautiful, regardless to say, is then all that serves a moral purpose, and then what poetry should do according to Plato is affect the principle in the soul and in that sense, be didactic. However, this idealized purpose notwithstanding, Plato recognizes in poetry “the power of harming even the good” (468), and as such, says, “All poetical imitations are ruinous to the understanding of the hearers” (468). It is clear that for Plato poetry had no purpose other than the moral purpose, however, Plato also acknowledges the impact of poetry on the hearer, which leads him to a sort of frenzy. Thus, there is a contradiction between what Plato wants a poetry to do and what according to him, poetry actually does.

In stark contrast to Plato’s concept of the purpose and effect of poetry, is the idea of Aristotle who places poetry at the very zenith of all arts, and according to whom poetry is, “more philosophical and a higher thing than history” (qtd. in Edmundson 8). Asserting on his law of probable impossibility as against, improbable possibility, Aristotle says that the poetry, and more specifically tragedy, the representation of not what has happened, but what may happen. It is for Aristotle, a tool for purgation of the emotions of pity and fear, i.e. *Katharsis*. Thus for Aristotle, poetry is a medium through which one recognizes one’s emotions and comes to terms with it.

Once again, Aristotle shares an affinity with the Indian Aestheticians, especially the adherents of the Rasa theory. For Bharata, the propounder of Rasa theory, *rasa*, or the “aesthetic relish” is the very end of poetry. Poetry then is not something that necessarily imparts a moral message, but something that leads to an emotional experience, which in itself is the very purpose of it. The

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commentaries that followed Bharata's *Natyasastra* tried to interpret this aesthetic experience of poetry in various ways. For Bhattanayaka, the aesthetic experience of poetry was essentially spiritual, with a capacity to lead the *sahradaya* towards the highest goal of life, *moksa*, i.e. emancipation. Abhinavagupta too perceived in the experience of *Rasa*, a divine experience, i.e. the experience of *alaukika*. Thus, despite various interpretations, for the Indian Aestheticians, the ultimate goal of poetry remained *ananda*, or delight, even *avidya*, or eradication of ignorance, ultimately leading to the state of bliss, *parmananda*.

How is the effect created in Poetry

Calling poets "a light and winged and holy thing" (qtd. in Daiches 7), Plato asserts that poetry is the outcome of divine inspiration. Plato says,

The Muse first of all inspires men herself; and from these inspired persons a chain of other persons is suspended, who take the inspiration. For all good poets, epic as well as lyric, compose their beautiful poems not by art, but because they are inspired and possessed. (qtd. in Daiches 7)

Plato gives an analogy of a magnetic stone. According to him, God or divine inspiration is the magnetic stone itself. Like a stone attracts a magnetic ring, which in turn attracts other rings, forming a sort of chain, the divine inspiration transmitted in the poet, is then passed on the spectator/audience. In this way, since poetry is not coming out of truth, but out of "inspiration", the effect that it has on the audience also remains one of falsity. Plato says to this effect, "The imitative art is an inferior who marries an inferior, and has inferior offspring" (*Wit and Wisdom* 136). Thus, for Plato, the effect of poetry is created when a poet under frenzy, transmits that frenzy on to the audience. Aristotle, for whom poetry represents ideal truth, and who sees in poetry the purgation of emotions, this purgation, or cleansing of self from negative emotions, is brought about by a certain recognition with the character and actions, arousing pity and fear. The audience sees in the misfortune of the character, an echo of its own suffering. It is then moved to fear, while the absolutely odious moves the audience to fear of what may have been a personal experience, and it is this identification that arouses pity and fear. Once the emotions are aroused, the actions of the plot serve as reinforcements to maintain the emotion of pity and fear through the development of plot which ultimately leads to catastrophe. It is this ultimate catastrophe that results in the purgation of the emotions, and the audience is left with a spent feeling, a sort of emotional vacuum.

Although one may be tempted to equate this emotional vacuum with the *santa rasa*, one must not forget that while catharsis leads to an emotional exhaustion, the *santa rasa*, that was added later to Bharata's eight primary rasas, is more of an emotional fulfilment to the point of detachment. For the *rasa* theorists, emotional experience of poetry is achieved through a strict

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formulaic method, and is impersonal, objective and universal in nature. The conjunction (*samyoga*) of the basic causes (*vibhavas*), symptoms (*anubhavas*), and other ancillary feelings (*vyabhicarins*) leads to the *rasa anubhuti*, the experience of *rasa*. The poetic effect, that is *ananda*, or pleasure then is the result of this experience (Devy 62). This experience is quite different from Aristotelian purgation, or Plato's frenzy. It is rather enlightening. In that sense, the purpose of poetry for Indian Aestheticians is dulce, sweetness, or rather the relishing of this sweetness. This experience then becomes inexpressible.

The Impact of Aesthetic effect

While for Plato, the impact of aesthetic experience was essentially demoralizing, even rendering effeminacy to men, the impact for Aristotle and the Indian Aestheticians was ennobling, leading to some knowledge and understanding of universal truths. Where Aristotle leaves the effect at that, Indian Aestheticians, especially those after Bharata, have tried to elevate the status of this emotional experience by associating concepts of spirituality and *moksa* to it. Plato also saw in poetry a sort of personal involvement. It was this possibility of personal involvement, of being the last ring in the chain of rings on the part of audience that bothered Plato. The experience of poetry then for Plato was not an objective experience, but something that moved the audience to a state of emotional and intellectual intoxication, and it was this intoxication that Plato vehemently opposed.

Aristotle too saw an active participation on the part of audience, and it was in the recognition of characters and actions that the emotions of pity and fear were aroused. For the Indian Aestheticians, who also debate on the issue of point of origin of *rasa*, the poet, the poetry, or audience, the experience of *rasa* is a detached experience. In fact for Indian Aestheticians, the experience involves a temporary forgetting of self and connecting the individual consciousness to the universal consciousness. This is what Abhinavagupta has called *sadharikarana*.

Conclusion

Plato's *The Republic* and *Ion*, Aristotle's *Poetics*, and Bharata's *Natyasastra* are valuable documents that provide insights into the nature and purpose of the imitative arts. Across different geographic locations, different cultures, and perhaps even different time-lines, the Greek and the Indian treatises, opposing each other on several points, do agree on one aspect: the very basic aspect of poetry and that is, its profound impact, whether detached or participatory.

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The Creative Launcher

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Vol. IV & Issue I (April- 2019)

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