

## ***Rasa* for Self-Censorship: Towards a Post-Theory Praxis**

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**Abstract:** Post-theory is a resistance to the ontological certitude imposed on any body of knowledge. Ontological certitude is an act of reducing the identity of the other to what you think it is. It destroys the potentiality of the other possibilities inherent in the substance thereby giving the identity of the substance a sense of finality. The Other keeps on escaping the framework of the identity that we ascribe to it. If we understand a body of knowledge in a particular way it is not because that body of knowledge inherently or naturally demands that understanding, rather it is because we employ certain specific conditions of reading to understand that episteme. Founded on the Deleuzian idea of differential ontology, Post-theory aims to dismantle the current organization of the episteme in order to actualize the vast reservoir of potentials inherent in it. To put it very crudely, Post-theory is an attempt to unravel the hitherto unthought-of in any body of knowledge by moving beyond the present conditions of understanding. So it stresses the need for incessant experimentation with episteme thereby constantly exploring the possibility of becoming. Anti-essentialist and anti-foundationalist, it is also a political praxis, at war with all sorts of identities, representations and permanent organizing principles, which ties the subject to a particular essence, fosters essentialism, and destroys the possibility of change.

Keeping in mind the postulates of Post-theory, this paper attempts to take a break with the conventional understanding of the concept of *rasa* as a theory of aesthetics, and demonstrate that it was also a tool for censoring the voices of dissent in art and literature. A close-reading of the concept of *rasa* reveals that it contains an anti-essentialist ethos that disrupts the state of being. This praxis attests an attitudinal shift concerning the ontology of any episteme and the dissipation of an unhealthy cathexis that checks “creative transformation”.

**Keywords:** Post-theory, *rasa*, *dhvani*, Indian literary criticism.

Literary theory brought about a revolutionary change in literature by providing the practitioners of literary criticism with numerous entry-points to a text. It, as Barry rightly points out in *Beginning Theory*, came in response to the liberal humanist approach to literature which held the view that the meaning of a text is monolithic in nature in all spatio-temporal locations. With the emergence of theory during the post-war period, the focus of criticism shifted from its fetish for authentic meaning to difference in meaning. Theory showed that a text does not contain any

meaning in itself; rather the meaning is constructed by the reader so no meaning can be privileged as authentic. Yet another contribution that theory has made to criticism is its revision of the concept of literature. If traditional literary criticism had set its focus only on certain types of writing by making a strict division between the literary and non-literary use of language, theory sees everything as a piece of literature. The practitioners of theory often prefer to replace the term 'literature' with 'text' to avoid the evocation of the traditional definition of literature which demands certain prerequisites for a piece of writing to become literature. According to Terry Eagleton "there is no essence of literature, whatsoever" (8), and the idea of literature is functional rather than ontological. What he means is that anything can become literature if we want them to be so. In short, in theory anything can be a text, let it be a poem, a novel, a street sign, an arrangement of buildings on a city block or a style of clothing. So far theory has been used as a tool to read a text from multiple vantage points. We have already seen that each time a text gets deconstructed a new system of knowledge about that text gets generated.

If everything is a 'text' for theory, then what about theory's own position as a text? Post-theory takes its cue from this question. So far theory has been considered a tool to deconstruct texts, and post-theory blurs this distinction between theory as a subject and text as an object. In Post-theory, the theory itself turns out to be a text. By constantly deconstructing the narratives of theory, post-theory rejects the sclerosis of theoretical writing, "the hardening of theory's lexical and syntactical arteries" (McQuillan 9). Post-theory can be defined as a resistance to the ontological certitude imposed upon any theoretical position. The exponents of post-theory see it as a desiring machine and a theoretical framework, as Deleuze puts it, as a Body without Organs. To understand the idea of BwO, it is important to know what a body is. A body can be defined as a whole composed of parts which proffer the whole a particular essence by standing in some definite relation to one another. And the connection that these parts make with each other to give the body an essence is not permanent. The parts have the capacity to change their relation with each other as they get affected by other bodies. When there is a change in the relation of these parts, the essence of the body also changes. Everything that exists in this world is a body, a whole composed of various parts where the parts stand in a definite relation to one another. A theoretical position is also a body. The ontological status that a theoretical position presently possesses is the result of the relation that these parts maintain with each other.

A Body without Organs is a body where the relation between these parts (that compound a body) keeps on changing, thereby resisting the ontological certitude. "In other words, the BwO is opposed to the organizing principles that structure, define and speak on behalf of collective assemblage of organs, experience or states of being" (Parr 33). What initiates changes on the surface of BwO is a desiring machine. Deleuze's concept of desire is a challenge to both the psychoanalytical conception of desire as an insatiable lack regulated by Oedipal law as well as the idea of desire as pleasure. Deleuze on the other hand says that desire is a productive force that endlessly experiments with the organizational patterns of parts to create new bodies. It is

continuous and oriented towards its process or movement rather than a teleological point of completion.

For Post-theory, a theoretical framework is a Body without Organs, i.e. an assemblage that does not have a permanent pattern of organisation on its own. Post-theory functions as a desiring machine that constantly and endlessly experiments with the narratives of theory to bring about new organizational patterns. Ferdinand de Toro in his *Explorations in Post-theory: Towards a Third Space* opines, “It [Post-theory] is a constant questioning of the ontological status of knowledge” (Toro 112). Martin McQuillan observes that Post-theory is a situation that one can never get to. In other words, it is directed towards continual becoming. He says, “Post-theory is a set of thinking which discovers itself in a state of constant deferral, a positioning of reflexivity and an experience of questioning which constantly displaces itself. . .” (McQuillan 12).

A keen awareness of these principles of Post-theory always encourages a critic to challenge the preferred readings of the institutionalized canon in theory. This project makes such an attempt on Indian literary theories which have not yet come out of the canonical readings prescribed for them. In his introduction to *Ardhantaranyasam*, Sreejan teases out two extreme dispositions towards what we call Indian Literary theories which we can name Anglicist and Orientalist. The Anglicist approach to Indian literary theories sees these theoretical positions as obsolete and exotic, and exhorts to focus exclusively on the western literary praxis. For them, the native is irrational and the western is rational and logical. This contemptuous disposition of the Anglicist group towards oriental disposition is very much the aftermath of the imperialist discourse on the east which brands the orient as exotic, barbaric and irrational. Opposite to Anglicist camp is the orientalist approach. Those who hold an orientalist approach to Indian literary theories show a strong desire to take recourse to the classical knowledge in its primitive form. They are driven by the desire to reclaim an identity and a knowledge system that are Indian. These two dispositions—Anglicist and Orientalist—will not make any productive effort in the arena of Indian literary theory because they either blindly reject it or valorise it in its primitive form. Sreejan says, “I would not say that we should boycott the western ideas. Nor would I agree with the view that we should take ancient Indian ideas in their purest form” (Sreejan 15). Rather what we need, he says, “is the creation of new knowledge out of these ancient critical practices.” This can be made possible only by putting them in conversation with the spirit of the moment.

Sreejan holds that our reluctance to put our native philosophical positions in an active dialogue with other systems of knowledge stunted their growth. He neatly summarises his plan in the following words:

Suppose somebody generates a new thought from the ideas of Barthes, either by deconstructing them or by connecting them with other ideas. I call such a move an original and unique contribution. What matters is not where the knowledge comes from, but whether a new system of knowledge is produced. What I mean is that instead of considering our ancient epistemologies as the ultimate truth, we need to see them only as

the beginning of the endless reconsiderations and deconstructions that are to come in future. (14-15).

Taking its cue from this idea of Sreejan, this paper attempts to create a new stream of knowledge about *rasa* theory, showing how the idea of *Kavyasastra* in general and the concepts of *dhvani* and *rasa* in particular coupled with the concept of *aucitya* or decorum function as a tool for pre-production censoring for the author.

Anandavardhana's Dhvani School is an important movement in the history of the concept of *rasa* propounded by Bharata. *Dhvani* came as a response to what Bharata has left unspoken about *rasa* in his *Natyasastra*—what is the most important aspect that constitutes *rasa* in a work of art? According to Anandavardhana, the most important element that constitutes *rasa* is *dhvani* or poetic suggestion. *Dhvani* is the tertiary meaning of a word (*vyanjana*) which is suggested through either primary meaning (*abhidha*) or secondary meaning (*laksana*). To cite an example of *dhvanikavya*, we can look at a poem that Anandavardhana gives in his *Dhvanyaloka*.

You are free to go wandering, holy man  
The little dog was killed today  
By the fierce lion making its lair  
In the thicket on the banks of Goda river

(Anandavardhana16)

The explicit meaning of the poem is that the holy man can wander around on the banks of Goda River. But what the poem actually suggests is a prohibition: i.e, although the dog that used to nag the mendicant is no more, the fierce lion that killed the dog is still roaming around on the banks of the Goda River so that the mendicant should not go there. A lot of similar suggestive poems can be found in *Dhvanyaloka*.

The question that I would like to ask here is this: Is *dhvanikara* at liberty to express whatever s/he feels like? Anandavardhana says that *dhvanikara* cannot be let loose to suggest whatever one feels like. The ultimate aim of *dhvani* is the creation of *rasa*, and if what is suggested cannot create *rasa*, then *dhvani* cannot serve its purpose. So *dhvanikara* should make sure that what is suggested should not cause *rasabhasa* or hindrance to *rasa*. *Rasa*, according to Anandavardha, is closely linked to the decorum of the society. Decorum is always a disciplinary mechanism to regulate the behaviour of individuals in any society. By observing a strict adherence to the rules of propriety, *dhvanikavya* stays away from actions that call into question the existing social praxis. By asking the author to stick to decorum, Anandavardhana is preventing the writer from dealing with topics and styles that subvert the status quo. In the ancient period, especially during the period from 6<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> century AD, there was a belief that a strict adherence to *Kavyasastra* which dictates what and how to write is necessary to produce good literature. What was at work under the veneer of the guidelines to produce good literature was, in fact, a desire to thwart any attempt that goes against the interest of the dominant force. In *Dhvanyaloka*,

Anandavardhana enumerates a whole lot of situations that a writer should avoid to keep up the decorum and stay away from hampering the *rasa*.

Anandavardhana holds that the plots, whether they are invented or borrowed from known sources, should be subjected to rigorous vetting in terms of decorum: “If in a plot adopted from a well-known source, the poet is faced with situations conflicting with the intended sentiment, he should be prepared to leave out such incidence, inventing in their place even imaginary ones in conformity to the intended sentiment” (74). The idea of decorum of which the strict adherence was said to be necessary to avoid *rasabhasa*, in reality, functioned as a surveillance mechanism to frustrate any anti-authoritarian move. Bhojadeva gives a range of examples of literary works whose plots have been revised to conform to the laws of decorum in the society and to avoid *rasabhasa*. In the classical age in Indian history, art and literature were patronized by the kings. So the idea of decorum which is said to avoid *rasabhasa* was conveniently used to protect the interest of the ruling class. In *InrdoshaDasaradha*, Rama is exiled not by his father King Dasaradha, but by two magical creatures imitating his father and his step-mother Kaikeyi. In Bhatta Narayaka’s *Veni-samhara*, Dushasana’s blood is drunk not by Bheema, but by a demon who has taken possession of him. All these alterations in the plot cemented the idea that the king cannot make a mistake, unless he is controlled by some metaphysical forces.

According to Anandavardhana, breach of the laws of decorum shows that “the poet’s want of education is very great” (72). In a nutshell, conforming to decorum is considered a sign of poetic excellence as well as a way to avoid *rasabhasa*. The ruling class that patronized literature during the classical age achieved two goals through the idea of *rasa* in conjunction with propriety. First, they could prevent people who were reading these literatures from questioning the status quo. Since all the texts valorised and conformed to the existing social practices, the readers did not have the option to think about an alternate way of living or the politics of their current life. Secondly, through the constant consumption of literature that strictly followed the rules of decorum, the readers modelled their lives according to the interest of the dominant force. This shows that *dhvanikavya* is not a purely aesthetic entity where the poet can suggest whatever s/he feels like, rather it was a political tool to model the behaviour of a generation.

The rules of decorum that Anandavardhana invokes in *Dhvanyaloka* are borrowed from Bharata’s *Natyasastra*. Anandavardhana opines whatever Bharata has said about the decorum of the character’s delineation of emotions in drama is equally applicable in poetry also (Bharatha 72). In “The Origin of Drama” in *Natyasastra*, Bharata observes:

The drama teaches the path of Virtue to those who carry on their duty. The modes of love to those eager to get it fulfilled; it admonishes the uncivilized and the ill-natured ones; encourages self-control of those who are disciplined; makes the crowd bold; the heroic ones are given more incentives, the men of poor intellect are enlightened and the wisdom of the learned is enhanced. (9)

This very clearly shows that Natyasastra is not only a treatise on dramaturgy which guides the author as to how to produce an excellent drama; it is rather a powerful tool to censor the writer and socially condition the spectators.

To corroborate this argument, I would like to show how the hegemonic forces try to fashion female subjectivity by generating the ideal model of woman. Bharata lays down a lot of laws for the representation of female characters in a drama. He classifies female characters into three broad categories namely *uttama* and *adhama*. Bharata defines the *uttama* types of heroines as follows:

The superior female character is a woman of tender nature. She pays heed to superior persons' advice. She is never cruel. Bashful by nature and good in her manners, she possesses natural beauty nobility and similar qualities. She is grave and forbearing. (513)

This description shows that the *uttama* kind of woman is obedient to authority, and does not go against the prevalent social order established by the dominant force. Bharatha says that she is bashful, which shows that she does not like to be in a public space. Being forbearing, she can silently put up with suffering. While talking about *devi* (divine) kind of women who fall in the category of *uttama*, Bharatha mentions that *uttama* woman is of middling sexual desire. It points to the fact that a woman who explicitly expresses her sexual desires cannot be considered a woman of superior character. In short, a woman of good quality is always subservient to others.

Since Bharata opines that the inferior male and female characters share common traits, I think it is appropriate to take a glance at the characteristics of inferior male characters to know how he sees the women of inferior quality.

The inferior male character uses harsh words. They are ill mannered and base in their mental spirit. They do not hesitate to commit crimes. They are irascible and violent. They engage themselves in useless activities too. Haughty in manner, they are ungrateful. They do not hesitate to dishonour venerable person. They are... treacherous and eager to commit sinful deeds. (514)

From this description of the inferior male character, we can infer that an inferior female character is outspoken, ill-mannered, violent, and a daredevil. *Asura*, *Raksasa* and *Pisaca* categories of women also belong to the *adhama* kind of women. To get a clear idea about what an *adhama* character is, let us take a glance at the features of these women that Bharatha enlists. The woman in this category transgresses laws of piety, is fond of wine and meat, very proud or fickle minded, always irritable and hot tempered, harsh, and quick to quarrel. A woman is said to possess the nature of a *Raksasa* if she has large and broad limbs, red wide eyes, and coarse hairs. A woman of *pisaca* category behaves atrociously during sexual dalliance; has a loud voice; roams around at night in parks and gardens; and is fond of liquor, meat and oblations.

From this description, it is quite obvious that a woman who is assertive and expressive; who is not subservient to the status quo of the society is considered an *adhama* kind of woman. Bharata mentions that an *adhama* sort of female character cannot become the central character of a drama as she is a bad example for the society. He is driven by the conception that an ideal woman should always be obedient and submissive. By dictating the author to present a woman who is obedient, submissive and unassertive as the ideal character, Bharatha was conditioning female subjectivity in such a way that a woman does not transgress the authority of men and the dominant class. By propagating the notion that conformity to these *Kavyasastris* necessary to become a creative writer of first grade, the ruling class was in fact trying to win the writer's consent to create literary models, characters and contents that conform to their interest.

From this analysis, what becomes clear is that the formulation of a literary substance follows a strict pre-given structure. This kind of a prescriptivism based on elitism is highly conservative and suppresses the emergence of alternative ideologies. According to Deborah Cameron "Prescriptivism could refer to any form of linguistic regulation, but in practice, it is strongly associated with those forms that are most conservative, elitist and authoritarian" (Cameron 185). This prescription (of methods and modes of writing) decides the nature of the treatment of the content in a *kavya* even before it is produced. In other words, even though the name and the local habitation of the characters and the objects change from *Kavya* to *Kavya*, the essence underlying them is maintained by decorum in accordance with their position and status. By specifying the nature of the literary content and its context, the must/ -must-not-be-expressed through *rasa* and *dhvani*, Bharatha and Anandavardhana retain a strong control over expression. In this sense, *dhvani* and *rasa*, along with its purely aesthetic values, become a prescription of ideal writing/speech/expression.

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