

An Introduction to Indian Literary Theory

Dr. Sreenath VS

Humanities and Social Sciences

Indian Institute of Science Education and Research - Bhopal

Lecture- 32

Two ways of implementing Aucitya Part 2

Closely related to this tendency of setting models for each character-type and aesthetic emotions was the attempt to sanitize situations in which an otherwise noble character commits an occasional act of impropriety. This particular method was employed when the creative writers were retelling an already existing story. It is important to note that this act of editing was often implemented on the ground that any violation of the existing moral and social order will result in *rasābhāsa* or the semblance of *rasa*. *Rasābhāsa* is that situation wherein a particular *rasa*, despite the presence of all the components congenial for its production, fails to come into being because the emotion is presented in an indecorous manner or is directed towards an improper object.

The history of *rasābhāsa* can be traced back to the ninth century critic Udbhaṭa's *Kāvyaḷaṅkāra-sāra-saṃgraha*. According to Udbhaṭa, "Any sentiment or feeling that is developed in an improper and objectionable manner is called *rasābhāsa* or *bhāvābhāsa*". Udbhaṭa also uses the term *ūrjasvin* to denote what he newly calls *rasābhāsa*. According to Udbhaṭa, *ūrjasvin* is "the composition of sentiments or *rasas* and feelings or *bhāvas* wherein an action transgresses propriety because of anger, desire and so on". The example given by Udbhaṭa for *ūrjasvin* is Śiva's indecorous advance towards Pārvaṭī before their marriage . A classic example of *rasābhāsa* that Abhinavagupta cites in his commentary on Ānandavardhana's *Dhvanyāloka* is Rāvaṇa's love for Sītā. According to Abhinavagupta, Sītā being another man's wife and a divine being, Rāvaṇa's advances towards Sītā are highly improper and do not generate *śrīṅgāra rasa*, although Rāvaṇa does everything that one is supposed to do to express erotic emotion. Abhinavagupta says, "*Rasa* appears when a stable state of mind or *cittavṛtti*, that is constantly directed toward *a proper object* is aesthetically relished. The improper variety or *ābhāsa* of *rasa* or *bhāva* appears when either of them is directed toward an improper object, as when Rāvaṇa's love is directed toward Sītā". This does not mean that *rasābhāsa* in itself is highly undesirable in literature. In the case of 'degenerate'

characters who do not observe the moral and social order of the society, *rasābhāsa* is acceptable.

Through *rasābhāsa*, the literary theoreticians primarily aimed to give the writers of *kāvya* a clear idea about the elements that they should necessarily avoid in the representation of an ideal situation or character-type. As far as Ānandavardhana is concerned, any impropriety with respect to *vṛtti* or *vyavahāra* or behaviour and code of conduct is a hindrance to *rasa*. Therefore he opines that if the poet “observes a pattern in the story that goes against the *rasa*, he should eliminate it, and bring in some other story appropriate to the *rasa* by his invention.”¹

In *Pratāparudriya*, Vidyānātha also asks poets to self-censor the representation of situations and character-types that are indecorous. Vidyānātha says, “Incidents that do not have propriety should not be represented on the stage”. Vidyānātha’s discussions of *anaucitya* and *rasābhāsa*, like his predecessor Ānanda’s, are also in connection with *śringāra rasa*. Vidyānātha opines that *rasābhāsa* in connection with *śringāra* occurs “[i]f the love is one-sided as it is in the case of Rāvaṇa’s love for Sītā, if it is presented in connection with animals and lower-caste people, and if a woman loves many men” (132). According to Bhānudatta, the situations that eventuate in *rasābhāsa* of *śringāra rasa* include the unappeasable anger of a heroine; a man’s love for more than one woman (until and unless they are his wives); a woman who is in love with more than one man; love for an elderly woman; the lesser degree of passion experienced by one of the pair; and the desire felt only by the man.

Jagannātha in *Rasagaṅgādhara* gives a long list of situations that are to be eliminated from the gamut of *kāvya*. According to Jagannātha, the situations that result in *rasābhāsa* include desire for an inappropriate object such as the wife of one’s teacher, a goddess, a queen, etc.; unreciprocated desire; desire on the part of a woman for more than one lover; a father’s grief for a wicked son ; the sorrow of an ascetic who has severed all his ties with the world; the spiritual detachment with life on the part of an untouchable; and the determination on the part of a lowborn man to learn martial arts and the laughter directed at one’s father (101-102). These observations show that the idea of *rasa*, as conceived by Sanskrit literary theoreticians, was also closely associated with the socially accepted values and customs, and the creative writers were supposed to self-censor anything that was at war with the moral ethos of the period.

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This self-censoring was meticulously exercised even when poets borrowed stories from other well-known sources such as the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*. Bhoja, in his *Śringāraprakāśa*, chronicles a lot of ‘self-censoring’ incidents from the past where the poets eliminated the occasional acts of impropriety committed by an otherwise *uttama* character. This change was made to make the texts conform to the prevalent notions of *aucitya*. For example, in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Daśaratha the king of Ayodhyā, exiles his son Rāma to keep the word he has given to his wife Kaikeyī, Rāma’s step-mother. But in the play *Nirdoṣadaśaratha*, this event is radically revised in such a way that Rāma is not exiled by Daśaratha and his wife Kaikeyī, but by two magical creatures who impersonate Daśaratha and Kaikeyī. In Bhavabhūti’s *Mahāvīracarita*, Rāma has a fair duel with Vālin, as opposed to the original plot in which Rāma treacherously kills Vālin by shooting an arrow at him from behind a tree. In the *Mahābhārata*, the noble character Bhīma drinks the blood of his enemy Duśāsana after killing him. Considering that such a heinous act is unbecoming of a high-born character like Bhīma, Bhaṭṭa Nārāyaṇa in his *Veṅṅisaṃhāra*, revises this scene in such a way that Duśāsana’s blood is drunk not by Bhīma, but by a demon who has possessed him. In *Harivaṃśa*, Māyāvātī is presented as the reincarnation of the wife of Kāma, the lord of love, and her lover Pradyumna as Kāma himself, in contrast to the original story where Pradyumna falls in love with Māyāvātī who is the wife of his preceptor. Such a change is made because *śringāra* with guru’s wife is socially unacceptable.

In Kālidāsa’s *Abhijñānaśākuntala*, Duṣyanta does not recognize Śākuntala, not because Duṣyanta’s love for Śākuntalā is inconsistent, but because Śākuntalā was cursed by sage Durvāsa that Duṣyanta would forget her. Yet another major work that Bhoja refers to in connection with the revision of the plot is *Calitarāma*.

Calitarāma portrays Rāma’s return to Ayodhyā after his victory over Rāvaṇa and recovery of his wife Sītā. But in this version of Rāma’s story, Rāma spurns Sītā because he was deceived by a posse of his surviving enemies led by a demon named Lavaṇa. In Māyūrāja’s *Tāpasavatsarāja*, which is an emendation of Bhāsa’s *Svapnavāsavadatta*, the minister lies to king Udayana that queen Vāsavadattā perished in the fire; this is not to conduct the marriage between Udayana and Padmavatī, but to save the king who is enamoured by Vāsavadattā to the point of neglecting his kingly duties.

In *Vakroktijīvita*, Kuntaka also refers to such emendations of plots. In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Rāma's younger brother Lakṣmaṇa goes in search of Rāma, upon hearing the cry of Rāma who has gone to catch the golden deer. But in the drama *Udāttarāghava* by Māyurāja, the plot is rewritten in such a way that it is Rāma who goes to rescue Lakṣmaṇa. Such a revision of the plot was justified on the ground that it is highly improper for a man of great prowess and courage like Rāma to be rescued by his younger brother Lakṣmaṇa.

This effort to censor elements which are against the interests of the existing notions of propriety was applicable not only to the representation of character-types and situations, but also to the very diction of *kāvya*. Literary theoreticians starting from Bhāmaha instruct the authors to avoid terms that are considered taboo. According to Bhāmaha, writers should always stay away from such faults as *srutiduṣṭa* or the poetic fault of using words that are offensive to ear, *arthaduṣṭa* or the improper or objectionable meaning, and *kalpanāduṣṭa* or the objectionable construction wherein joining of words give rise to an objectionable sense. Bhāmaha gives a list of words and expressions that are to be avoided. He also talks about the conjoining of two words that can potentially become sound like an objectionable term.

Daṇḍin also holds the same opinion. According to him, the expression—“Hey maiden, why don't you love me who loves you a lot?”—is *grāmya* or uncouth or unpolished, as it explicitly expresses a man's desire for a woman. Such explicit expressions of sexual desire, says Daṇḍin, should strictly be avoided from *kāvya* because it generates obscenity. Daṇḍin is also against any explicit representation of *sambhoga-śringāra* (love-in-union) and the employment of taboo terms referring to love-making. Like Bhāmaha, Daṇḍin points out that a poet should always be careful about the conjoining of words in a sentence so that it does not generate any obscene denotation or double entendre. He cites a few examples in this respect. For example, when we separately speak out each word in the sentence *yā bhavataḥ priya*, the sentence means, ‘whoever is the beloved of the lord.’ But when we conjoin these words and speak rapidly, they undergo elision, meaning ‘the beloved of the one who is overly interested in love-making.’ According to Daṇḍin, instances of obscenity, such as these, are always against the interest of propriety, and hence should be summarily removed from literature. According to Vāmana, a word should be completely avoided from the entire gamut of *kāvya*, even if only one of its significations is obscene.

It could also be argued that the entire corpus of Sanskrit *kāvyaśāstra* functioned as a discourse on *aucitya* precisely because *kāvyaśāstra*'s primary concern, as we have seen in the first chapter, was to prescribe an ontology that was proper to *kāvya*. *Kāvyaśāstra* made a clear distinction between the body of *kāvya* and that of the ordinary language by prescribing to the creative writers that the language of *kāvya* should conspicuously be different from the ordinary use of language by a figurative deviation of speech. Bhāmaha's dictum regarding the body of *kāvya* which was to become a sine qua non for literary critics and creative writers of Sanskrit *kāvyaśāstra* tradition is worth quoting here. Bhāmaha says that if a composition is devoid of the figurative deviation of sense (*vakrata*), it turns out to be mere 'news,' not *kāvya*. According to him, ordinary expressions bereft of *vakrata*—such as 'the sun has set; the moon shines or the birds fly back to their nest,' etc.—cannot become *kāvya*. It is mere news (*vārta*). This habit of producing *kāvya*, which is, conspicuously different from the ordinary form of speech permanently conditioned not only the ontology of *kāvya*, but also the very expectation of readers about the form of *kāvya*.

The above-mentioned examples are more in keeping with classical western or Greek notions of decorum but in its insistence on the social acceptability of certain words / acts represented by those words, *aucitya* also became a literary index of socially acceptable behaviour. This implied the careful avoidance of the vulgar and uncouth for the readers of Sanskrit *kāvya*. It is important to bear in mind that the readers of Sanskrit *kāvya* always constituted a niche audience. In other words, Sanskrit *kāvya* did not reach out to a mass audience. The readers, it originally aimed to address, were by and large an upper class, upper caste audience, since Sanskrit education was always a prerogative of this class. Here, as Lienhard rightly points out, we should not "fall into the common error of thinking that it [*kāvya*] was the province solely of the rich and the socially privileged. On the contrary, it was a matter that concerned everyone with education, and its communicative and artistic aspects were directed precisely at these people. *Kāvya* could also be enjoyed by the poor, but educated and well-read Brahman". Abhinavagupta's comment about a *sahṛdaya* bears testimony to it. According to him, the reader that a *kāvya* envisages is one who has his heart "polished by the constant study and practice of poetry". This shows that the reader of a Sanskrit *kāvya* is invariably the nobility of the society.