

The Poetics and Natyasastra – A Study in Comparison

Abstract

Literary texts are subject to criticism to unearth issues relating to style, composition, utility and aesthetic value. In literature, drama as a genre occupies an important place both in Western and Eastern literature. Aristotle's *Poetics* and Bharata's *Natyasastra* are two monumental works which analyses the essentials of drama from different perspectives. Originally written in Greek, *Poetics* explores mainly the aspects of tragic drama and its effect on the audience. In *Natyasastra* written in Sanskrit, the author discusses the Indian tradition of drama and its technicalities and how it influences the audience. The paper is an attempt to compare the *Poetics* and *Natyasastra* as critical texts and assess their similarities and differences in the context of their impact on the audience of dramas.

Keywords: Poetics, Dramaturgy, Sutra, Catharsis, Rasa

Introduction

The Poetics of Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) is perhaps the greatest piece of literary criticism in the Western world. No one in Europe has influenced the Western thought and philosophy as did Aristotle. In fact, all Western criticism seems to grow from *The Poetics*. The reference to the Western world is deliberate here because, though Aristotle's monumental work has been used as an evaluative tool to criticise Eastern literature also in India and elsewhere, there is and has been a strong critical tradition existing in India long before Aristotle. Indian criticism has seldom been used to study Indian literature, mainly because there has been no serious exercise or exploration of the same. It is pertinent to mention here that the term 'Poetics' is in itself a broad term encompassing in its scope the science of criticism. Ancient Indian critical writings may collectively be termed Indian poetics. But it is debatable because India is not a linguistic entity like Greek, Latin or Chinese. Hence Indian poetics better be termed as Sanskrit Poetics because all ancient Indian critical texts are written in Sanskrit. The term Poetics is made up of the words Poio = to make + tekhnē = technique, craft, science etc. So Poetics is essentially the science or craft of making or creating. Bharat Muni or Acharya Bharat (henceforth to be called Bharata) believed to be belonging to between 2nd Century B.C to 2nd Century A.D was an intellectual luminary of ancient India. He is credited with the authorship of *Natyasastra*, an immortal encyclopedia of the theories and doctrines about poetry and drama. Etymologically *Natyasastra* is the science of drama or dramaturgy. Both *The Poetics* and *Natyasastra* bear striking resemblances in theme and treatment. The paper is a humble attempt to present the same.

Aim of the study

The aim of the study is to acquaint readers of the various technicalities of drama envisaged by Aristotle from Greece and by Bharata from India in their respective texts, *Poetics* and *Natyasastra* and assess how the two works analyse drama and help in interpretation of dramatic art. The Greek tradition to which Aristotle belonged, is largely based on tragedy. Sanskrit hardly has any tragedy in the technical sense of the term. Comedies in Greek are frivolous affairs. The themes of Greek plays, especially of tragedies are repugnant even today because they deal with sacrifice of own children, incest, adultery, murder, patricide and so on. Sanskrit literature abounds in passion, romances, exploits of Gods and Goddesses, infatuation, sin, sorrow, separation etc. What is worth noting is the fact that both the Greek and Sanskrit tradition of drama is serious not only in their subject matter, but also in the manner and mode of their presentation. They followed well defined technical norms which surprises and excites even the present day reader. Both *The Poetics* and *Natyasastra* are treatises on drama and are believed to be the earliest in the field. Both the works mark the origin of the technique and form of drama.



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However, being texts concerned with form and technique, they are acromatic texts – that is they cannot be understood by themselves; their reading must be supplemented by help books or dramatic texts. *The Poetics* is not a regularly written treatise. On the whole, it is coherent, and Aristotle assumes some sort of intelligence on the part of the reader. Like *Natyasastra*, it is written in the 'sutra' style. They don't elaborate but say in formulas. It is no wonder therefore that both the works are taught in the Western world as contemporary texts.

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Tragedy for Aristotle and 'natya' for Bharata are synonymous terms for both denote serious drama. Contrary to contemporary understanding, tragedy in Greek is not a tragic drama but a serious play not necessarily ending in grief or misery. In *The Poetics*, Aristotle names almost 30 plays of which two – *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles and *Iphigenia in Tauris* by Euripides are mentioned frequently. The former ends unhappily while the latter ends happily. Aristotle does not rate them but both plays are perfectly good with good plots. The four co-ordinates or dimensions of drama according to Aristotle are : (i) imitation (mimesis), (ii) language (iii) presentation, and (iv) catharsis. Bharata's substitutes are pathya (text), geet (song), abhinaya (presentation/performance) and rasa/rasanubhuti (poetic pleasure which is aesthetic). All these co-ordinates follow from the proposition that drama is the only medium that synthesizes oral with the visual. It is not an imitation of a human person as such, but imitation of human action, a process, a doing, a continuity. Aristotle's concept of 'mimesis' supports this view. Bharata considers drama an imitation of people's joys and sorrows and consequently of human action which is termed

"anukriti." Both Aristotle and Bharata visualise a play as a linguistic entity where mimesis or anukriti is the differentia of fine arts. Aristotle lays stress on the dramatic manner of the presentation while for Bharata the play is successful only if it can carry meaning from the stage to the audience. This is termed as "abhinaya" which is nothing but basically a communication of meaning. Drama, in other words signify the movement of ethos of a culture. Both authors agree that the function of drama is to give the reader or audience a focus. Therefore, the final cause must be in-built in the play. It must have an effect on the audience, and the audience becomes a willing participant in the scheme which Bharata calls 'sahridaya' or co-creator. He is also of the opinion that drama must provide pleasure - 'ananda' - above the emotions of joy and sorrow – a state of mind above and beyond anything.

The most striking similarity in *The Poetics* and *Natyasastra* is when both the authors try to derive the effect of drama on the audience. Aristotle uses the term catharsis (often spelt with a 'k') in this connection which may mean purgation, purification, synthesis or illumination. Bharata uses the term *rasa* to describe the effect of drama on the audience which may be of four types – (i) *rasa* as utpatti (production), (ii) *rasa* as anumiti (inference), (iii) *rasa* as bhoga (enjoyment), and (iv) *rasa* as abhivyakti (manifestation). Both the terms, 'catharsis' and 'rasa' are not explained or defined by the authors which accounts for their multiple interpretations. It is a strange coincidence that catharsis and *rasa* appear in the VIth chapters respectively of *The Poetics* and *Natyasastra*. of course, the term catharsis also occurs in the XVIIth chapter of *The Poetics*. In literary theory perhaps the most debatable terms are 'catharsis' and 'rasa'. An important point to be noted is that *catharsis* as a term was not invented by Aristotle, he simply borrowed it from the Hippocratic medical lexicon which defined the term as purging out harmful elements from the human body. Likewise, the term *rasa* for the first time occurs in the rig Veda which signified the juice of the *Soma* plant. In the Vishnu Purana, *Soma* is the moon god, the son of Atri and Brahma. The term is used for the first time in literature by Bharata to define the effect of a play on the audience. *Rasa* as a term is perhaps more inclusive and encompasses within its scope more emotions which dramatic art purports to convey. Bharata mentions eight *rasas* and the presence of the ninth is debated. They are

1. srngara-erotic,
2. hasya-humorous,
3. karuna-tragic/pathetic,
4. raudra-furious/cruel /impetuous anger,
5. vira-heroic,
6. bhayanak - terrific or fearsome,
7. bibhatsa-loathsome, awkward or gruesome,
8. adbhuta-unnatural or peculiar.

The ninth *rasa*, *santa* – poise / peace which is mentioned in certain ancient critical texts seems to be an interpolation. No other critical work mentions such diverse and specific emotions which Bharata enumerates.

Conclusion

Summing up, it is worth summarizing the four common points between *The Poetics* and *Natyasastra*

1. Tragedy and natya are synonymous terms denoting serious drama.
2. Both follow a formulaic mode – the sutra form, providing hints but no description. *Catharsis* and *rasasutra* is a formula to describe the effect of drama on the audience.
3. The doctrine of universalization is prevailed upon, that is, both the texts believe that a play brings about a transformation from general to the aesthetic, the painful to the joyous.
4. Simultaneity and duality go side by side providing the aesthetic experience.

The evaluation of western plays by the *rasa* theory and that of Indian plays using *catharsis* would undoubtedly benefit and benefit any contemporary critical endeavour.

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