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Fear in Greek and Sanskrit Drama

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle tells us that tragedy best fulfills the aims of poetry and most fully employs the resources of that art. He defined tragedy as the imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude, by means of a language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, including music and spectacular effects (*Poetics*: 1462a); it relies in its various elements not on narrative but on acting (4.1448b4-19). In response, the spectator feels pity and fear and through this process experiences a purgation (*catharsis*) (*Poetics*: 1449b), viewed as a temporary psychological effect without moral consequences. In both the *Poetics* (1453a) and in the *Rhetoric* (book 2, chapter 5), Aristotle defines fear (*phobos*) as an emotion akin to terror caused by the presence of whatever threatens our own selves with harm or destruction. He defines pity (*eleos*) as an emotion suggesting tears and lamentation.¹ He sees it as an alternately directed form of fear involving the fate of others who suffer undeserved misfortune. In other words, Aristotle defines pity as but a variant of fear. Since they are essentially the same emotion, we will focus our discussion in this essay on the central role fear plays in Greek drama. We will then compare this focus to the function of fear in Sanskrit drama.

¹ For a general discussion of fear and pity, see *Rhetoric* 2.5-8. The author does not presume that the topic of this essay is in any way original. Comparisons of Greek and Sanskrit drama and their treatments of emotion exist. In particular, see Deutsch (1975), Gupt (1994), Singal (1971), Alejandre (2013), Thakkar (1986). It is merely our intention here to introduce broadly the role of emotion in Sanskrit drama through a comparison with Greek drama.

The production of Greek tragedy, was clearly directed toward eliciting a strong emotional arousal of pity and fear with purgation as its pleasurable effect. As Plato noted in the *Republic*, “Even the best of us when we listen to a passage from Homer or from the makers of tragedy... are delighted and surrender ourselves” (605c-d). Plato’s recounts in the *Ion* (5.35c) how a rhapsode reciting poetry talks of his hair standing on end. Aristotle does not limit the variety of emotions an audience can experience. While the Other arts also work through fear and pity, they can also produce an effect through other emotions (*Politics*: 1341b33-342a29). In the *Rhetoric* (2.1-11), for example, Aristotle notes how an orator can evoke anger, affection, friendliness, enmity, hatred, fear, shame, pity, and indignation. But, the supreme emotion on which tragedy depends is *phobos*. Tragedy cannot afford every kind of pleasure, only that which is proper to it, its *oikeia hedone* (*Poetics*: 1454a) to result in *catharsis*. However clear regarding this aim of drama Aristotle may be, he does not go into detail on how the arousal of fear and pity actually give rise to *catharsis* (*Poetics*: 1453a). He does not set down any system explaining exactly how the process of purgation occurs. It is just seen as an organic part of the plot, where the action draws towards a catastrophic end, followed by a reversal of the situation, recognition, and finally *pathos*. Fear and pity, aroused by spectacular means, thus result from the inner structure of the piece. One who hears a tale told will thrill with horror and melt to pity at what takes place. Because tragedy satisfies a basic human need for imitation (*Poetics*: 4.1448b4-19), harmony and rhythm (1453b), it gives us pleasure and satisfaction. It purges us of our emotions (through imitation) and reconciles us to our fate or universal lot. In its quest for the universal, Greek tragedy resembles Sanskrit drama.

In comparing these two classical forms of drama, the Greek and the Sanskrit, we must first acknowledge that tragedy, as we understand it in the Greek context, did not exist in ancient India. While there was always an element of fear in the principle forms of Sanskrit drama, it takes on various forms and the crisis is always resolved by the end of the play. Perhaps as early as the 3rd century BC, Indian dramatic theorists such as Bharata and Abhinavagupta, spoke of fear (*bhaya*). But in classical Sanskrit drama, fear occurs in the context of other emotions (*bhāvas*) that become universalized in the dramatic process as moods or *rasas*. Bharata, the foremost theorist, set out the rules of all artistic

representations in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, a treatise dating from circa 200BC to 200 AD. In this extensive treatise, Bharata minutely investigates all the arts. In his discussion of drama, he analyzed all the qualities of feeling that attend each primary emotion. He then identified the symptoms of the feelings, the substrata of emotions that might grow out of a primary emotion, and the ways in which emotions complement or oppose each other. In this schema, fear appears as just one key emotion among eight others (the erotic, comic, pathetic, furious, heroic, terrible, odious and marvelous) (*Nāṭyaśāstra*, trans. Ghosh: 2.78). While Aristotle mentioned other emotions in the *Rhetoric*,² his range of *psychagogia* was as limited as their description; they were certainly not analyzed in minute form or as comprehensively as one finds in Bharata. Whereas Aristotle never explains the mechanics of the aesthetic experience, Bharata, in contrast, delineates minutely how drama evokes emotions.

The compassionate fear described by Aristotle is the rough equivalent to what Indians term *karūṇa*. In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle described it as a kind of pain (*lupe*) felt at the sight of a painful or destructive event happening to someone who does not deserve it – a fearful event close at hand which one might expect happening to oneself, a relative or a friend (Stanford: 24). Such events arouse *eleos* only if they are placed in the framework of cosmic helplessness. *Phobos*, in contrast, makes one want to escape. Its symptoms include paleness, chilliness, fast pulse, shivering, shuddering, shrieking, horripilation, prostration (Stanford: 28), emotions which also have their parallels in Indian dramatic theory. Stupor (*ekplexis*) has its Sanskrit equivalent in *stambha*. In both Indian and Greek drama, stupor occurs when one does something in ignorance and later discovers it. The ensuing shock causes such tremendous fear that one becomes stupefied. But, as I noted, such fear is delineated in Indian drama merely as one emotion among many. It certainly never drives the action.

The Sanskrit dramatic term for emotion, *bhāva*, connotes a state of being, a condition of becoming, a way of feeling or thinking, a sentiment, purport, or intention. In the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Bharata divides the *bhāvas* into three groups, the *stayi* or dominant emotions, the *vyabhicari* or transient emotions, and the *sattvika* or psychosomatic emotions. There are eight *stayibhāvas*: sexual

² He mentions anger (*menis* or *cholos*), hatred (*misos*), and moral indignation, (*nemesis*)

pleasure (*rati*), humor (*hāsa*), grief (*śoka*), anger (*krodha*), confidence (*utsāha*), fear (*bhaya*), revulsion (*jugupsā*) and astonishment (*vismaya*). The transient or *vyabhicari bhāvas* are 36 in number and include dejection, guilt, doubt, envy, intoxication, fatigue, indolence obsequy, worry, fondness and so on – they are transient because they are not as visceral as the permanent variety; they cannot exist in isolation from the other transient emotions. Othello's actions were caused by the *stayibhāvas* of anger and sexual frustration, *krodha* (anger) and *rati* (sexual love) in Indian parlance, but also by what Bharata would term of other transient emotions or *vyabhicaribhāvas* such as worry, fondness and envy. This is where Sanskrit dramatic theory becomes an elaborate storehouse of minutia very different from Aristotle's vague generalizations. Because of the interaction between the *bhāvas* and the ancillary *anubhāvas*, *vyabhicaribhāvas*, and *stayibhāvas*, the *bhāvas* transmogrify into their equivalent *rasas* or universalized moods (*Nāṭyaśāstra*, trans. Ghosh: 2.81).

The term *rasa* can denote many things in Sanskrit. In both Vedic and classical Sanskrit usage, *rasa* means juice, a fluid, semen, or an extract, as in Ayurvedic terminology where it describes the vital juice extracted from foods to keep the organism going. Bharata uses the term *rasa* as something worthy of being tasted (*rasa ko padārthaḥ ucyate āsvādyatvāt* (*Nāṭyaśāstra*: bk.6, verse 31). It is the mixture, described as an alchemical operation distilled out of the one or several *bhāvas* acted upon by permanent and transient emotions and their ensuing psychosomatic effects created through verbal and gestural acting (*abhināya*). Simply put, a dominant emotion, like fear or sexual passion or anger is tasted as *rasa*, when it is mixed with transitory emotions (like dejection, guilt, doubt, intoxication, etc.) and communicated through verbal and physical acting. Indian theoreticians are very descriptive; they delineate in minute detail how the myriad verbal styles, gestures, facial and bodily expressions and acting movements combine in a vast variety of ways to effect this change. A drama such as Kālidāsa's *Abhiññānaśākuntalam* (85–76, hereafter, *Śākuntala*), generally believed to be the best exemplar of a play in the Sanskrit language, exhibits this wealth of emotions that the Indian dramatist seeks to portray. The general aim is for the author to display all the various emotions and their ancillary feelings with subtlety, elegance, and artistry.

If we take the *Śākuntala* as our example, we can see how the various *rasas* are represented. The *rasa* of joy, excitement and delight (*harṣa*) can be found at least four times during the play (2.15, 4.3, 6.6, 7.20).³ It comes about through the actors' depictions of brightness of face and eyes, their using sweet words, horripilation, tears, perspiration, etc. (*Nāṭyaśāstra*: 7.60). Emotion is represented on stage by repeated shivers, arm hairs standing on end, and the actor repeatedly touching his body (*Nāṭyaśāstra*: 7.21). The representation of joy is accompanied on stage by the actor perspiring and acting this state by taking up a fan, wiping off sweat and looking for a breeze (*Nāṭyaśāstra*: 7.102). The informed viewer (*sahjādaya*) understands these cues, experiences their interaction, relates to them first in an individual fashion that subsequently expands and transforms into a universal experience.

The *rasa* of shame, embarrassment, modesty, bashfulness, shyness (*vrīḍa*) in the *Śākuntala* can be seen to appear in at least two instances (4.5, 4.6). It is evoked by actors covering their faces, thinking with downcast faces, drawing lines on the ground, touching clothes and rings, or biting their nails (*Nāṭyaśāstra*: 7.57). The *rasa* of fear (*bhaya*) occurs at least three times (5.26, 6.0, 6.3) and is evoked by the actors' trembling hands and feet, palpitation of the heart, paralysis, dryness of the mouth, licking of the lips, perspiration, tremor, hurried movements, wide-open eyes (*Nāṭyaśāstra*: 7.21). It is represented on stage by the character being inactive, inert, senseless and stiff (*Nāṭyaśāstra*: 7.101). The *rasa* of amazement, surprise and astonishment (*vismaya*) occurs at least eight times in the *Śākuntala* (1.7, 4.4, 4.10, 5.29, 5.30, 7.9, 7.13, 7.20). It is represented by the actors' eyes being wide open, looking without blinking, considerable eyebrow movement, horripilation, moving the head to and fro, crying "wonderful" etc., joy, tears and fainting (*Nāṭyaśāstra*, 7.27).

The *rasa* of despair, dejection, despondence and dismay (*viśāda*) occurs at least four times in the *Śākuntala* (2.0, 3.5, 5.17, 5.21). To evoke this *rasa*, characters look about for allies or think about how to achieve their goals. They display a loss of energy, absent mindedness, deep breathing, etc. They can also run around aimlessly, sleep, breathe deeply, and fall into a trance. The *rasa* of remembrance (*smṛti*) can be found just once in the *Śākuntala* (4.120) and is

³ For notation of where the various *rasas* can be found in the *Śākuntala*, see Kālidāsa: 79–80.

signified by the raising and nodding of the head, looking down, and raising the eyebrows. The final *rasa*, confusion, agitation, bewilderment (*saṃbhrama*) occurs many times in the play (a few instances include 1.9, 1.19, 1.21, 1.29, 6.25). The 10th-century abridgement of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the *Daśarūpaka* of Dhanamjaya sees it represented in dry lips, licking lips, change of facial color, loss of voice (1.79, 1.42).

The eleventh-century commentary to Bharata written by Abhinavagupta, the *Abhināvabhāratī*, specifically explains how the *bhāva* of fear is transformed in an emblematic scene from the *Śākuntala* into its equivalent *rasa*. The play opens with the King Dushyanta chasing a deer through a hermitage. The spectator knows that the deer is afraid, but there is no reality (*viśeṣa rūpa abhāvaḥ*) to which this fear can be related as the chaser is unreal and the chase is not in real time and space. Abhinavagupta notes that the spectator is himself not afraid. Nor does he think that the actor is really afraid. [I use the male pronouns intentionally since the presumed spectator is a man. Women were not allowed to learn Sanskrit.] The spectator does not think that the other—either the actor or the character – is a friend or a foe. Since personal reactions could distract the viewer from fully feeling the represented emotion, it is incumbent on him to set such reactions aside (or view them as non-existent). The dramatically represented emotion – here fear- can then loom large and go to the spectator’s heart as the *rasa* of fear (*bhayānaka rasa*). At this moment, the self (*ātman*) of the spectator is neither assertive nor subdued – it is not reacting normally. The dramatic emotion that has been produced by the play is impersonal and felt in a special way. It is unlike the emotional states in daily life.

Rasa can be stripped of personal reactions because the experience of the spectator is influenced by the experience of the entire viewing community. The audience, felt to be of one heart with the drama unfolding before them – the Sanskrit term for the empathetic spectator is *sahr̥dāya*, meaning “with one heart” – are all offered the same perceptive experience through the various *bhāvas*. The resulting communal experience is intense. In fact, it is so strong that all the bonds of time and space are set aside for the emergence of *rasa*. There is the realization of a single unified experience for all the spectators (*ata eva sarvasāmājīkānām ekaghanayā eva pratipattiḥ sutaram rasapariposhaya* (*Nāṭyaśāstra*: AB 6:31). All those viewing the performance have the same

deeply unifying experience, not because they are moved by the same thing, but because every spectator's consciousness is colored by the same seed (*bija*) of the emotion – here fear – and there is a consonance among the spectators in experiencing this primordial desire (of fear) as *rasa*. The experience is without obstruction; it is a unity and a wonder (*sarvesham anādivāsanācīrtīrtacetashām vasanāsamvādāt sa ca avighna samvit camatkārah*). Therefore, it can be said that the *bhāva* is *rasa*, since all likes and dislikes have been removed through the dramatic experience (*sarvarthārasanātmakavīta- vighnapratītigrahya bhāva eva rasah*). According to Abhinavagupta, the *vibhāvas*, *anubhāvas* and *sancaribhāvas* have the effect of removing all experiential obstructions (*tatra vighnapasāraka vibhāvaprabhṛtayah*) (*Nāṭyaśāstra*: AB 6:31) and allowing for the experience to *rasa* to occur.

When we compare these two classical dramatic systems, certain differences immediately present themselves. First, Greek and Sanskrit drama aim for different aesthetic experiences. Indian drama envisions aesthetic pleasure as its goal and aims to produce delight in the representation of a considerable variety of different emotions. It provides intricately elaborated patterns for combining various ancillary emotions, stagecraft, and performance rules in order to achieve this desired amalgamation of portrayed emotions. The informed viewer intellectually grasps what is being done, understands the Sanskrit poetry and its sophisticated literary allusions, punning and plays on words. He takes pleasure in the intricacies and the variety of the representations as they are experienced in a communal setting. In contrast, Greek drama focuses on the *catharsis* resulting from the fear and pity elicited in the audience from the action inherent in the plot of the drama. This *catharsis* is understood as a restoration to a very individual state of pleasure; it is not understood as a general or communal experience. Aristotle does not describe or chart the psychological changes that constitute this purging. We are merely told that it happens.

The Indian theorists, however, minutely describe the elements that contribute to the creation of *rasa*. Bharata outlines all the components and ancillary emotions that work in conjunction to create a variety of moods not just, as in the Greek context, the mood of fear. This dissection of the dramatic process and delineation of the acting style, phonetic devices, costuming, make-up, gestures, dance, and stagecraft all contribute to the heightening of the

experience in the learned spectator allowing him to move out of his personal experience through the distanciation effected by what is being performed before him. This emotion can, to a certain degree, be seen as itself purged of its individual component, since it becomes an emotion divested of personal attachment. The experience of *rasa*, however, does not stop at this level of depersonalization; it proceeds to undergo detemporalization. In fact, *rasa* is said to give a sense of joy that is akin to religious bliss in terms of its rapture and intensity. Bharata claims that the *rasa* is capable of being tasted (*āsvādyate*) as when well-disposed persons eat food cooked with many kinds of spices. Such as the *gourmand* enjoys the taste and attains pleasure and satisfaction, so too does the informed spectator of drama experience *rasa* (*Nāṭyaśāstra*, trans. Ghosh: 1.81-82). If this pleasure can be seen as a form of release, then the *rasa* experience is a kind of *catharsis* or, perhaps more precisely, we can envision *catharsis* as a prerequisite of *rasa*.

The differing aims of Greek and Sanskrit drama might well be examined from the religious purpose they serve. It is significant that tragedy defines what we know of Greek drama. We were always taught that we would have a different understanding if whatever Aristotle wrote on comedy, if indeed he wrote extensively about comedy, had come down to us.⁴ Nevertheless, his description of tragedy tells us much about the Greek way of seeing things. The Greeks wrote tragedies. The Greek theorists speak to us of *catharsis*; it is associated with tragedy, and seen as a means of restoring a spirit that is felt to be torn apart. Greek drama thus offers a temporary relief in what the Greeks perceive as an otherwise hopeless world. The Greeks saw that bad things happen and were moved to represent human vulnerability in the dramatic form of tragedy. They recognized the inescapability from pain and sorrow as key to the human condition. Fear was seen as a dominant and dominating presence in their lives. There was the oppressive knowledge that one could just as easily be a victim of fate as the hero/heroine of tragic events. One could only hope for a momentary reprieve from not personally experiencing something akin to

⁴ In the *Poetics*, Aristotle notes that he will treat epic and comedy later (1449b). Chapter 5 begins the discussion on comedy. But it is fragmentary and not enough of the text survives. In Chapters 23 and 26, Aristotle discusses the epic genre as a corollary of tragedy.

the awful suffering depicted on stage. “There, but for the grace of God, go I.” Humans are impotent in the face of destiny. They are truly powerless.

This tragic view of life simply does not exist in India, where good and evil are seen to naturally coexist. Evil is understood as the co-relative of goodness. Bad things happen not because we have angered the gods or god is absent from human affairs. They happen as a consequence of our past actions. While the notion of karmic retribution does not work too well on a social level (hence the development of Buddhism and Christianity in India to supplement Hinduism’s seeming apathy for one’s fellow man), it more than adequately explains why terrible things happen. There is misery all around, but Indians tend not to focus too much on it. The world, as we know it, is illusory. We are blinded by the veil of *māyā* that distorts the ultimate reality. In the Indian context, it is far more important to focus on one’s own spiritual path. The key to the concept of salvation in Indian thought is detachment from the bonds and illusions of this world. The Indians are not oriented to the sufferings of this world (*saṃsāra*). Rather they are fixated on deliverance (*mokṣa*) from suffering through the cessation of the cycle of death and rebirth. Fear, like all emotions (and everything else in life, for that matter), is transient. The real world is one of illusion and our task is to detach ourselves from its snares. Part of this detachment involves a movement from the singular to a more universal experience. Drama is seen as contributing to this spiritual process of detachment. When we look on the loves of King Dushyanta and Śakuntalā, we are not meant to think about our own relationships, our own loves or their disappointments. We are pushed to come out of ourselves, partake of not just my love for my husband, but Love (with a capital L) as it is shared with the audience around me. I seek to forget myself and move just a little closer to the loss of egoity and timelessness. In the Indian context, the dramatic experience of fear (along with all the other emotions) leads to a movement away from individual ideation to a religious experience or universalism in radical distinction from the very individualized *catharsis* experienced in the Greek context.

We in the West are the children of the Greeks. We are trapped in our sense of self and our ego structures. Our dramatic heroes are individuals – not the static types (king, queen, buffoon, and thief) one finds in Sanskrit drama. Who could be more unique than Medea, Oedipus or Phaedra? We are also

much more tormented and perplexed by pain and suffering. Our tendency is to deny or rage against their dominion over us. Given our fear of pain, suffering and death, it is logical that it would dominate our forms of artistic expression. To speak of emotions as a source of formal coherence, as is found in Indian aesthetics, is foreign to the Aristotelian perspective. In the West, we tend to see the emotions as chaotic, explosive, corrosive and irrational. For Plato, feeling threatens *logos* and tragedies lure the spectator into surrendering control of the emotions.

Indian drama takes us in the opposite direction. Fear is transitory like everything else. Pain and suffering do not define what it is to be human, but are seen as mere momentary effects in a series of incarnations until we gain release from delusion and cease to be reborn into this world. Indian drama viewed life in this context of a truly *longue durée*. Plays could always end “happily ever after.” In doing so, they support a Hindu notion of cosmic order (*ṛta*). Sanskrit drama restores emotional harmony that, of necessity, becomes disrupted. In relegating fear to a minor role in drama, Indian dramatists acknowledged the important Hindu truth that whatever tragedy might exist on earth is ultimately meaningless, since there is an ultimate happy ending in salvation (*mokṣa*). Abhinavagupta determined that the emotional experience of art actually foreshadows the bliss of *mokṣa*. Emotions experienced in real life limit our freedom because we get caught up in them. But, the emotions evoked in art can be experienced with dispassion, since the informed spectator recognizes that art is a world apart from everyday life. In such a disinterested state, emotions can be savored (as *rasa* in the sense of an essence or a juice). Pleasure comes from being able to relish the quality of feeling without being subject to it. By drama demonstrating the variegated interrelatedness of all opposing feelings to which we are subject, it moves us away from a deeply personal dimension toward a more universal quality and creates an experience of liberation.

In the world of Greek drama, we encounter Olympian pessimism. In Indian drama, we experience Vedāntic⁵ equanimity. Indians, quite simply, react differently than we in the West to the perception of the world as a vale

⁵ Literally, the end or continuation of the Vedas, the earliest sacred books of Hinduism teaching the oneness of the individual soul (*ātman*) with the Divine (*Brahman*).

of tears. In both dramatic worlds, however, fear (and its external expression of pity) when represented on stage provides a pleasure, whether it is called cathartic *hedone* or *bhayānaka rasa*. Life consists of suffering whether you lived in Greece or India, but its representation on stage always give us some form of release, whether it be *catharsis* or *rasa*. Both begin with purification and end in delight.

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Fear in Greek and Sanskrit Drama

Summary

This essay compares Greek and Sanskrit drama from the perspective of their aesthetic aims. It examines briefly the role of pity and fear in Aristotle as a point of departure for a more general study of emotion in Sanskrit drama, where fear comprises but one mood sought in the aesthetic experience. The discussion is based on the theoretical understanding of drama as elucidated by Bharata in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and Abhinavagupta in his commentary to this work.

Keywords: comparative literature, *catharsis*, *phobos*, *bhāva*, *rasa*, Aristotle, Abhinavagupta, Bharata, *Nāṭyaśāstra*

Slowa kluczowe: komparatystyka literacka, *katharsis*, *phobos*, *bhāva*, *rasa*, Arystoteles, Abhinavagupta, Bharata, *Nāṭyaśāstra*