

The Transcendent Aesthetic: Rasa and Sublimity Across Two Traditions

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ABSTRACT

Literary experience is closely connected with the human capacity to perceive, interpret, and respond to aesthetic qualities. Aesthetic perception shapes the way individuals encounter literature, influencing how a literary work is read, evaluated, appreciated, and critically interpreted. Such responses occur across different cultural and historical contexts, whether among Western or Eastern readers, or within ancient and modern literary traditions. Although literary works emerge from particular times and places and are shaped by language, mythology, imagery, social practices, and cultural contexts, these differences do not necessarily restrict their aesthetic reception. Rather, they contribute to the diverse ways in which literary experience is understood. The capacity of literature to evoke emotional and aesthetic responses enables it to communicate across cultural and temporal boundaries. Within this broader field of literary aesthetics, the concepts of Rasa and the Sublime occupy significant positions, particularly in their engagement with intense emotional and imaginative experience.

Against this background, the present study revisits two influential classical aesthetic theories, Rasa and the Sublime, by examining the conceptual affinities between the aesthetic thought of Bharata Muni and Longinus. Although they belong to different historical, geographical, and intellectual traditions, both thinkers are concerned with the capacity of artistic expression to generate an elevated and emotionally significant experience in the reader or spectator. Bharata Muni develops his aesthetic principles primarily through Natya, particularly dramatic performance, while Longinus discusses the Sublime in relation to poetry and elevated literary expression. Their approaches therefore emerge from distinct literary forms and cultural contexts, yet both address the relationship between artistic expression, emotional response, and the transformative potential of aesthetic experience. A comparative reading of these traditions provides a broader understanding of how classical aesthetic thought approaches the capacity of literature and performance to move beyond ordinary perception and produce an intense experience of artistic appreciation.

Keywords: Aesthetic emotion, objective correlative, Rasa, Sublime, transcendental experience

INTRODUCTION

The theory of 'Rasa' (relish), articulated by Bharata in the *Natyashastra*, occupies a significant position in the Indian tradition of poetics. Bharata's *Natyashastra*, generally dated to approximately the 4th or 5th century CE (Gnoli xiv), is regarded as the oldest extant comprehensive treatise on Indian dramatic art. Although earlier references to the *Natyasutras* of Shilalin and Krishnashvan appear in the writings of Panini (Lidova 111-113 & Mehta 17), Bharata provides a systematic treatment and codification of the concept of 'Rasa'. He understands *Natya* (drama) as an imitation of life (*lokanukruti*) in which human emotions are represented and intensified through dramatic expression (*bhavanu kirtanam*). Through this process, the spectator experiences the pleasures and pains of human life (*lokasya sukhadukha*) as *Natyarasa* (dramatic relish), becoming a *Rasika* (art lover),

Bharata's understanding of aesthetic relish also finds an interesting parallel in the Bhagavata Purana, which invites the connoisseur to experience aesthetic emotion through its poetic and devotional expression:

Drink,
o you connoisseurs (rasika) on earth who have A taste for the beautiful [or:
who have a poetic taste, A taste for a language full of feeling] (bhavuka),
Drink again and again this Bhagavatam, this store house [of] aesthetic mood
(rasa) (Vyasdeva, qtd. in Redington 3).

Initially, Rasa functions primarily within the field of dramaturgy rather than as a comprehensive theory of literary aesthetics. The Acharyas of the Alamkara (figure) school treat it largely as an element of ornamentation rather than as the central principle of literary creation. Over time, however, critical reflection gradually establishes Rasa as a fundamental concept in the understanding of literary and artistic experience (Patnaik 15).

In the Western classical tradition, Longinus' *On the Sublime* occupies an important position in literary criticism. The work approaches literary excellence from a perspective that differs significantly from conventional theories of instruction, persuasion, and delight. It therefore "remains towering among all other works of the class" (Saintsbury 174). Longinus, often regarded as one of the greatest Greek critics after Aristotle, argues that the greatness of poetry does not depend solely on its ability to instruct or delight. Its distinctive power lies in the sublimity of thought and expression. For him, elevated writing does not merely persuade the reader through reason; rather, it transports the reader through the intensity of its effect. Sublimity consequently becomes a central quality of literary expression, and Longinus identifies five principal sources through which this effect is achieved.

The term 'the sublime' is associated with Longinus' *Peri Hypsous*, subsequently translated as *On the Sublime* (Dorsch 99). The work contributes to a critical tradition that increasingly emphasizes poetic inspiration and the exceptional creative capacity of the writer. Its emphasis on inspiration and elevated expression contributes to Longinus being described as the first Romantic critic (Saintsbury 172).

Patnaik's *Rasa in Aesthetics* (1996) examines the development of aesthetic thought in ancient Indian literary traditions and identifies 'rasa' as a central expression of imaginative and aesthetic understanding. His discussion also draws attention to the relationship between rasa and the Indian concept of dhvani (sound), associated with Anandavardhana. Within this framework, artistic expression derives significance not only from its formal representation but also from the meanings and aesthetic responses that emerge through it. Patnaik further presents Rasa as an alaukik experience, one that moves beyond ordinary worldly perception. The artist transforms individual emotions into a more universal aesthetic experience, enabling the spectator to respond to emotions beyond their immediate personal circumstances. In this sense, the work of art becomes a medium through which emotional experience is refined and communicated to the spectator.

Dr. Pramod Kale's *The Theatrical Universe: A Study of the Natyashastra* (1974) examines the Natyashastra with particular attention to its relevance for stage production and its accessibility to Western scholars. His study gives considerable importance to the practical dimensions of the text, although its discussion largely concludes at the point where the actual application of the theoretical principles begins.

Dr. Manomohan Ghosh's English edition and translation of the *Natyashastra* (1951) provides an important resource for Western scholars. Ghosh describes his translation as "literal as far as possible" (Ghosh xxiv), and his introduction and explanatory notes contribute significantly to the understanding of performance and rasa theory. At the same time, the complexity of its terminology and its emphasis on theoretical and psychological explanations can create difficulties in interpreting certain aspects of staging and characterization. Kale therefore observes that such approaches may lead to "often inadequate and misleading" conclusions in relation to theatrical practice (10-11).

Mishra's *Coleridge and Abhinavagupta: A Comparative Study of Philosophy of Poetry in the East and the West* considers aesthetic pleasure as a central purpose of literature and establishes a comparative connection between Longinus and Abhinavagupta. Mishra suggests that the sublime enables literature to move the reader beyond ordinary perception and into an intensified state of aesthetic experience. Through such elevation, literary expression can shift attention from external circumstances towards inward reflection and emotional awareness.

The relevance of the *Natyashastra* also extends into modern Western theatre. John Brown, in "Shakespeare, the *Natyashastra*, and Discovering Rasa for Performance," explores "analogies between the assumptions about theatricality found in the classic Sanskrit treatise on acting, the *Natyashastra*, and those of the Elizabethan theatre" (Brown 3). His work identifies points of correspondence between Shakespearean and Asian theatrical traditions and employs 'Rasa' as a means of engaging with Asian performance principles. Brown clarifies that his approach does not constitute a rigid application of the *Natyashastra* but rather an experimental adaptation, describing the resulting method as "Asian in genus, while being European in species" (Brown 5).

The contemporary application of Rasa is also evident in the work of Richard Schechner and his colleagues at East Coast Artists. Their *Rasaboxes* exercise and training programme applies principles associated with Rasa to theatrical practice, while Schechner further develops these ideas in his essay "Rasaesthetics" (27-50). Rasa occupies a central position in Sanskrit literary criticism and functions as an important connecting principle across different forms of artistic expression. Bharata

discusses its significance in relation to both natya (drama) and kavya (poetry), particularly in the sixth and seventh chapters of the *Natyashastra*, where he develops the celebrated *Rasa* sutra.

For Bharata, the creation of *Rasa* constitutes the central purpose of dramatic representation. A performance seeks to evoke a particular aesthetic experience in the spectator, and this experience is understood as '*Rasa*'. Aesthetic experience involves the perception and enjoyment of beauty and the accompanying awareness of joy or *Ananda* (bliss). Thus, *Rasa* can be understood as aesthetic relish arising from artistic representation.

The term *Rasa* originates from the root *rasah*, which denotes sap, juice, taste, flavour, or relish. In this sense, *Rasa* represents the essential flavour or distilled essence of artistic expression and becomes a source of creative inspiration for both the artist and the spectator. Bharata explains the process through the well-known *Rasa* sutra in the *Natyashastra*: "*vibhavanubhava vyabhichari sanyogat rasa nispatih*" (line 32). The sutra indicates that aesthetic relish (*rasa nispatih*) arises through the combination of determinants (*vibhava*), consequents (*anubhava*), and transitory states or fleeting emotions (*vyabhichari bhava*).

Bharata further explains *Rasa* through the analogy of an extract produced by combining different ingredients. Just as individual condiments acquire a distinctive and pleasurable taste when combined, different emotional and dramatic elements come together to produce an aesthetic experience. This process establishes the relationship between *Bhava* (emotion) and *Rasa*. The term *Bhava* derives from *bhu-bhavati*, meaning 'to become' or 'to come into existence'. Bharata associates *Bhava* with the process through which an emotion becomes perceptible and contributes to the communication of *Rasa*, which is "principally sought to be conveyed" (Bhat 95).

Bharata identifies eight '*Sthayibhava*' or stable emotions: '*rati*' (love), '*hasa*' (mirth), '*shoka*' (grief), '*krodha*' (anger), '*utsaha*' (heroism), '*bhaya*' (fear), '*jugupsa*' (disgust), and '*vismaya*' (wonder) (line 15). These correspond to the eight '*Rasas*': '*shringara*' (amorous), '*hasya*' (humorous), '*karuna*' (pathetic), '*raudra*' (furious), '*vira*' (valorous), '*bhayanaka*' (horrific), '*bibhatsa*' (repugnant), and '*adbhuta*' (wondrous) (Bharata, line 17). These stable emotions are presented as fundamental to human experience and provide the basis upon which other transitory and intensified emotions operate (Masson and Patwardhan 39). Chaudhary similarly describes permanent emotions as innate states that remain dormant within human consciousness and are supported by various subsidiary feelings:

permanent emotions (*sthayibhava*) ..., in dormant stage in all the human minds are basic instincts, and are fed by a number of minor feelings called transitory, accessory or auxiliary feelings. Permanent emotions in us are inborn. These emotions are not acquired by any experience or training and also are not born out of any emotion or feeling (Chaudhary 68).

Bharata further identifies forty-nine emotional states through three categories: eight '*Sthayibhava*' (stable emotion), thirty-three '*Vyabhicharibhava*' (transitory emotion), and eight '*Satvikabhava*' (divine emotion). The '*Satvikabhavas*' represent the physical manifestations of intense emotional states, including '*sthambha*' (petrification), '*svetha*' (perspiration), '*romancha*' (horripilation), '*swarabhanga*' (choking of voice), '*vepathu*' (trembling), '*vaivarnya*' (facial colour change), '*ashrupravah*' (shedding of tears), and '*moorchha*' (fainting) (Upadhyay 44-45). Together, these categories demonstrate the close relationship between psychological emotion and its embodied expression.

The production of *Rasa* begins with *Vibhava*, which functions as the stimulating cause of an emotional state. The principal determinant is identified as *alambana vibhava*, while environmental or supporting factors constitute *uddipana vibhava* (Patnaik 32). '*Anubhava*' refers to the physical and expressive consequences of these determinants, communicated through action, speech, and facial expression. The thirty-three '*vyabhicharibhava*', also referred to as '*Sancharibhava*' in some editions of the *Natyashastra*, represent fleeting psychological states. These emotions succeed one another and gradually strengthen the '*Sthayibhava*' until it becomes established as '*Rasanubhava*', or the experience of aesthetic relish. Pande explains this process through the analogy of music: "Just as in music a procession of notes in certain combinations reveals a characteristic melodic whole or *raga*, similarly, it seems that the representation of *bhavas* reveals *rasa* as an aesthetic whole" (Pande 313).

The interaction of these elements can be illustrated through Kalidasa's *Abhijanasakunthalam*. Dushyanta's arrival at the hermitage functions as the '*alambana vibhava*', while the surroundings, including the conversation of the girls, their attire, the bee, and the flower garden, operate as '*uddipana vibhava*'. The characters experience a succession of emotions such as wonder, fear, curiosity, confusion, and bashfulness. Through their interactions, the emotion of love gradually develops. When the performer effectively represents '*Satvikabhava*', such as '*romancha*' (horripilation), '*vepathu*' (trembling), or '*sthambha*' (petrification), the '*rati sthayibhava*' becomes established and enables the spectator to experience '*shringara rasa*' (amorous) (Goodwin 109).

Bharata establishes a close relationship between '*Bhava*' and '*Rasa*', particularly within performance. The actor, dancer, singer, instrumentalist, and other participants in a production remain conscious of the '*sthayibhava*' and the '*Rasa*' they seek to evoke. Their successful realization of this process constitutes '*siddhi*' (achievement) through '*Rasotpatti*' (production of relish). Importantly, '*natyarasa*' refers to an aesthetic experience produced through dramatic representation rather than an actual experience of the corresponding emotions. The performer and spectator may experience emotional responses such as tears or spontaneous laughter, yet both remain aware that the represented emotion is not occurring as an actual event in their lives.

Longinus approaches literary aesthetics through the transformative power of sublimity. In *On the Sublime*, he considers the

capacity of art and literature to elevate and transport the reader. Sublimity represents “a certain distinction and excellence of expression, that distinction, and excellence by which authors have been enabled to win immortal fame” (Pritchard 358-376). For Longinus, the power of elevated expression lies in its ability to move beyond ordinary persuasion and produce an overwhelming aesthetic response:

For the effect of sublimity elevated language is not to persuade the hearers but to entrance them; and all times, and in every way, what transports us with wonder is more telling than what merely persuades or glorifies us. The extent to which we can be persuaded is usually under our control, but these sublime passages exert an irresistible force and mastery, and get the upper hand with every hearer... a well-timed stroke of sublimity scatters everything before it like a thunderbolt, and in a flash, reveals the full power of the orator (Pritchard 358-376).

For Longinus, sublimity emerges through both natural and artistic capacities. He identifies five principal sources through which literary expression achieves sublimity: grandeur or greatness of thought, the capacity to produce strong emotions, the appropriate use of figures or figural language, nobility of diction, and dignity of composition. These elements together explain how literary expression moves beyond ordinary communication and produces an elevated aesthetic response.

The relationship between thought and expression forms an important part of Longinus’ understanding of sublimity. For him, elevated thought generates elevated feeling, while appropriately expressed emotion contributes to the uplifting of the mind. The effective use of rhetorical figures, diction, and composition further strengthens this effect. Figures become particularly powerful when they are incorporated naturally into the expression rather than presented too explicitly. Shakespeare’s Othello provides an example in which the figure is concealed within the dialogue between Desdemona and Iago:

Desdemona:

Am I that name Iago?

Iago:

What name, fair lady?

Desdemona: Such as she says my lord did say I was (Shakespeare 286).

This emphasis on appropriate expression also corresponds with the broader aesthetic significance of diction. Prof. Upadhyay illustrates the expressive potential of poetic language through Kalidasa’s Meghdootam, where the ‘Yaksha’ (demigod) sends a message to his beloved through the cloud:

O

cloud, you will see river Narmada, Spread out at the foot of the Vindhya

Mountain, Rough and full of the rocky hill, Looking at the decoration on the

Elephant body, Made by scattered marks of painted strokes... (Upadhyay 41).

The passage demonstrates how carefully selected words and imaginative description contribute to the aesthetic force of poetry. Diction, therefore, does more than communicate meaning; its arrangement brings thought, emotion, imagery, and figures into a unified composition. When these elements work together, the literary work acquires the coherence necessary for a sublime response.

Longinus further connects greatness of expression with greatness of mind. Sublimity emerges when noble thoughts and emotions are expressed through equally appropriate language, enabling the reader or spectator to experience an elevated state of aesthetic awareness. In this sense, sublimity becomes a means of recognizing the depth of an idea and the expressive power of language. Sir Philip Sydney echoes this relationship between poetic ability and artistic cultivation when he observes:

For poesy must not be drawn by the ears, it must be gently led, or rather it must lead... And therefore is an old proverb: Orator fit, poeta nascitur (the orator is made, the poet is born). Yet confess I always that, as the fertile ground must be manured, so must the highest-flying wit have a Daedalus to guide him (Sidney 5).

The comparative relationship between Rasa and the Sublime becomes clearer when their treatment of emotion, artistic expression, and aesthetic experience is considered together. Bharata’s *Natyashastra* addresses dramaturgy in a comprehensive manner, encompassing poetics, language, metre, figures of speech, stylistic qualities, and, most importantly, emotions or rasas, without which dramatic action remains incomplete (Preminger 383). Within Indian aesthetics, Rasa consequently occupies a central position in the understanding of aesthetic realisation.

The theory develops further through the contributions of later Indian aestheticians. Bhattanayaka (850-900 A.D.) introduces the concept of Generalisation, through which characters and situations acquire universal significance (Goodwin 181). Abhinavagupta (950-1016 A.D.) develops this understanding further by describing the experience of ‘Rasa’ as an encounter between the generalized subject and the universalized object of experience (Arjunwadkar 90). Anandavardhana (820 890 A.D.) connects this process with the theory of ‘Suggestion’, which becomes an important principle in poetry. According to this perspective, literary embellishment, diction, technique, and presentation derive their significance through their relationship with ‘Rasa’ (Higgins 50). Thus, Rasa is not simply an effect added to an already completed poetic structure; rather, the poetic elements themselves become meaningful through the aesthetic experience they collectively produce. This understanding corresponds with the idea of poetry as an organic whole in the ‘Gestalt theory of Poetry’ (Tsur 244).

The development of Indian aesthetic thought also includes Kuntaka’s concept of ‘Vakrokti’ (Oblique Expression), which emphasizes the relationship between the sound and meaning of poetic language. Kuntaka maintains that these two dimensions remain in balance, neither overpowering the other, through the artistic ability of the poet (Kuntaka 88). From this perspective,

suggestion gradually opens the symbolic dimensions of poetry and enables the connoisseur to approach the 'Infinite' and experience the 'Bliss' associated with the 'Absolute.'

The comparison with Western aesthetics requires some qualification. The source associates Indian aesthetics with a spiritual orientation and Western aesthetics with greater emphasis on individuality and material experience. Such a distinction should not be treated as an absolute division between two traditions, since both contain diverse aesthetic positions. Within this broader comparison, however, Longinus' emphasis on suggestion, powerful emotion, and the layered meanings of sublime poetry provides an important point of correspondence with Indian aesthetic thought. His understanding of "the stimulus of powerful and inspired emotion" as a source of the sublime also finds parallels in later Western discussions of literary emotion. Aristotle, Johnson, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, I.A. Richards, and T.S. Eliot each address the relationship between emotion, expression, and poetic effect in different ways. Wordsworth refers to 'powerful feelings' and 'emotions recollected in tranquility' (Wordsworth 57), while Eliot emphasizes the transformation of emotion into artistic form:

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative, in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion, such that when external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked (Joshi & Agarwal 43).

These approaches demonstrate that the relationship between emotion and aesthetic expression extends beyond any single literary tradition.

A closer comparison of Bharata and Longinus reveals both correspondence and difference in their aesthetic frameworks. Bharata explains the production of Rasa through the interaction of 'Vibhava,' 'Anubhava,' and 'Vyabhichari bhavas', while Longinus considers the achievement of the 'Sublime' through the appropriate use of figures, nobility of diction, and dignity of composition. Bharata primarily develops these principles within the structure of 'natya' (drama), whereas Longinus focuses on the structural, linguistic, and figural dimensions of poetry. The comparison therefore does not suggest that the two theories are identical; rather, it reveals a shared concern with the relationship between artistic form, emotional intensity, and aesthetic response.

The relationship becomes particularly significant when Longinus' emphasis on grandeur of thought and genuine emotion is considered alongside Bhoja's concept of 'ananda' (bliss). In Bhoja's theory, Rasa functions as a means towards 'ananda', rather than being itself identical with the sublime (De 22). This distinction allows the comparison to move beyond a direct equation of the two theories and instead identify a broader aesthetic concern with elevated experience. The figural and linguistic dimensions associated with Longinus also find points of comparison with later Sanskrit concepts such as 'dhvani' (sound), 'vakrokti' (innuendo), 'auchitya' (legitimacy), and 'sphota' (opening) (De 28).

Longinus' emphasis on the transporting effect of literature provides another important point of comparison. He values literature not merely for its capacity to teach or persuade but for its ability to move the individual beyond ordinary experience towards a heightened aesthetic state. This emphasis resembles the movement from emotional representation towards aesthetic relish in Rasa theory. At the same time, the available evidence does not establish direct historical influence between Bharata and Longinus. It is therefore more appropriate to understand the comparison in terms of conceptual affinity rather than confirmed transmission. Longinus' account of sublimity, particularly its emphasis on grandeur of thought, powerful emotion, and the formal elements that support these qualities, can be productively read alongside Bhoja's concept of 'ananda', understood as the ultimate bliss associated with artistic experience.

The comparison between Rasa and the Sublime reveals significant points of convergence in their treatment of emotion, artistic expression, and elevated aesthetic experience, while their distinct historical and theoretical contexts remain important. The possibility of intellectual and cultural exchange between East and West has been discussed in relation to the historical contacts between the two regions. J. M. Roberts observes that "although...The mature art of Classical Greece was unique, its roots lie far back in the renewal of ties with Asia" and identifies a "process of cultural interplays" (177). He also notes the presence of Persian and Hellenistic influences in Mauryan India:

From

Ashoka's era survive many inscriptions bearing decrees and injunctions to his subject. The use of the means of propagating official messages and the individual style of inscriptions both suggest Persian and Hellenistic influence and India under Mauryas was certainly more continually in touch with the civilizations to the West than ever before. At Kandhar, Ashoka left inscriptions in both Greek and Aramaic (Roberts 425).

These historical contacts make cultural exchange a plausible area for further investigation, but they do not by themselves establish a direct transmission of aesthetic theories between Bharata and Longinus. The presence of Greek and Aramaic inscriptions in the Mauryan period demonstrates contact between India and Western cultures, while the geographical and historical development of Sanskrit aesthetic thought provides a context in which comparative study remains meaningful. The similarities between Rasa and the Sublime can therefore be understood as significant points of aesthetic correspondence, particularly in their shared attention to emotion, artistic form, elevated expression, and the transformative possibilities of literary experience.

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