

Classical Theories of Drama – A Comparative Critique

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Comparative criticism of texts irrespective of their socio-cultural, linguistic, idealistic, stylistic and artistic divergence has become a productive form of literature as it allows national literatures to gain worldwide recognition. The researcher in Comparative Literature could be restrained solely by the texts in translation. Because, claiming originality to the texts in translation is impossible as they bear the dominance of the translator and the limitations of both the Source Language (SL) and Translated Language (TL) to some extent. But the translation done in accordance with translatology assures that the adopted script bears all the key concepts of original text. Moreover, the classics of all literatures have come down to the readers only through translation. Hence, depending on the translated texts becomes a prudent choice. In this article, the researcher comparatively discusses the Indian and Western views or theories on Dramatics – Bharata's *Natyasastra* (Sanskrit) and Aristotle's *Poetics* (Greek) – in English translation; and proposes the comparative scrutiny of the plays of some notable dramatists to justify their unique way of propagating humane values and how they are reformative in nature.

The medieval critics presume from the revaluation of the ancient literature that both classics share common elements – visual, aural and spatial, and features: techniques – multi-channeled discourses, dance and music. Their sole aim had been the transformation of reality not the depiction of it, arousal of deep emotional impact and consequently giving psychological relief to the spectators. They propose teaching of humanistic philosophy and values. Thus, they together have been the inspiration for the modern theatrics and dramatics. Hence, the researcher evaluates and suggests the importance of these two manuscripts and select plays that are composed in accordance with these two treatises in humanizing mankind from a modern critical perspective; and emphasizes on the need to look upon ancient theories for the composition of drama script at present in the modern world where the humaneness is missing.

These classical manuals of India and West are semiotic in structure, *heiropraxis* (religious or ritual) in practice, and uphold a few metaphysical and epistemological concepts in common. The overall examination of classical Indian and Greek drama reveals that the personas, costumes, masks, settings, music, dance, chorus, monologue, dialogue, soliloquy and action etc are of primary significance. It may also be noted that in their magnitude and content *Peri Poietikes* and *Natyasastra* are different structurally, thematically and aesthetically. To be precise, Indians popularised comedy and the Greeks, tragedy. The difference between these two traditions has been so great that the two artistic expressions could not but be different. In the west 'evil' has been a positive force whereas in India 'evil' is evil itself or just absence of good. As Sri Aurobindo argues, "In Hindu drama, it would have seemed a savage and inhuman spirit that could take any aesthetic pleasure in the sufferings of an Oedipus or a Duchess of Malfi in the tragedy of Macbeth

or Othello” (Qtd. in Prasad and Yadhav 4).

And, another significant difference is that Aristotle’s *Poetics* deals with dramatics and theatrics as a part among other arts but Bharata Muni’s *Natyasastra* regards theatrics as a major subject and treats other arts as a part of it. The *Natyasastra* has been the foundation of dramatic tradition of Indian Literature whereas the *Poetics* was written much after the best had been achieved in classical Greek literature. The presumptions of the ancient criticism claim that “the invasion of Gandhara by Cyrus and its Persian occupation till Alexander’s invasion facilitated many exchanges. But there is no evidence to suggest that Indian ideas on drama had travelled to Greece, as it happened undoubtedly in the area of Medicine” (Gupta 16). Historically speaking, the origin of *Natyasastra* is still under speculation. Bharata Muni, the name ascribed to the compilation of *Natyasastra* refers not to a person but to a community. And out of its *dasarupakas* (ten types of drama), the modern playwrights are able to practice less than four. This theory is a mixture of *rasas*, *bhavas*, *abhinayas*, *dharmis*, *vrttis*, *pravrttis*, *siddhi*, *svaras*, instruments, song and theatre-house (Gupta 86). The *Poetics* must have been penned by Aristotle between 335 BC and 324 BC. The dramatic theory of Greece consists of four aspects namely *mimesis* (imitation), *catharsis* (purification), treatment of various genres, the division of tragedy into six elements: *Muthos* (myth), *ethos* (feelings), *dianoia* (technical thinking), *lexis* (diction), *melopoiia* (fear) and *opsis* (spectacle)... (Gupta 86).

But the in-depth study of these classics reveals their resemblance on both the thematic structure and stylistic features. Predominantly, the Greek concept of *muthoi* is not different from Indian *Vedas*. The conception of *bhavavyanjana* (spiritual lesson) or *dharmis* (cosmic law), *lokadharmi* (life oriented), *natyadharmi* (theatre oriented) *vibhavas* (cause) and *anubhavas* (experience) in *Natyasastra* and *psuchagogia* (beguilement), *philanthropia* (love for mankind), *nemesis* (moral indignation), in *poetics*; and some other common concepts such as pity (*eleos* and *oiktos*), pain (*lupe*), fear (*phobos*), hatred (*misos*), anxiety (*merima*, *tarbos*, and *prontis*), and loathing (*stugos*) are formulated exclusively for the purpose of transformation and purgation. Critics of Greek dramatics declare that the intention of Greek theatre is psychological transformation. And, the division of drama into tragedy and comedy is itself a Western thought.

From this disposition of the public to express the most universal sentiments of human nature, of joy and sorrow, by laughter and by tears, arises the great division of the drama into plays that are cheerful and plays that are sad; into comedy with all its subspecies, and into tragedy and drama with all their varieties (Qtd. in Kushwaha 10).

Emotional arousal is emphasized through the concepts of *ekplexis* (paralysis) in Greek and *stambha* or *sadvika bhava* (temperament) in Sanskrit which refers to the realization of great harm done to a dear one out of ignorance and the shock caused by it. The other dominant emotions found in Greek theatre are *aischune* (ashamed), feeling shame before or after a dishonourable deed; others are, *aidos*, reverence for the virtuous; *eros*, sexual desire; *storge*, filial affection; *charis*, gratitude; *philia*, friendship; and *philopatria*, patriotism.

And Indian system of emotional arousal was done by *bhavas* (mood) and *rasas* (aesthetic emotion). In *Natyasastra* permanent emotions are classified into three groups: *sthayi* (dominant), *vyabhicari* (transient) and *sattvika* (psychosomatic). *Sthayi* is eight in number: *rati* or pleasure, *hasa* or humour, *soka* or grief, *krotha* or anger, *utsaha* or confidence, *bhaya* or fear, *jugupsa* or revulsion, and *vismaya* or wonder. *Vyabhicari* states are thirty six: *nirveda* (dejection), *glani*

(guilt), *sanka* (doubt), *asuya* (envy), *mada* (intoxication), *srama* (fatigue), *alasya* (indolence), *dainya* (obsequity), *cinta* (worry), *moha* (fondness), etc. *Sattvika* are manifestation of *psuche* (mind) and *soma* (body); they are eight in all and also known as *bhavas* – *vibhavas* and *anubhavas*. To add Bharata's views:

The drama as I have devised will give courage, amusement and happiness as well as counsel to them all [...] the drama will thus be instructive to all... It will give relief to unlucky persons who are afflicted with sorrow and grief or [over] work, and will be conducive to observance of duty (dharma) as well as to fame, long life, intellect and general good, and will educate people (Qtd. in Kushwaha 11).

But the tragedies like *Urubhanga*, romances like *Abhijnanas-sakuntalam* and historical plays like *Mudrarakshas* which form an imperishable part of our literary heritage attest the glory of Indian Drama. Hence, comparative study of Indian and western plays in the backdrop of classical theories would demonstrate that they are preoccupied with the spiritual concepts of purity and vitality. The writings of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides in Greek, and Seneca, Plautus and Terence in Roman and Vyasa, Bhasa and Kalidasa in Sanskrit can be cited as the primary instances.

To cite some, the tragedy of Orestes or Antigone does not arise from individual error (*koros*, *hamartia*, or *hubris*) but of fate (*moira*). For Arjuna of *Mahabharata* or Homer's Achilles the demands of *timee* (fate) are supreme. Public esteem again forces Rama to desert Sita in a slander; Pandava to mortgage Panjali in a dice game; Oedipus to desert his kingdom; and Andromaque to agonise after Hector's death. But, the modern ideas on individual choice, responsibility and interpretation of *dharma* or *moira* came to be formulated only towards the end of *Hellenic* period in Greece and *Smrti* (renaissance) period in India. Both theories gave, irrefutably, importance to the concepts of *miasma* (despair) or the *Satva* (reality), power of oath, oracles, curses, the concept of good and evil, heaven and hell; and other beliefs such as *bahudevavta* or *theokrasis* (Universal Egg), perception of five senses as the extension of five elements: earth, water, fire, air and ether; cycle of four ages, and metempsychosis. Thus they have had common aspects beyond their linguistic, cultural, epochal differences. Because these theories were written for the same task, that is to portray the nuances of sacred drama and to keep the humanity intact.

Both models demand unification of speech, gesture and dance in *hieropraxis* (religious or ritual) phase. During the medieval period, when the Indian dramatics underwent rapid change and decline due to the advent of colonisers, the Greeks developed their content and popularised them throughout the world. Deviation from the religious representation of theatre took place with the impact of Renaissance or Humanistic Philosophy. The medieval dramatists committed themselves the task of propagating humane ideals. They wrote with the conviction to promote upcoming theories of social change and transformation. Consequently death in battlefields, plight of women, evils of war, social and ethical problems became the themes. But, unlike their successors who questioned inhumane tendencies among humans in the name of race, caste and gender, they were content to reflect the turmoil that they saw.

The comparative treatment of the plays after the renaissance in England (1485 – 1660) such as Shakespearean comedies and tragedies, tragedies of Seneca, Thomas Kyd, Marlowe, Ben Jonson, Webster, Dekker, Dryden etc and the drama of Sanskrit literature before the advent of

British such as Kalidasa, *Harichandra* in Tamil, Buddhist plays, Plays of Bhavabhti, Sudraka, Vishakhadutta, Harsha, Bhanbhata, Bhattanarayana and Ashvagosa attest the dramatic glory of the duo. Indian drama was at stake when Western Drama (1820–1947) underwent a sea-change in stylistic and thematic convergence. These plays had both the impact of antiquity and modernity. Studying these plays in the backdrop of the *rasa* theory and the concept of *hamartia* would demonstrate the religious, spiritual, psychological and philosophical overtones that permeate their plays, postulate the dramatists' concern for humanity.

For instance, one can feel the presence of earnest humanism in the plays of Goldsmith, Sheridan, Ibsen, G. B. Shaw, J. M. Synge, Sean O'Casey, D. H. Lawrence, Bertolt Brecht, Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, in Indian plays by Rabindranath Tagore, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, Sri Aurobindo, T. P. Kailasam, Asif Currimbhoy, Pradap Sharma, etc. The notable women playwrights of this phase are Aphra Behn and Bharathi Sarabhai. They opposed the socio-cultural system that oppressed women as weaker sex. The philosophical thoughts that permeated their plays had a considerable impact on their fellow dramatists. Despite the absence of values, the transgression of the boundaries of decorum, the greed for power, lack of integrity, cruelty, scepticism, hatred, self motivation, terror, the lack of a centre and being in the midst of a dark horror, the search for hope for human destiny takes their plays a step ahead of today's modernity.

Resultantly, the panorama of dramatic literature became the unified genre of both the revived indigenous dramaturgy; and the modern theatrical techniques. The dramatists experimented plays with modern theories of literature. To give examples, Beckett, Harold Pinter, Osborne, Caryl Churchill, and others in Western Drama; and Habib Tanvir, Gurucharan Das, Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar, Nissim Ezekiel, Grish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar, Mahesh Dattani and so on in India are the representative playwrights of new humanist movement. Their plays bespeak the authors' ardent concern for the society and humanity. They revitalized drama by taking theatrics to new extremes and push their characters to the limits of emotional solitude, non-communication and personal hopelessness. They wrote with the conviction to re-humanize the mankind. Their aim perhaps is to depict the inhumane tendencies that encapsulate the society and to warn the modern man against the awaiting wilderness if the same persists. On the whole, the realm of drama proves that the purpose of both the classical theorists and the dramatists of then and now have been voicing against loss of humanity, mechanical and materialistic nature of modern life and the impersonal and virulent social environment.

Thus, the comprehensive reading of Bharata's *Natyasastra* and Aristotle's *Poetics*; and remarkable playwrights of Indian and Western traditions from the comparative stand point, suggest how the theories served as the driving force behind the dramatists. Apparently, the concepts of *catharsis* (purgation of impurities) and *Rasas* (cleansing of the soul) as laid down in the classics of dramaturgy remain the predominant aspect of dramatic literature even today. Though the dramatists of this century have evolved new theories to suit their modernist theatre, they are keen on retaining the ideals of *Catharsis* and *Rasa*; which together make the dramatic literature vibrant one. Thus, *Natyasastra* and *Poetics* which insist on the propagation of humanistic philosophy remain guidelines for the drama and theatre of all cultures and ages.

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