

Stanley Fish and Affective Social Reader Response Theory: Indian *Rasa-Dhvani* Theory and Affective *Sahrdaya* Aesthetics

Vishal Joshi

Ph.D. Research Scholar

Department of English

HNB Garhwal Central University

Srinagar, Uttarakhand (India)

Abstract

The present paper focuses on Stanley Fish, the leading American critic well-known for his ‘affective stylistics’ interrogating Western methods of mainstream stylistics; and also for his teasing and humorous essay ‘Is there a Text in this Class?’ thereby demonstrating the productive role of the reader in meaning-making determined culturally “by prior interpretive procedures that are always already in place” (Childs and Fowler 197), available as a normative framework at any given time. The second section of this paper is in the nature of a curtain raiser. Affective *sahrdaya* or reader-response is undoubtedly placed at the centre in Sanskrit dramaturgy to poetics. The origin of such discourse can be traced back to Bharata’s *Nāṭyaśāstra*. He is renowned for his seminal *rasa-sūtra: vibhāvānubhāva vyabhicāri somyogād rasa niṣpattih* (*Nāṭyaśāstra* 6.22). *Rasa-dhvani* aesthetics form the mainstream of Indian Poetics and offer distinct Indian perspective of affective reader response. In the light of some likely affinities it opens up its comparative applicability with Western model.

Keywords: affective stylistics, interpretive community, interpretive strategies, *obiter dictum*, master-narrative, authorial intension and execution, *rasa sutra*, *bhāva*, *abhinaya*, troika, *sahrdaya*, *rasāvasthā*

Introduction:

The American critic Stanley Fish (b. 1938) is hailed as a leading specialist of Milton studies of his generation, and a leading voice of one variety of reader-response approach to literature often described as ‘affective stylistics’ (1980). Fish in his most anthologized essay “Interpreting the Variorum” (1976; rev. 1980) debunks the standard notions of interpretation and “introduces his seminal concept, ‘interpretive communities’, which radically revises interpretive theory by locating meaning not in texts but in the protocols of communities” (Leitch 1970). Fish voiced his reaction against the New Critics who advocated the primacy of the texts as something autonomous, autotelic, or self-sufficient ‘verbal icons’, and directed their entire focus on language and literary form. Fish, thus, interrogated the tendency of ignoring and underestimating the role of the reader in the text-centric approaches of Formalism and New Criticism.

Reader-centric Approach:

A reader's interaction with the text occurs in the act of reading, which is complementary, as it is by reading that the 'potential' meaning of a text is actualized or realized. A reader is, therefore, an active participant who completes the meaning of a text, which has, fundamentally, no existence until it is read; a text's "meaning is in potentia [sic.], so to speak"; and by "applying codes and strategies the reader decodes the text" (Cuddon 726). The reader response theory, thus, foregrounds the reader's contribution in textual production/recreation instead of relegating him/her to occupy the role of passive consumer of meaning offered to them through a work of literature.

Affective Stylistics as Antithesis:

As per Peter Barry, literary critics have so often accused the practitioners of stylistics "aiming to turn [literary] criticism into a branch of applied linguistics" by applying "linguistic methods to literary text" and using "a wide range of specialist terms and concepts taken from the science of linguistics – terms such as 'transitivity' or 'underlexicalisation' ... which have no currency outside the linguistic field" (Editor's 'Introduction' 12). As a reader-response critic Stanley Fish comes up with his own version of stylistics called 'affective stylistics', which he propounded as an antithesis to the methods of mainstream stylistics. Fish argues that:

The most stylisticians wrongly assume the neutrality and objectivity of the process of unearthing the linguistic data on which their conclusions are to be based. In practice, he claims, not all the linguistic data in a poem can be relevant to a given argument or interpretation; and, as there is no linguistic way of separating relevant from irrelevant data, it must follow that the act of selecting and laying out the data is a subjective interpretative act, not an objective and descriptive one. Fish argues further that it is not a fixed standard of neutral objectivity which determines how interpretations are made, but the norms established by what he calls the 'interpretive community'. (Fish cited in Barry, Intro. p. 30)

In his reader-oriented 'affective stylistics' the prime concern of Fish is to examine "the rhetorical force of texts and their effects on readers" (Leitch 1971), as he sees that responses of readers tend to develop and change in relation to the words or sentences on the page as they follow each other in temporal succession. Fish's reader-oriented stance and style is epitomized in his essay "Interpreting the *Variorum*", in which he reads Milton as a test case and interrogates the accepted beliefs in authorial intention and textual autonomy, and proposes the provocative thesis that a text is an empty container waiting to be filled in reading by the reader.

Intention and Execution:

At this juncture we may recall Milton's lines in which the poet articulates his conscious intention justifying his epical venture to "assert Eternal Providence, / And justifie the wayes of God to men" (*Paradise Lost*, bk. I, 26). In spite of the authorial assertion, the poet unknowingly or, more specifically, subconsciously empathized with Satan (owing probably to a kindred-soul

sort of biographical affinity) which is voiced by S.T. Coleridge in the words that Milton is in every line of *Paradise Lost*.

Milton's grandiloquence and power of rhetoric burst forth when he describes and presents Satan. It seems that authorial (conscious) intention, so often, tends to slip out of its author's grip under mysterious pressure of the subconscious that is why William Blake has to say that Milton was "of Devil's party without knowing it". On readers' part, they themselves in reading the text are enthralled by magniloquent utterances given to Satan or Lucifer (the arch-feigned and arch-tempter), which underscores the spell of the rhetoric force of the text, *Paradise Lost*.

Stanley Fish in "Not so much a Teaching as an Intangling" (the selection from *Surprised by Sin* (1967) argues that John Milton in *Paradise Lost* "manipulates his reader in order to advance his moral argument." He foregrounds the points that it is the reader who is "the poem's centre of reference" and "also its subject." The poet's "purpose is to educate the reader to an awareness of his position and responsibilities as a fallen man" separated "from the innocence once" he possessed. Fish further holds that the method Milton uses "is to recreate in the reader's mind the drama of the fall." This was so because "Milton's concern with the ethical imperative of political and social behavior", as per Fish, "would hardly allow him to write an epic which did not attempt to give his audience a basis for moral action." (Fish cited in Rivkin & Ryan 195)

Operative Assumptions:

Fish builds his argument on a couple of assumptions, which he sets down as under:

- 1) There is a disparity between our response to the speech and the epic voice's evaluation of it.
- 2) Ideally, there should be no disparity.
- 3) Milton's intention is to correct *his* error.
- 4) He wants us to discount the effect of the speech through a kind of mathematical cancellation.
- 5) The question of relative authority is purely an aesthetic one. That is, the reader is obliged to hearken to the most dramatically persuasive of any conflicting voices.

Christian Cosmos in Puritan Format:

One must not forget that as a devout Christian Milton was brought up within Western Christian culture which was fed and nourished by the ancient Greco-Roman and Hebraic traditions. Using Taine's terminology we can say that 'race', 'milieu', and the 'moment' of Milton's 17th century England was broadly shaped by the master-narrative of Jesus Christ and the Church of which the authentic, reliable scriptural voice was the Bible. Milton chose his central theme from this source to undertake the Epical enterprise celebrating spiritual-history, in classical epic format, on the subject matter borrowed from the Christian myth of fallen mankind, and their souls' possible redemption through sins and sufferings.

Interpretive Community and Strategies:

The phrase ‘interpretive communities’ gains currency in reader-response theory after its effective demonstration in the essay “Interpreting the *Variorum*” (1976) by Stanley Fish. He posits his thesis:

that even though each reader essentially participates in the making of the literary text, s/he approaches the literary work not as an isolated individual but in her/his capacity as a member of a community of readers, viz. an ‘interpretive community’, so much so that it is the latter rather than the former the one that ultimately produces meanings. (Fish cited in Golban & Ciobanu 194)

In *Variorum* essay Fish examines the reading process as an interaction between two separate entities: the text (with its stylistics or literary, rhetorical input encoded therein) and the reader’s subjective response with his/her expectations, corrective revisions, projections, conclusions, assumptions, and judgments. The process of experiencing the text, therefore, coincides with meaning-making. The textual meanings are thus actualized in the process of reading. This process is of the nature of subjective as well as socially implicated one, functioning under the internalized or subconscious impact of ‘interpretive community’ of readers, with which individual reader has affiliation as a reader.

In his later approach through reading which culminates in his essay “Is there a Text in this Class?” Fish is stated to have revised his earlier view of perceived “division between subject (reader) and object (text)”. Earlier he held that it is the text that exerts control over the reader. Later on, reversing that polarity Fish prioritizing the reader contends that “it is the *reader* who *makes* the *text* with the aid of *interpretive strategies* shared among the members of an ‘interpretive community’ wherein the reading takes place” (*ibid.*).

The interpretive communities, as per Fish, are purely conventional. They are constructions created by human consensus. Likewise, interpretive strategies are learned and subject to changes over time. They are not something natural or held as given universals. Also that, Fish’s affective stylistics attempts through close reading “to investigate how the reading experience prestructured by the text, and how it differs from what the text ‘says’ or ‘means” (*ibid.* 198).

The diagram hereinafter is displayed for mental visualization to help better understand Fish’s thinking behind the transaction or interaction involved in reading literature between various components in literary communication, with particular focus on the reader and the text (-making-meaning):

**Fish's Affective Stylistics Interrelates Social Reader Response
Theory of Interpretation (Text-Making)**

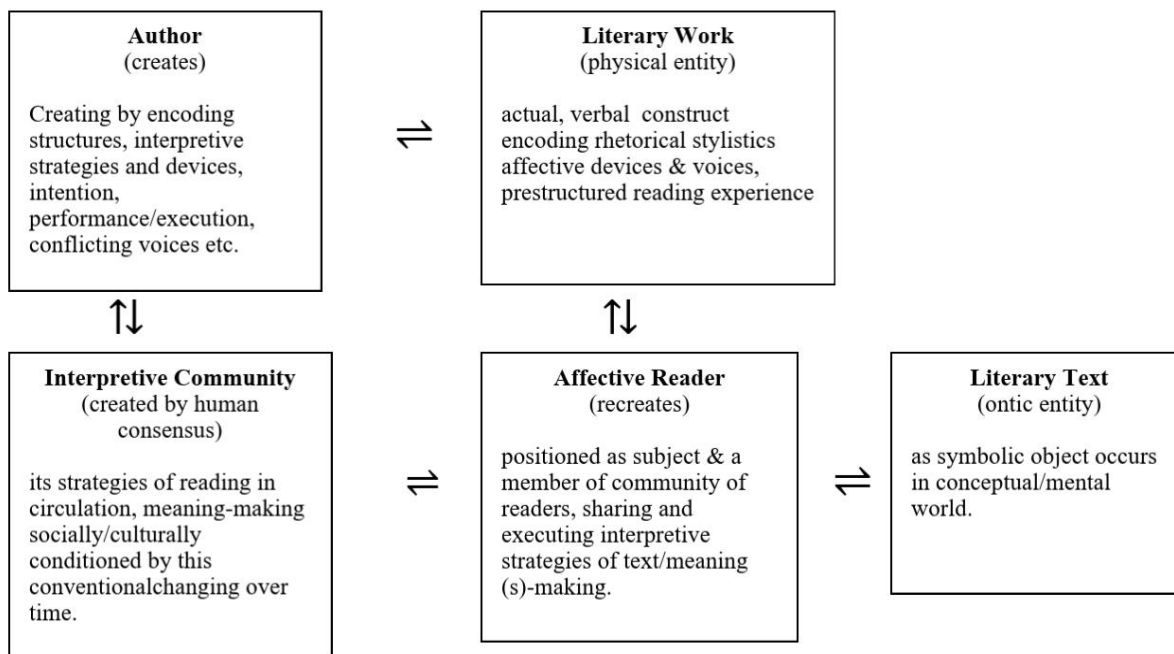


Fig. 1. (conceived & formulated after Fish)

Statement of Christian Vision of Christian Culture:

Fish argues that in *Paradise Lost*, as against Adam the main protagonist, it is Satan whose presence opens up for Milton “much scope to express what he really feels about life”. To morally educate his reader he adopts a pattern of “a calculated departure” from the conventional approach. The poet “consciously wants to worry his reader to force him to doubt the correctness of his responses ...” (Fish cited in Rivkin & Ryan 196). Consequently, “the disparity between [authorial] intention and execution [on the part of the poet] become a disparity between reader expectation and reading experience In this way, we are led to consider our own experience as a part of the poem’s subject” (*ibid.*). Fish, thus, sees a calculated pressure on the Christian reader as part of an intelligible pattern in *Paradise Lost*.

Pattern to Communicate Central Purpose:

The epic voice (*obiter dictum*) is the narrative voice intending to guide the reader but the guilty reader (as progeny of fallen man) tends to ignore the narrator’s comments on the character, situation and action in the poem. Poet’s conscious intention is voiced in his announcements to “assert Eternal Providence” and “justify the ways of God to men” (*PL* 24-25) stressing the point of view about God-centric universe. As a response, this raises some specific reader expectations conforming to and substantiating that scriptural point of view, magnificently articulated by Milton.

The reader's first impression is, therefore, frustrated when s/he encounters disparity in the poet's performance or execution of narrative action in the shape of Satan's speeches structured in epical magniloquence. The impressiveness of Satan's speeches and the power of rhetoric have had immediate poetic effects. Reader attention gets gravitated towards them. The charm of eloquence lulls the reasoning process of the reader. Like Milton (though partially), the reader largely loses himself in the mysterious labyrinth of subconscious workings of such epical speeches on him/her. There is a mismatch between the expectation of the reader and his/her reading experience.

Fish impresses upon us, that the mechanics of Satan's rhetorical articulations lure the reader to an emotional reception of his creed tinged with diabolism. The reader is emotively and imaginatively drawn towards him to be one of his parties. The reader is, thus, transported to the fictional world of *Paradise Lost*, and tends to ignore the mild rebuke of narrative, epical-voice (*obiter dictum*), which intermittently cautions and exposes deceptions. The reader (the progeny of fallen man or erring mortals) can morally better learn by the enactment of the drama of fall in which s/he can learn by the error of omission and correction in close, revised successive sensitive readings.

Encounter of Voices, which one to listen to or not attentively:

A few extracts are drawn from the poem to illustrate the basic pattern (embracing conflicting voices) which is discernible, while undertaking sensitive reading, experiencing, and interpreting its contents:

[epic voice] . . . say first what cause

Moved our grand parents, in that happy state,
Favoured of Heaven so highly, to fall off
From their Creator . . .

.....

Who first seduced them to that foul revolt? (*PL.* ll. 28-31; 33)

Th' infernal Serpent; he it was whose guile,
Stirred up with envy and revenge, deceived
The mother of mankind, (*PL.* 34-36)

.....

He trusted to have equalled the Most High,
.....
Against the throne and monarchy of God
Raised impious war in Heaven and battle proud,
With vain attempt (*PL.* 40; 43-45)

[Satan's first speech] . . . so much the stronger proved

He with his thunder; and till then who knew
The force of those dire arms? . . .

.....

. . . , do I repent, or change,
Though changed in outward luster, that fixed mind,
And high disdain from sense of injured merit,
That with the Mightiest raised me to contend, (ll. 92-94)

. . . What though the field be lost?
All is not lost- the unconquerable will,
And study of revenge, immortal hate,
And courage never to submit or yield:
And what is else not to be overcome? (ll. 105-109)

[epic voice] So spake th' apostate Angel, though in pain,
Vaunting aloud, but racked with deep despair; (ll. 125-26)

[Satan's second speech] . . . th' Arch-Fiend replied:-
"Fallen Cherub, to be weak is miserable,
Doing or suffering: but of this be sure-
To do aught good never will be our task,
But ever to do ill our sole delight,
As being the contrary to his high will
Whom we resist. If then his providence
Out of our evil seek to bring forth good,
Our labour must be to pervert that end, (ll. 156-164)

[epic voice] So stretched out huge in length the Arch-fiend lay,
Chained on the burning lake; . . .
. . . all-ruling Heaven
Left him at large to his own dark designs,
That with reiterated crimes he might
Heap on himself damnation, while he sought
Evil to others, and enraged might see
How all his malice served but to bring forth
Infinite goodness, grace, and mercy, shewn
On Man by him seduced, but on himself
Treble confusion, wrath, and vengeance poured.(ll. 209-210; 212-220)

[Satan's third speech] . . . Farewell, happy fields,
Infernal world! And thou, profoundest hell,
Receive thy new possessor—one who brings
A mind not to be changed by place or time.
The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.

.....
 Here we may reign secure; and, in my choice,
 To reign is worth ambition, though in Hell:
 Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven. (ll. 249, 51-55; 61-63)

According to Fish the reader's mind is the *locus* of that interaction, who in his/her successive readings, notices the conflict in Satan tormented voice "between the external boast and the internal despair". Although in the first reading "the reader loses himself in the workings of the speech, even for the moment" placing him "in a compromising position" thinking how fine this all sounds". Even then, the cautionary epic voice, earlier ignored or unattended surfaces to remind the reader of his/her error of omission and consequently, he/she "begins by simultaneously admitting the effectiveness of Satan's rhetoric and discounting it because it is Satan's" and finally, "the reader is more than prepared to admit the justness of the epic voice's judgment of Satan" (Rivkin and Ryan 198-199), whose powerful (vicious) voice entraps the innocent victim. To sum up, using Fish's words in a different sense, we can say that 'rhetorical drama' in the reader's mind ends with the triumph of 'authorial rebuke' over 'demonic attraction'.

To sum up, Stanley Fish has, thus, applied his critical reader response tools (affective stylistics combined with interpretive community's strategies of meaning-making) to demonstrate how they could be put to very fruitful use in the appreciation of Milton's masterpiece *Paradise Lost* evincing his full awareness of the niceties of the Western interpretations.

According to Bate, once "a literary work is published, it belongs to its readers and no longer to its author", moreover, "there is no copyright control over readerly interiorization and interpretation" (Bate 26-27). There is the point in Fish claiming "that what a text means is the experience that it produces in the reader" (*ibid.*). In conformity with this view Tyson's observation is worth notice: "Though the main thrust of this approach is affective, i.e. it examines 'how (stylistics) [the text] affects (affective) [the reader] in the process of reading', it achieves its goal through a 'cognitive analysis of the mental processes produced by specific elements in the text'" (Tyson *ibid.*).

II

Inception:

In this section, we just attempt to give the bare outlines, avoiding intricacies and details, presenting thereby dimly the thought stream of Indian reader-response perspective in its own idiom. This section is in the nature of a curtain raiser, affective *sahrdaya* or reader response is, undoubtedly, placed at the centre in Sanskrit dramaturgy to poetics. The origin of such discourse can be traced back to Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra*. He is renowned for his cardinal *rasa-sutra*:

vibhāvanubhāva vyābhicāri samyogad rasa nispatih. For conceptual clarity the gist of Bharata's *rasa sutra* in visual form is displayed below:

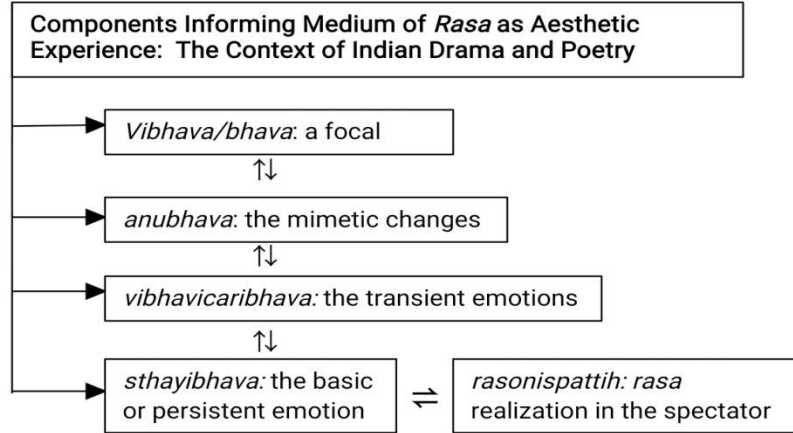


Fig. 2

Rasa in Dramaturgy:

Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* is hailed as the Fifth Veda. In dialogic format it contains 36 or 37 chapters. It has 6,000 verse stanzas composed mostly in the *sloka* metre. In the sixth chapter of *Nāṭyaśāstra* entitled '*Rasa Vikalpa*', Bharata presents his theory of *rasa*. His treatment of *rasa-bhāva* aesthetics extends to chapter seventh. The *bhāvas* include the *vibhāvas*. They are communicated to the *sahṛdaya* through *abhinaya*. Bharata lists four categories of *abhinaya*: *āṅgikam* (use of the body parts), *vāchikam* (words/speech/songs), *sātvikam* (effective expressions of emotions) and *āhāryam* (costumes, hair-do and decorations). Bharata classifies three types of theatrical performances: *nāṭyam*, *nṛityam* and *nṛttam*. Sanskrit term *nāṭya* means *drishya kavya* or *drishya roopak*. It combines drama, dance and music, thus, forming a troika. In his extensive, in-depth and insightful discussion Bharata covers each and every aspect of drama and theatre, and also other performing arts, such as music, dance and poetry.

Bharata attributes creations of *nāṭyāveda* to Prajapati Brahma. Bharata through mythical Brahma upholds: "there is no art or science, craft of skill, falling outside the purview of *nāṭya* or stage performance" (cited in *Aesthetician*, Krishnamoorthy 3). Bharata's treatise ends with the mythical descent of theatre from heaven to earth and celebration of its glory.

As per K. Krishnamoorthy '*bhāvana*' is "the process of creative imagination . . . which is tantamount to aesthetic sensibility. This is the first pre-requisite as much of the playwright as of the spectator (*bhāvaka* or *rasika*)" (*Aestheticians* 6). He further underscores the fact that in *Nāṭyaśāstra* Bharata coined a range of "technical terms pertaining to the core-term '*bhāva*', to emphasize the role of imagination on the part of the [*sahṛdaya*] spectator" (*ibid.* 27).

Rasa-Dhvani Symbiosis and Sahṛdaya:

The doyen of Indian aesthetics, in the first half of the ninth century A.D., was Anandvardhana. His “*magnum opus* is the *Dhvanyāloka* or the ‘light of poetic essence’ which provides for the first time an insight into the secret of poetic beauty” (*ibid.* 33). To Anandvardhana, creative genius and critical taste are two rare gifts, yet they are virtually the twin facets [comprising] one ability. It is “the gift of imagination (*pratibhā*) or aesthetic sensibility” which is shared in common by “a true poet” and “an ideal critic” (*ibid.*). This is the reason that an “ideal critic is called *sahṛdaya* or *rasika*; if the poet creates poetry, the critic recreates it in his imagination and enjoys it”. This prompted Anandvardhana to choose alternative title *sahṛdayāloka* for his seminal work *Dhvanyāloka* (*ibid.* 34). Anandvardhana was of the view that only the *rasika* is competent enough to grasp “the inmost core or soul of *rasa*: which is *sui generis* to poetry” (*ibid.* 35). A play or a poem invites empathetic *sahṛdaya* to construct or recreate meaning on the basis of specific culture, history and the total textual discourse he/she encounters leading to *rasa* realization.

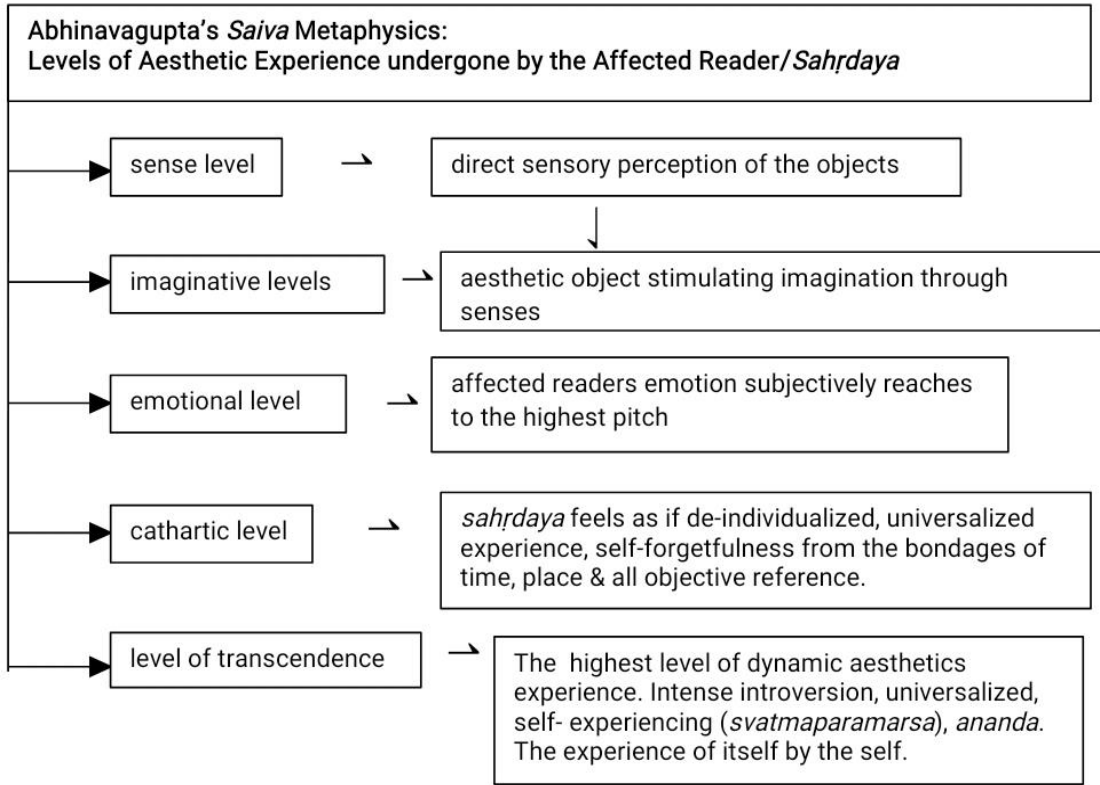
Aesthetic Enjoyment as *Sahṛdaya*’s *Rasa-Samadhi*:

As per Pandey, Abhinavagupta, an encyclopedic thinker of Kashmir, was born in about 960 A.D. He had more than fifty works to his credit. He was a true aesthetician and his contribution to aesthetics, is primarily based on the available works of the second period, the *Dhvanyāloka Lochana* and the *Abhinava Bharati*. His treatment of aesthetical problems is confined to those which arise in the context of drama and poetry (61).

Abhinavagupta analyses “*rasa* as an object, presented on stage, he points out the situation with a focal point (*vibhāva*), the mimetic changes (*anubhava*), the transient emotions (*vyābhicāribhava*) and the basic or persistent emotion (*sthāyibhāva*) are its constituents” (*ibid.* 61).

For Abhinavagupta, *vibhāva* etc. comprise “a medium for the realization of the basic emotion by the actor through contemplation and by the spectator on account of identification with the hero” (*ibid.*).

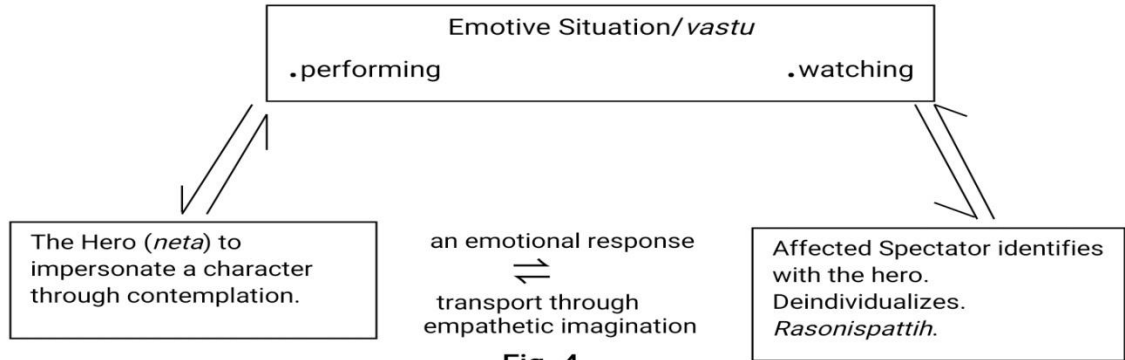
As per Abhinavagupta in *rasāvasthā* spectator transcends his own personality. In that state of “loss of personal identity” distinction of “subject or object” is obliterated. One’s sense of I (-amness) or ‘ego’ is “submerged in a *rasa* experience of *ānanda*”. “The *rasa* is *ānanda*”. It is the “unique heightened state of aesthetic enjoyment”. In yoga it is the state of “*nirvikalp samādhi*” or “spiritual trance” when yogi undergoes “the experience of Brahma (the absolute)”. Similarly, in “*rasa samādhi*” spectator’s ego is immersed in “a *rasa* experience of *ānanda*” (cited in Patnaik 51-52). The very idea is summarized through the graphic account, given below, for clarity and visualization:



(Fig. 3 After *Aestheticians*, Pandey 64)

***Rasa-Dhvani* as End and Means:**

Indian Poetics address the issue of the affect of poetry on the *sahṛdaya*, *rasika* and *bhāvaka* the three terms are taken as the near Sanskrit equivalent of the word 'reader'. As per Rayan, the terms "denote taste, flair, penchant, sensibility . . . in respect of any of the arts, but in literary theory refer contextually to the reader" (Rayan cited by Arjunwadkar 49). Sanskrit literary theory correlates *rasa* as the 'end', and the 'means' to access that 'end' is *dhvani*. *Rasa* is induced in the *sahṛdaya* while reading the written text or watching the performed text. The process of *rasa* realization by the empathetic *sahṛdaya* is roughly displayed in the following diagram for mental visualization:



Cultural Specificity of *Rasa-Dhvani*:

Rayan locates in Bharata's dramaturgy *Nāṭyaśāstra* the origin of the concept of *rasa*. Later on, the term comes to gain further extension and currency in the practice of the subsequent aestheticians and acquires the status of an essential component of Sanskrit poetics or literary theory (*ibid.* 49). Citing an aphorism from *Nāṭyaśāstra* "*kavyarthan bhavayantiti*", Rayan comments that Bharata thought of "the pre-existing emotional set (*bhāva*) in the reader's mind, out of which *rasa* is born. Bharata lists eight such states of mind subsuming different forms of affective experience. Moreover, literary theories tend to be culture-specific and the *rasa-dhvani* theory is no exception to this. Accordingly, Rayan affirms that in Indian poetics "*Rasa-Dhvani* theory has grown from Indian culture and is in fact one of its institutions which has demonstrated its continuity" (*ibid.* 11).

Conclusion:

To sum up, we must not forget though individuals create literature it is a social and cultural product. Moreover, it is an effective medium, and as such, implies a reader or *sahrdaya* to be affected in reader-writer-text interactions. Indian *rasa-dhvani* theory manifests a *sahrdaya* -orientation. Compared to the West, Indian aesthetics, besides its being older, is wider in its applicability and usefulness, as well. We, therefore, need to investigate further and extend, following the examples of a couple of great Indian scholars (examples avoided), the rich native tradition of *rasa-dhvani* by analyzing it in conjunction with the Western reader-response theories.

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