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Modernising the *Dhvani* Aesthetics: A Study of Krishna Rayan's Theory of Suggestion

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Abstract

Contrary to the notion that there is a void in the area of Indian Poetics after the seventeenth century work *Rasagangādhara* by Jagannatha, this paper attempts at reinforcing the fact that the twentieth century in India, as is the case with West, has been a fertile ground for the flourishing of literary theory in Sanskrit, English and other Indian languages. Although many of the critics and their formulations were nothing but re-interpretations of the already existing theories, the existence of substantial critical activity in India in the twentieth century cannot be denied.

Among contemporary scholars of Sanskrit poetics, Krishna Rayan enjoys considerable reputation. His *Suggestion and Statement in Poetry* (1972) is a book about English poetry and also about Sanskrit criticism. A close reading of *Suggestion and Statement in Poetry*, shows that Krishna Rayan tries to modernise the Dhvani theory of Sanskrit poetics and traditionalise Western Structuralism, formalism, and New Criticism. In a work prominently based on Sanskrit poetics, the introduction to the concepts comes through illustrate lines from Herbert Read, Swinburne, Dylan Thomas, Chaucer, Wordsworth, T.S. Eliot etc. The peculiarity of this work is marked by the presence of a Sanskrit parallel for every Western concept, and that of a Western one for every Sanskrit one. An example can be that of Sthāyibhāva which Rayan equates with Objective Correlative.

This paper tries to explore how the East-West amalgamate in the theory of Krishna Rayan and how his concepts lead towards a modernised / modified form of Rasa-dhvani theory.

Keywords: Indian Poetics, Theory, Rasa, Dhvani, Suggestion

Modernising the *Dhvani* Aesthetics: A Study of Krishna Rayan's Theory of Suggestion

Literary theories in Sanskrit Poetics can be understood to have been concerned with one of the following aspects of a literary composition: Language (*Alamkāra* and *Vakrokti*), Sound and Sense / Meaning (*Dhvani*), Style (*Riti*), Compositional value consisting of merits or demerits (*Guna* and *Dośa*), Propriety (*Auchitya*) and ultimately the Aesthetic Experience relished out of the composition (*Rasa*). Almost unarguably established is the fact that out of the above mentioned theories, the Dhvani theory comes next only to Rasa in its importance, scope and applicability. Ānandvardhan, the first formal and systematic proponent of the Dhvani theory in the ninth century, who was considered by Tzvetan Todorov as “the greatest of all theorists of textual symbolism”, considers suggestion / suggestive power – the quality of a *kāvya* to indirectly evoke meaning – as the characteristic property of literature that distinguishes it from other discourses. Prof Kapoor writes:

“As articulated in his *Dhvanyaloka*, dhvani becomes an all-embracing principle that explains the structure and major elements of literature – the aesthetic effect (*rasa*), the figural devices (*alamkāra*), the stylistic values (*riti*) and excellences and defects (*gunas* and *dośas*).” (20)

That the literariness of literature lies in its multiple layers of meaning has been attested by ancient Sanskrit texts right from Vedas. In the Rigveda, for instance, one finds the distinction between the literal meaning and the suggested meaning – “He sees, but sees not... one hears, but hears not.” (Kapoor 21) Ānandvardhana formulated that words (*śabda*), in their ability to convey meaning, possess a threefold power – *abhidhā* (denotative meaning), *lakṣanā* (indicative meaning) and *vyājanā* (suggestive meaning / *anuranan*). Accordingly, the different layers of meaning conveyed by literature are *Vāchyārtha*, *Lakṣyārtha* and *Vyanagārtha*. A *kavya* which can evoke and emanate up to the last of the three aforementioned kinds of meaning is considered the highest kind of poetry. *Vyanagārtha* (Suggested meaning) or tertiary meaning can be communicated through words, sentences, sound, gestures, tone, socio-cultural and contextual factors. However, it “is not apprehended by a mere knowledge of grammar and dictionary. It is apprehended only by those who know the essence of poetic meaning.” (*Dhvanyāloka* 1/7, Sreekantaiyah 40).

Dhvani is complementary and not conflicting with Rasa; Rasadhvani, the highest kind of Dhvani reinforces, nourishes and helps in the realization of Rasa. According to Sreekantaiyah, “Rasa is the soul of poetry; the mode by which the body of poetry reveals it is dhvani and the harmonious accordance of the body and the soul is auchitya (propriety). Rasa-dhvani-auchitya is the *gayatri* of poetry.” (43)

Although there has been strong and serious views put forward by many scholars in the past few decades regarding the “break” / “discontinuity” / “amnesia” in Sanskrit Poetical tradition after Jagannāth (17th century), recent research contradicts these views. Prof Singh, for instance, enlists more than fifty published

and unpublished Sanskrit texts on Indian Poetics in the Post-Jagannāth period along with their authors in the appendix to his *Revisiting Literature, Criticism and Aesthetics in India* (2012). Adding to this, there are works in other Indian languages. The elaborate list, which consists of texts roughly from late 17th century up to the first decade of the 21st century – although many of them may be reiterations or reworking of precepts by the previous acharyas – clearly indicates that “the tradition assumed a new garb, though the principal ideas remained the same. And the continuity of ideas is more significant than the language...” (421)

Upholding and continuing this rich legacy in the contemporary period is Krishna Rayan (b. 1928) who is a prominent name in the contemporary scholars of Sanskrit Poetics. Having completed his education in Madras and then in London, he has been English at universities in India and abroad for over five decades. His endeavour has been to develop a comprehensive theory of Suggestion through amalgamation of critical concepts from Indian and Western criticism. His *Suggestion and Statement in Poetry* (1972) is a work in this line. It is surprising why Rayan himself denies the work being a comparative study of Indian and Western literary theory stating:

“This essay is not an exposition in Sanskrit poetics nor is it a comparative study of Sanskrit and English critical theory – anything in that line will have to await the advent of a super-scholar who matches a knowledge of what the ninth-to-eleventh century Indian theorists of poetry meant with a specifically modern sensibility... and to speak a language which will not distort what those masters said and yet will be comprehensible to present-day English speaking readers.” (Rayan *Suggestion and Statement* V-VI)

Two points deserve mention over here: Firstly, the title of this paper privileges Rayan's formulations on Suggestion to be called 'Theory'. This may be found debatable because in Western criticism, the term 'Theory' has its own implications, especially from the Poststructuralist times. However, “Indian literary theories are constitutive theories i.e. they are concerned with analysing how meaning is constructed, through what devices of cognition and communication, and how the work succeeds in giving enjoyment, *ānanda* to the *sahridayi*. The major concern, therefore, is HOW and secondarily WHAT.” (Kapoor 45) Theories of Indian origin need to be judged keeping with 'Indian Conceptual Framework' and if Rayan's formulations become eligible to fit these criteria, he undoubtedly is working out a 'theory' of Suggestion. In this context, Rayan sets off in a systematic manner by examining the term 'Suggestion', its meaning, origin, development, contemporary status, its implications, its types and two case studies of Suggestive Poetry from the Western tradition.

Secondly, Rayan's work is certainly an exercise in comparative poetics, if not in comparative criticism. Sceptical as he appears about it, the fact cannot be denied that Comparative Poetics is only a methodology and

not a discipline in itself. “Comparative Poetics brings in an element of modesty by positing that no *śāstra* is complete in itself and so different poetics complement and supplement each other.” (Singh *Quest* 238) Rayan's is a work prominently based on Sanskrit poetics but the introduction to the concepts comes through illustrate lines from Herbert Read, Swinburne, Dylan Thomas, Chaucer, Wordsworth, T.S. Eliot etc. The peculiarity of this work is marked by the presence of a Sanskrit parallel for every Western concept, and that of a Western one for every Sanskrit one. An example can be that of Sthāyibhāva which Rayan equates with Objective Correlative. This method of juxtaposition for mutual illumination is a domain of comparative poetics.

Meaning/s of Suggestion and its Position in Western Criticism:

The ontological question ‘What is Suggestion?’ Rayan answers by describing what ways suggestion can be made through. According to him, the multiple ways of suggestion are – suppression, incantation, semantic association, realization of alternative meaning/s, activation of a completely unspoken meaning, evocation of an emotion through its correlative sensuous details, use of symbol or system of symbols, rhythm etc. For each of these techniques he gives example from the above-mentioned English poets, six out of the nine chosen being twentieth century poets, only to infer that even in contemporary literature “Suggestion is clearly the prevailing mode of modern poetry, and the exploration of suggested meaning is the largest single concern of present day criticism and scholarship.” (*Suggestion and Statement* 6)

The earliest use of the word ‘Suggestion’ in its present sense, according to Rayan, is found in Dryden's 1697 remark – “Virgil.. loves to suggest a truth indirectly.” (17) He also notes David Perkin's comment on Wordsworth – “No more than other Romantic writers does Wordsworth spend much time speculating how the process of suggestion actually works.” (17) Even Coleridge is known to have spoken about ideas being “suggested” and “awakened”. For Rayan, Romantic age is a more fertile ground for suggestive poetry than the Neo-classical age although the term doesn't appear as a technical critical term during the period. He finds the term used in its present sense for the first time in American criticism in the writing of Cotton Mather (1663-1728) who, in his work *Manuductio ad Ministerium* (1726), speaks of a style “embellished with something beyond what is spoken”. (18) However, the tem is formally established in the writings of Edgar Allan Poe who rejected Coleridge's definition of Imagination and Fancy and proposed one of his own. He considers suggestivity as an integral part of imaginative poetry or what he considers good poetry. Rayan notes Poe's distinction of Imagination vs. Fancy in terms of suggestivity:

“Poems which mankind have been accustomed to designate as imaginative, are remarkable, he says, for their suggestive character, by which is meant that there lies beneath the transparent upper current of

meaning an under or suggestive one. But not so in the poems that the world has always persisted in terming fanciful. Here the upper current is often exceedingly brilliant and beautiful; but then men feel that this upper current is all.” (19)

However, the equation of ‘suggestive’ with words like ‘ideal’, ‘ethereal’, ‘elevating’, ‘august’ etc by Poe is found suspect by Rayan.

Suggestion and New Criticism:

According to Rayan, what the New Critics were describing under various labels like Ambiguity, Obliquity, Paradox, Intension, Texture etc are nothing but techniques of suggestion. For instance, the earliest of these terms was ‘Emotive meaning’, as opposed to ‘Referential Meaning’ proposed by I A Richards, which refers to the meaning beyond the lexical one i.e. suggested meaning. For Empson, Rayan has to say that his seven types of ambiguity are “in fact the prototypal study, in English criticism, of suggested meaning in poetry... Viewed as such, suggestion is synonymous with Ambiguity”. (*Suggestion and Statement* 9) Another term under the ambit of Suggestion is Tillyard’s ‘Obliquity’. He says that the suggested or ‘oblique meaning’ should be alien to the stated meaning with example from *Lycidas*, the dhvani of which he considers near to the preaching of Gita.

As an example for his theory of Paradox, Cleanth Brooks has used the opposition between the image of Lucy, motionless in death in the famous Lucy poem by Wordsworth, and the earth’s rotation which involves her. Rayan notes Brooks’ comment: “Wordsworth . . . attempts to suggest something of the lover’s agony... And how shall he suggest this? He chooses to suggest it, not by saying that she lies as quiet as marble or as a lump of clay; on the contrary, he attempts to suggest it by imagining her in violent motion.” (*Suggestion and Statement* 8) Even Allen Tate’s term ‘Intension’, which is a part of his theory of Tension, is nothing but a substitute for connotation to Rayan – to find out through verbal analysis the ‘intensive meaning’ through extra-logical intuitive method.

Suggestion and Objective Correlative:

Objective Correlative, as defined by the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, is “an external equivalent for an internal state of mind”. (236) Brought in vogue famously by T S Eliot through his essay ‘Hamlet and His Problems’ (1919), the term refers to an author using an object, scene, event or situation to evoke an emotion in place of directly expressing it in a subjective manner.

Rayan's Sanskrit equivalent for objective correlative seems to be the *bhāvas* (*Vibhāva*, *Anubhāva*, *Vyabhichari*) in Bharata. According to him, objective correlatives are primarily manifestations of the causes / determinants (*Vibhāva*) and consequents (*Anubhāva*) of an emotion (*Sthāyibhāva*). Thus, in art the representation of an actual life emotion (*bhāva*) is through its association with objects of emotion – character, situation, landscape etc. These objects, he states,

“... are not personal... but universalized... Then the sensuous objects of an emotion (*Vibhāva* etc), thus universalized in art, impinge upon an emotional set latent in the reader's consciousness, the two coalesce and give rise to utter aesthetic satisfaction known as Rasa.” (*Suggestion and Statement* 37-38)

Here, the author/artist has a dominant emotional state of mind (*Sthāyibhāva*) of which the characters, situation, landscape, imagery etc created by him are equivalents. According to Rayan, this state of mind cannot be named / denoted; “it can only be presented in the work and realized in the reader's consciousness by being *suggested* through its objective correlative”. (*A Theory of Suggestion* 125)

Rayan considers images and as the most important of all suggestors. The basic function of an image is to act as a metaphor and as an “instrument of plurivocity”. Modern writing has been more and more reliant on images, symbols, myths and archetypes as objective correlatives than words, and consequently, the dynamics of suggestion also change.

However, objective correlative, as mentioned by Dr Nanavati in his thesis, stands on the idea of objectivity i.e. separation between the artist and his creation. Rasa, on the other hand, demands equivalence. Thus, Rayan's juxtaposition takes both the original theories out of their contexts.

Suggestion and Poststructuralism:

The principle of suggestion, primarily one of meaning-making, is invariably related to Saussurean model of signification. However, unlike the primary / denotative meaning (*vāchyārtha*), the signifier-signified relationship here is not that of strict one-to-one correspondence. A single image, for instance, may evoke different meanings to different readers. For Rayan, Dhvani (suggestion) is a process of loose, variable signification in which the signified (*vyangyārtha*) can be multiple, complex, connotational and polysemous. “Alternatively, it can be described as a case of the syntagmatic chain being left loose and open, so that the absent associations or potential paradigmatic substitutions are enabled to operate.” (*Towards a Rewritten..* 13)

This multiplicity of meaning is the fulcrum of Poststructuralism.

Rayan also believes that objective correlation strategies in the modern and postmodern literature (viz. Images, symbols, fragmentary narration etc) have been characteristic of gaps and indeterminate elements. Suggestion of this kind activates the reader's capacity to participate in the production of meaning. The growing minimalism in micro-poetry and micro-fiction induce a mode of reading which makes a competent reader to become the co-creative author in his attempts to fill in the gaps. "The reader's emotional experience is thus the meaning of the work." (*Towards a Rewritten* 14) Saying this, Rayan undoubtedly connects the Dhvani principle to Reader Response Theory.

Conclusion:

Literature in the contemporary time has certainly grown to be more and more complex, minimalistic and suggestive. The means and media of suggestion also have undoubtedly changed – images, symbols, omission, ellipsis, fragmentation etc. are the soul of new modes of creativity. If creativity puts on new garbs, how can criticism fail to update itself?

The theories of ācharyas like Ānandvardhan and Abhinavagupta, well beyond the boundaries of time and space as they may stand, they can certainly be enriched and understood better by juxtaposing them with notions from Western criticism and critical theories of meaning-making. Rayan's is a modest attempt in this direction. Whether his formulations might be accepted as an independent theory is subject to the test of time but he certainly has opened up new vistas in the discussion of Dhvani theory by making it interact with modern / postmodern English literature and literary-critical theories, and in this way he has been able to 'make-it-new' the conventional Dhvani aesthetics.

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