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**RASA THEORY AND THOMAS GRAY'S
ELEGY WRITTEN IN A COUNTRY CHURCHYARD**

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Abstract

To define, *Rasa* is an aesthetically sublimated ecstatic experience resulting when we observe something and enrapture. The Indian theory of *Rasa* can be traced back to the age of *Vedas* where the word '*Rasa*' is implied as an object to drink. *Rasa* theory was mainly propounded by Bharata Muni in his *Natayashatra*. *Rasa* is consummated by observing *Vibhava* (Determinants), *Anubhava* (Consequents) and *Sancharibhava* (Transitory feelings). The Indian Rhetoricians defined *rasa* as the pleasure gained from reading extraordinary animated poems or literary compositions. According to Bharata, the *rasas* – *srngara*, *raudra*, *vira* and *bibhaatsa* are the fundamental *rasas* and *hasya*, *karuna*, *adbhuta* and *bhananaka* originate from them due to 'cause and effect relationship' between them. Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* is a brilliant example of *karuna rasa* or pathos. The poet celebrates the glory of the poor rustics who lie buried in the country churchyard. The condition of the graves is very poor and they lie there unsung, unheard and uncelebrated. In the poem grief is the *Sthayibhava* (dominant emotion), the dead forefathers are *Alambanvibhava* (the object), and the poet and the readers are the *Ashrayavibhava* (the Subjects). Further the shade of yew trees, the bad condition of the graves are *Uddipanvibhavas* (the Excitants) and they invoke *Karuna Rasa* in the heart of the poet as well as in the audience. The *Sancharivibhavas* (Transitory feelings) are *Unmad* (Intensity), *Dainya* (Depression), and *Smriti* (Remembrance). Thus the *Rasa* theory is a deep psychological study of universal human emotions, the source of aesthetic delight in literature and the paper is an attempt to observe *Karuna Rasa* and its implication in Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*.

Key-Words

Karuna Rasa, Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, Indian Poetics,
Rasa-sutra, Rasa theory, Natayashatra.



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The whole of the subject-matter of Sanskrit Poetics has been divided into ten *kavyamgas* (constituents) of poetry: *Kavya-svarupa* (the nature of Poetry), *Sabdasakti* (the significance of a word), *Dhvani-kavya* (aesthetic suggestively), *Gunibhuta-vyamgya-kavya* (suggested sense is secondary to the primary sense), *Rasa* (Sentiment i.e. the poetic relish), *Guna* (the excellences in poetic expression), *Riti* (the style of poetry), *Alamkara* (figurative beauty of poetry), *Dosa* (blemishes in poetic expression) and *Natya-vidhana* (Dramaturgy). To define, *Rasa* is an aesthetically sublimated ecstatic experience resulting when we observe something and enrapture. The Indian theory of *Rasa* can be traced back to the age of *Vedas* where the word '*Rasa*' is implied as an object to drink. *Rasa* theory was mainly propounded by Bharata Muni in his *Natayashatra*. *Rasa* is consummated by observing *Vibhava* (Determinants), *Anubhava* (Consequents) and *Sancharibhava* (Transitory feelings). The Indian Rhetoricians defined *rasa* as the pleasure gained from reading extraordinary animated poems or literary compositions. According to Bharata, the *rasas* –*srngara*, *raudra*, *vira* and *bibhaatsa* are the fundamental *rasas* and *hasya*, *karuna*, *adbhuta* and *bhananaka* originate from them due to 'cause and effect relationship' between them. Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* is a brilliant example of *karuna rasa* or pathos. The poet celebrates the glory of the poor rustics who lie buried in the country churchyard. The condition of the graves is very poor and they lie there unsung, unheard and uncelebrated. Thus the *Rasa* theory is a deep psychological study of universal human emotions, the source of aesthetic delight in literature and the paper is an attempt to observe *Karuna Rasa* and its implication in Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*.

One of the aspects of the medieval revival was a renewed interest in the poetry of the old

English masters, more specially Spencer and Milton. Under the inspiration of Milton's *Penseroso*, there grew up a school or cult of melancholy and the poets of this school are known as "the churchyard school of poets". Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* is the best and the most popular poem of this school. In this connection mention may be made of Edward Young who in his *Night Thoughts* imparted the romantic touch of melancholy to the poetry of the period, for it became a fashion to imitate Young and write, like him, in a melancholy vein. Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* is one of those longer poems which came to be engraved in the imagination of the people in general and the people in England in particular. Though there were many elegies composed by writers before and after Gray yet they could not be as popular as the *Elegy* of Gray is. The *Elegy* of Gray has an aroma of its own. It raises the question of human dignity. There is a delicate touch of melancholy of the poet, which contributes to the pathetic beauty of the elegy. The poet seems to be forestalling Wordsworth by dwelling upon the beauty of nature. The didactic note in the poem is not ponderous or imposing but suggestive, symbolically. It is persuasive in its appeal and servile by any chance. It has a charming simplicity of its own and a new subject was discovered by him *i. e.* the elegiac note astonished his contemporaries. Moreover, the *Elegy* has a sort of nihilism (the meaninglessness of life) as its ultimate philosophy.

Rasa is for aesthetic pleasure and it is often called *sukhadukhatmaka* *i.e.* causing both pain and pleasure when we feel the mixture or overlapping of pleasure and pain together in a work of art. The worldly cause, effect and accessory – *vibhava*, *anubhava* and *sancharibhava* respectively in poetry take us from this earthly existence to super worldly plane. It is true that the emotions, grief, fear etc. are related to worldly cause, effect and accessory and appear painful. When such emotions get association with *vibhava* etc., they convert into the *rasa* like *karuna*, *bhayanaka*, etc. leading us to transcendental pleasure. In fact, the *rasa* manifests itself when the *sthayibhava* *i. e.* the emotion of a reader or a spectator is correlated with any of the three aspects: either an excitant or ensuant response or transitory feelings. What is necessary is that all the three must be accumulated as one whole. Thus the basic emotions as love mirth, sorrow, anger etc. are dormant in their initial stage. When the emotions are aroused – stimulated in the worldly affairs through any cause, effect and auxiliary feelings, they are termed as love and mirth, anger and sorrow etc. and among these, love and mirth impart us joy and delight, while sorrow and anger – affliction and agitation of mind. But while reading any literary piece of work when these emotions – love, mirth, anger, sorrow, etc. – are correlated with excitant, ensuant response and auxiliary feelings – all the three accumulated as one – they, themselves, manifest into erotic, comic, furious and pathos, sentiments respectively on the ground of the principle of the 'suggestiveness' as well as 'generalization'. And both the types of sentiments, whether It is Bharata Muni who mainly propounded *Rasa* theory. In his *Natyashastra*, he says that

Rasa is consummated by observing *vibhava*. Bhattalollata, SriShenkuka and Bhattanayaka are the three main interpreters of *Rasa* theory. Bhattalollata is well known for his theory '*Utpattivad*' which indicates to the identification of actor and character theory. When the actors identify themselves with the characters in the play, they attain the state of *Rasa*. This state occurs when their *sthayibhava* (Permanent Dominant Emotion) is supported by their acting skills, music and dress that the actors attain while enacting the play. But Lollata's theory fails us to satisfy in terms of the realization that the audience or the readers get. Criticizing his theory on this ground, Shenkuka postulates the theory of '*Anumativad*' according to which the middle term like *vibhava* (Determinants) or *Anubhava* (effect of the emotions) are necessary to attain *sthayibhava* (Dominant Emotion). When the actor describes the emotions and actions in real, they identify themselves imaginatively with the characters. In the process, the spectators and readers easily identify themselves with the actors, feel emotions and realize *rasa*.

However, it is Bhattanayaka, the third interpreter who propounded a better theory known as '*Bhaktivad*'. He defines it a kind of *rasa* that is enjoyed not by indifference but in real sense. He also gives the theory of '*sadharikarana*', a kind of empathy through which audience or readers enjoy the *rasa* while reading or witnessing a work of art. Bharata regards *rasa* the combination of *vibhava* (Determinants), *Anubhavas* (Consequents) and the *sancharibhava* (Transitory Feelings). The *vibhava* consists of *Alamban* (Object), *Ashraya* (Subject) and *Uddipan* (Excitant). *Anubhava* (Consequent) creates visible effect of the feeling that stimulates emotions afterwards. It further divides into – *Angik* (Physical Consequent) and *Satvikas* (psycho-physical Consequent). *Sthayibhavas* are eight in number – *Rati*, (Love), *Hasya* (Laughter), *Shoka* (Grief), *Krodha* (Anger), *Utsah* (Enthusiasm), *Jugupsa* (Repulsion), *Bhaya* (Fear), *Vismaya* (Astonishment). Later two *sthayibhavas* – *Nirvaid* (Detachment) and *Vatsalya* (Paternal Feelings) are added.

Bharata's explanation of *rasa* has been further discussed extensively and interpreted by many of his interpreters such as Bhattalollata, Bhattanayaka and Abhinavgupta. According to Bharata, a *sthayibhava*, intensified by poetic description or historic representation through *vibhavas*, *anubhavas* etc., becomes *rasa*. The *rasa* primarily resides in original characters but through *anusadhana* (a mental activity and act of imagination); the actor attributes himself the role of original characters and thus experiences *rasa* secondarily. He, however, ignores the poet and the audience in this transaction of *rasa*. Shenkuka emphasizes the importance of action (inference). He takes recourse to the analogy of a picture horse. On seeing the picture of a horse or its representation in any form, we accept it as a real horse. Similar is the case with the spectator when he sees the faked emotions or *rasas* being performed. However, it is Bhattanayaka who clearly asserts that *rasa* affects the spectators and that poetic language is different from ordinary language. He emphasizes the

role of theology and philosophy on the *rasa* theory. He thinks that the spectator's self becomes one with the divine soul after experiencing *rasa*. He explains this in terms of *swarupanada*, a kind of infinite subjectivity. At last, we achieve self-realization: *atma-sakshatkara*.

In the light of above discussion, we can say that the *Rasa* theory studies human emotions at psychological level and it is the source of aesthetic delight in every literature of the world. The presence of *Rasa* theory is felt even in the literature in English. Eighteenth century English poetry, instead of accepting the soft radiance of enthusiasm, accepted the classical dictum. As a result of it, there was no inside probing or the high flights of imagination. The age of Thomas Gray, though in the grip of prose, rambled on with the poetic innovations, half of the classical nature and half romantic. The churchyard at Stoke Poges in Bucks where he himself was buried inspired him to write his famous elegy entitled *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*. The poem is one of those longer poems which came to be engraved in the imagination of the people in general and the people of England in particular. The themes of elegies are numerous: marching songs, love songs, political verses, the pastoral poems, personal sorrow, as artificial medium of expression, humorous theme etc. but Gray's *Elegy* has some notable point about it. The sorrow has not been directed to an individual but has the universal 'pathos of race'. As far as Indian poetic theory of *Rasa* is concerned, *Karuna Rasa* is quite manifest in the poem. Here grief (*Shoka*) is the Dominant Permanent Emotion (*Sthayibhava*). The melancholy atmosphere that invokes *Karuna Rasa* in the readers is the product of the poet's own melancholy. The depiction of the dusky evening in the beginning may be due to this melancholy mood in him. 'Tolling the knell by the curfew' is a dark note, springing under such a condition of mind. 'The glimmering landscape' is of a short duration and the rest of it remains in darkness. The choice of the graveyard is also of the melancholic turn of mind. The families run on even without the presence of the sire is a melancholic idea. The early designing of the poem so also the last phase (before Epitaph) is full of melancholy.

There is the dusky peace in the poem which agrees with the temperament of the poet. His melancholy is not of a violent type, it is passive and under control. The arresting use of the 'moping owl' in the early phase of the poem shows the mastery of Gray to use such a symbolic bird as owl to heighten the melancholy mood. The graveyard scene in the poem aptly describes the melancholy disposition of Gray as depicted in the lines:

Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree's shade,
Where heaves the turf in many a mouldering heap,
Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,
The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep. ²

The sad and somber depiction of the rustics' life by Gray brings to the fore that life is a melancholy fact. No sound, howsoever pleasant it might be, can make them rouse from their eternal slumber. From the common experience of life he carves out the beauty in melancholy. The dead person is snatched from his sweet hope. The children no more vie with each other to clamber on the knees for the kiss of the sire. The rural folk do not have even a minor tinge of grandeur because their history of life is simple. Grave is the 'inevitable' goal of human existence. It is a melancholy fact of life that no proper memorials are erected in the honor of rural folk in comparison to the graves of the rich people. There is another grim fact that the 'silent dust' can not be provoked. Melancholy at times gives place to pity. It is a pity that 'chill penury' should repress their 'noble rage'.

The mood of *The Elegy* is overwrought with an all-pervading melancholy. We can trace a note of melancholy in the rustics' mode of living which is not high and hectic but a quiet living in countryside. 'Along the cool sequestered vale of life, / they kept the noiseless tenor of their way'.³ The entire poem is surcharged with excessive gloom and sadness, two prominent features of melancholy. The culmination of melancholy is seen in Gray's pathetic imagination of self-death. The lines are more graphic than powerful. Here we objectify subjectivity dipped in his own blood '....like one forlorn, /or crazed with care /or cross'd in hopeless love,'⁴ is an inward fact projected outwardly. Thus *The Elegy* is the projection of the inside darkness of the poet. The 'sense of tears in human life' is the keynote of his melancholy. Thus grief (*Shoka*) is the main *sthayibhava* in the poem. The dead forefathers are the object (*Alambanvibhava*), the poet and the readers are the subjects (*Ashrayavibhava*), the shade of yew trees, the bad condition of the graves are Excitants (*Uddipanvibhavas*) as they excite the feelings of grief (*Karuna Rasa*) in the heart of the poet and readers. Intensity (*Unmad*), Depression (*Dainya*), Remembrance (*Smriti*) is the transitory feelings (*Sancharivibhavas*). Rasa has its renderings in the instincts or impulses ingrained in human soul in the form of emotions – the emotions that are further divided in two principal categories: *Sthayi* (Permanent) and *Vyabhicharis* or *Sansari* (Transitories). To quote R. S. Tiwary:

The first category comprises the leading emotions which are of a relatively transitory character and arise chiefly in the service of the predominant emotions and having promoted them, automatically disappear, giving way to other kindred ones, Transitories. It is the emotions of the former class, to wits the "Sthayis" which develop into Rasa, when portrayed in amplitude, supported by Transitories. The "Sthayis", attaining the status of Rasa that is, Relishability, give rise to certain manifestations, physical on psychological, which suggest that the subject (the man) is under governance of a Permanent Emotion. They are designated "Anubhavas", that is, the Indicators or

Emsuants. But the principal factor in the emergence of the Rasa is the “Vibhavas” to wit, the persons and the circumstances that are respectively harburers of a particular “Sthayi” and serve as immediate causes of the generation of that Emotion. They are known as “Vibhavas”. “Alambana Vibhavas”, those agitated by the rise of that emotion. Also the situationality plays a leading role in the emergence the “Sthayis”, such as loneliness, a flower garden, the moonlight et cetera. These situationalities are called “Udeepana Vibhavas” that is Stimulants. “Vibhavas” as a whole are designated as Causes er Determinanta. ⁵

The atmosphere in which *The Elegy* is set is that of gloom. In the beginning of the poem the elegiac frame has been set – the sounds and sights, the landscape, the ‘lowing herd’, the droning flight of the moon, encroaching upon the solitariness of the owl – this kind of atmosphere localizes the concentrated one, the atmosphere of the graveyard. The domestic atmosphere represents the blazing hearth on which the meals are cooked for the peasant. Here is homeliness, a universal reality to which Gray is alive. How the dead are missing with the cozy domesticity of a home. The churchyard scene is elegiac where the ‘frail memorial’ is shown with the clumsiness of the ‘uncouth rhymes’ and ‘shapeless sculpture’, having a pitiable decoration enhance the tone of the pathos. The death in *The Elegy* is three-dimensional as it exists in the foreground, in the situation and in the background. The sense of moral-subjectivity exists in the last phase otherwise it is objective. The scheme of the poem appears to present the atmospheric death with its exposition, development and the climax. There is the denouement and that is the Epitaph in the poem. The poet’s melancholy finds a subjective note:

For thee, who mindful of the unhonoured dead,
Dost in these lines their artless tale relate;
If chance, by lonely contemplation led,
Some kindred spirit shall inquire the fate. ⁶

Taking himself to be a dead person he thinks of the aftermath of death. It is very touching to leave the cheerful day without being able to cast a nostalgic glance at the beautiful world. The deceased longed that he died in the arms of someone loving him and the tears falling on him. Even in the ashes and the dust remain the fires of such longings. He is keenly aware of all this, some ‘kindred spirit’, who has been attached to the dead, would then enquire about the circumstances of his death. Some old villager would tell him about it, for he had often seen him in the mornings or under the beech tree in the noon. The forlorn person, a poet of sad romantic turn of mind was often seen by him. Then it was seen that a mourning procession wended its way to the church.

Death value thus envelops the consciousness of the poet without which the poem could not have been written. Gray imagines his own death and the people, who are accustomed to see him in his favourite places, miss him badly:

One morn morn I missed him on the customed hill
Along the heath and near his favorite tree!
Another came; nor yet beside the rill,
Nor up the lawn, nor at the wood, was he; ⁷

In the above lines the tragedy of death has been explained in the physical absence of the person, particularly the poet, from his favourite spots. The tragedy becomes all the more keenly poignant because of the association of the person, missing from the scene.

Last but not the least *The Epitaph* gives the biographical melancholy of the poet which lingered with him as long as he lived:

No farther seek his merits to disclose,
Or draw his frailties from their dread abode,
(There they alike in trembling hope repose.)
The bosom of his Father and his God. ⁸

Here the poet is of the view that those who have weaknesses and strength repose in bosom of God. He wishes that no one should seek more than what he has or think that he should be having weaknesses because of his humble circumstances. Both of them will receive the reward or the punishment at the hands of the Almighty as the Biblical saying is that the soul of a man waits for the punishment or the reward on the Day of Judgment. Life after death has its own significance. *The Epitaph* tells people that the young dead person was unknown to fame. He was of the melancholy frame of mind. He had a noble and generous heart with a shining soul full of milk of sincerity. God gave him a friend as a compensation for other losses. One must not bother to know more about him. He completely resigned himself to God and he would ultimately be consecrated by him.

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