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Research Article

The Aesthetics of Hasya, Bibhatsa and Bhayanaka: A Rasa-Theoretical Reading of Richard Sheridan's The School for Scandal

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Abstract

This research explores the representation of Hasya, Bibhatsa and Bhayanaka rasa in Richard Sheridan's anti-sentimental comedy, *The School for Scandal* (1777). Anti-sentimental comedy is also called Comedy of Manners, which emphasises satire, irony, wit and realistic human behaviour to expose the weaknesses of fashionable society. It focuses on issues such as hypocrisy, greed, scandals and lust of the wealthy upper class. This play depicts the comedy of social hypocrisy, the disgust of moral corruption and gossip and the fear of exposure and the loss of reputation, which can be observed through the aesthetics of hasya, bibhatsa and bhayanaka rasa. William Congreve, Oliver Goldsmith, Richard Brinsley Sheridan are the prominent key figures of the Comedy of Manners. The Rasa theory began with Bharata Muni's *Natyashastra*, which is the ancient Indian perception of the concept of emotions is aroused by performance and art. This paper connects the Indian aesthetics of rasa theory with the play *The School for Scandal*.

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INTRODUCTION

According to Indian Poetics, when we read a piece of literature whether in lyrical or epical form or composed in any other genre like drama, story novel or even essay written in an elegant style, we get pleasure as a reader and when we watch a drama on the screen or the stage, we enjoy as a spectator. This term can be called as 'rasa'. The word rasa can be translated in English language as aesthetic pleasure. In Natyashastra, Bharata wrote about eight major rasas, Shringara (love), Hasya (humor), Karuna (compassion), Raudra (anger), Veera (heroism), Bhayanaka (fear), Bibhatsa (disgust), and Adbhuta (wonder). The ninth rasa Shanta (peace) was accepted by Udbhata and later proposed by the 11th and 12th century Kashmiri philosopher Abhinavagupta in Abhinavabharati. In the sixth chapter of Natyashastra, Bharata Muni had written the theory of rasa as:

विभावानुभावव्यभिचारिसंयोगाद्रसनिष्पत्तिः

(Natyashastra, Chapter Six)

The word 'Rasa' indicates several meanings, especially in Indian context. At one time it meant 'water', 'wine' or 'juice'. At another point it implied 'essence'. In another context it meant 'relish' or 'savouring'. In ancient times it was associated with the primary constituents of medicine. Rasa is the soul of a rupaka or drama without which the purpose of drama remains unfulfilled. In rasa theory, the emotional experience (rasa) is produced through the combination of Sthayibhava, Vibhava, Anubhava and Vyabhicharibhava. Sadharanikarana plays an important role as a bridge between the dramatic emotion and the spectator's aesthetic experience of rasa.

The 18th century theatrical genre, anti-sentimental comedy or comedy of manners rejects excessive emotionalism through using satire to hypocrisy, vanity and social follies. When Sentimental comedy started declining, writers such as Richard Sheridan and Oliver Goldsmith turned into anti-sentimental comedy which was basically an artificial comedy. Both are considered as pioneers of anti-sentimental movement. Sheridan's play, 'The School for Scandal' is a perfect example of anti-sentimental comedy, which exposes hypocrisy, gossip and false appearance of fashionable eighteenth-century society. The play mainly revolves around some characters Lady Sneerwell, the Surface brothers, Sir Peter and Lady Teazle and Maria. The play begins with Lady Sneerwell, who spreads rumours about others and wants to prevent Charles' marriage to Maria. She conspires with Joseph Surface, Charles's elder brother, who appears as a virtuous man but is actually selfish and hypocritical. Sir Peter Teazle is unhappy in his marriage to the much younger wife Lady Teazle because of her extravagant lifestyle. For a huge gap in age, clash over money and habits, they sometimes get involved in arguments. Joseph attempts to win Maria's heart and secretly tries to seduce Lady Teazle. Sir Oliver Surface, the uncle of Charles and Joseph Surface, whose arrival creates the central test of their true nature of character. Sir Oliver, disguised as Mr. Premium, Sir Oliver discovers

Charles's generosity and genuine affection for him when Charles refuses to sell his uncle's portrait. In contrast, Sir Oliver, disguised as poor Mr. Stanley, discovers Joseph's selfishness when Joseph refuses to help him. In the last part of the play, Lady Teazle is discovered in Joseph's room, which exposes his hypocrisy. Eventually, Sir Oliver reveals the truth to Charles and Joseph Surface. Snake exposes Lady Sneerwell's forged letters, and later her plan fails. The play ends with the engagement of Charles and Maria. In the play, honesty triumphs over hypocrisy and malicious gossip.

Hasya, Bibhatsa and Bhayanaka Rasa in the Play:

Hasya Rasa, which represents laughter, can be observed in the play mainly through witty dialogue, comic misunderstanding, satire, caricature and ridiculous social behaviour. The characters of the play frequently become objects of laughter because their words and actions contradict one another. The first important source of Hasya is the scandal-mongering society itself. The woman Lady Sneerwell, with whom the play begins as gossipmonger, at last her real conspiracy has come out. In the last part of the play, Snake, who was hired by Lady Sneerwell to spread rumours, exposed all the conspiracies which were created by Lady Sneerwell. Mrs. Candour pretends to be good-natured and honest but actually, she spends her time spreading rumours. Her name ironically references the word candor, which is another word of honesty. Her statement, "True, true, child; but there's no stopping people's tongues," becomes comic because she herself contributes to the very gossip she condemns. Through this statement, she herself helps those tongues to keep talking. She means that people cannot be prevented from spreading rumours and talking about others. She claims that she herself was upset when she heard the rumours. The irony is that Mrs. Candour herself is a great gossip. Although she pretends to dislike scandal, she actively participates in spreading it. Another example appears when the gossiping duo, Sir Benjamin Backbite and Crabtree, mock Mrs. Ogle. Crabtree describes her face as a collection of features from different countries, while Sir Benjamin concludes that "her face resembles a table d'hôte at Spa- where no two guests are of a nation." This exaggerated comparison transforms social cruelty into comic caricature and produces Hasya through verbal wit. The strongest comic situation occurs after the revelation of Lady Teazle, Charles humorously declares, "Lady Teazle! by all that's wonderful!" while Joseph responds, "Lady Teazle! by all that's horrible!" That time, Sir Peter says, "Lady Teazle! by all that's damnable!" The contrast between "wonderful", "horrible," and "damnable", together with the confused reactions of the characters creates intense comic energy. The laughter continues when Sir Oliver and Sir Peter later remember the incident. Sir Oliver says, "I never laughed more in my life, I assure you. Ha! ha! ha!" and Sir Peter calls the episode "Oh, vastly diverting! Ha! ha! ha!" Hence, the hasya rasa can be observed in the play.

Bibhatsa Rasa arises from experiences of disgust, repulsion, and aversion. In this play, it is moral and social corruption produced by hypocrisy, slander and false friendship. Lady

Sneerwell openly admits the pleasure that she receives from destroying other people's reputations, "I confess I have since known no pleasure equal to the reducing others to the level of my own reputation." Her confession reveals a deeply corrupt psychological attitude. Joseph Surface generates an even stronger form of Bibhatsa rasa because his public image of morality contrasts sharply with his actual character. Lady Sneerwell describes him as "artful, selfish, and malicious—in short, a sentimental knave," although society considers him as a model of prudence and benevolence. Sir Peter similarly expresses his disgust on the scandalmongers, when he describes them as, "utterers of forged tales, coiners of scandal, and clippers of reputation." Here, 'coiners' and 'clippers' represent reputation as something dishonestly manufactured and damaged. Therefore, the Bibhatsa rasa can be observed through the moral corruption of the various characters in the play, which satirizes the fashionable eighteenth-century society. Bhayanaka Rasa, which is associated with fear, anxiety, apprehension, and insecurity, appears in the play through the characters' constant fear of exposure and social disgrace. In the world of scandal, truth becomes threatening because the revelation of real behaviour can destroy reputation. Lady Sneerwell experiences intense anxiety when her plan begins to collapse. She says, "Explain to Sir Peter! Impossible! Will he not immediately be reconciled to Charles, and of consequence no longer oppose his union with Maria? The thought is distraction to me."

(The School for Scandal, Act 5)

Lady Sneerwell is shocked and afraid of the possibility that Sir Peter might discover the truth about her conspiracy. She thinks that if Sir Peter understands the reality, he will make peace with Charles and stop opposing Charles's marriage to Maria. This is a serious situation for Lady Sneerwell because she wants Charles and Maria to remain separated. She herself is in love with Charles and has been working with Joseph Surface to destroy Charles's reputation and prevent his marriage to Maria. Her psychological disturbance creates the emotional basis of Bhayanaka rasa. The screen scene of the play provides an even clearer example. Sir Peter has come to Joseph Surface's house. Joseph is pretending to be a respectable, moral man, but he has been secretly trying to seduce Lady Teazle. When Sir Peter arrives, Lady Teazle hides behind a screen. Joseph is terrified because he does not want Sir Peter to discover her there. Sir Peter's fear is also connected with public humiliation. He worries that if his wife's supposed infidelity becomes known, "the town would only laugh at me, the foolish old bachelor, who had married a girl". He imagines that people will make "ballads" and "paragraphs" about him. Here fear is inseparable from reputation. The threat is not physical death but social destruction.

CONCLUSION

Rasa is a concept in Indian arts which denotes the aesthetic flavour of any visual, literary or musical work that evokes an indescribable feeling in the reader or audience. The play, The

School for Scandal can be understood through the aesthetic framework of Hasya, Bibhatsa, and Bhayanaka rasa. Hasya rasa emerges through witty dialogues, satire, comic situations, and the ridiculous behaviour of scandalmongers. Bibhatsa rasa reflects the moral corruption created by hypocrisy, slander, selfishness, and false appearances. Bhayanaka rasa arises from the characters' fear of exposure, humiliation, and loss of reputation. Through these three rasas the weaknesses of fashionable society in the play can be observed which Sheridan describes with the comedy of manners. Sheridan uses comedy not merely to entertain but also to criticize social corruption.

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