

# Abhinavagupta and Eliot: A Comparative Study of Aesthetics

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An attempt at comparing the aesthetic philosophy of Abhinavagupta with the stray speculations of Eliot on art experiences may sound a little strange to western critics. Nonetheless, the similarity is too striking to ignore, and we feel that it is not merely incidental. The feeling is amply buttressed by a string of evidence showing the penetrating influence of Indian tradition on Eliot. Unfortunately, it has been by and large overlooked by scholars of Eliot's poetry, giving a wrong direction and erroneous exegesis of his magnificent poetry.

In his Virginia lectures, Eliot himself dilates upon the tantalizing influence of Indian philosophers on his personality. The quotation is quite significant and we crave the indulgence of the readers for its inordinate length: "Two years spent in the study of Sanskrit under Charles Lanman and a year in the mazes of Patañjali's metaphysics under the guidance of James Woods, left me in a state of enlightened mystification. A good half of the effort of understanding what the Indian philosophers were after—and their subtleties make most of the great European philosophers look like schoolboys—lay in trying to erase from my mind all the categories and kinds of distinction common to European philosophy from the time of the Greeks. My previous and concomitant study of European philosophy was hardly better than an obstacle. And I came to the conclusion—seeing also that the 'influence' of Brahmin and Buddhist thought upon Europe, as in Schopenhauer, Hartmann and Deussen had largely been through romantic misunderstanding—that my only hope of really penetrating to the heart of that mystery would lie in forgetting how to think and feel as an American or a European, for practical as well as sentimental reason, I did not wish to do."<sup>1</sup>

Here, the hesitation on the part of Eliot in imbibing influence of Indian mystics before whom "the great European philosophers look like schoolboys," for practical as well as sentimental reasons,<sup>2</sup> is quite apparent.

This appears in bold relief when in the *Gerontion*, he rejects the Greek tradition lock, stock and barrel in preference to the Christian culture. We may further venture to say the poem needs reinterpretation for understanding the attitude of Eliot towards ancient Greek

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<sup>1</sup> Helen Gardner, *The Composition of Four Quartets*, Faber, p.55.

<sup>2</sup> op. cit., p. 55.

culture and philosophy. The entire poem is a flaming condemnation of the ancient Greek culture. 'Gerontion' here stands not merely for an old man, as is generally presumed. The specially intended connotation, veiled in Eliot's characteristic style, is 'the priestly culture of ancient Greeks'.

In Homer, at various places, occurs the phrase '*geras esti geranton*' which baffled the early classical writers. Ostoff for the first time pointed out that the word '*geras*' means simultaneously the 'special share to be given as an honor to the chief' and 'an old man'. In the first sense the Greek word '*geras*' is a cognate of Sanskrit *jaritā* meaning a priest who sings litanies derived from the root *jṛ* to sing. The Greek priests used to hold a special position in society and were entitled to certain privileges called *geranton*. In the second sense, *geras* is a cognate of the Sanskrit word *jarā* meaning old. Eliot dexterously used the word *Gerontion* to indicate at once an old decrepit and the Greek priest. The burden of the entire poem *Gerontion* is the commendation of the destruction of the Greek culture by the onslaught of the Christ, depicted as a tiger.

It clearly indicates his approval of the course of history which dictated the fading away of Greek culture, and the superimposition of Christianity over it. In contradistinction to his attitude towards Greek culture, he almost surreptitiously borrowed Indian metaphysical ideas, which are well reflected in his poetry. No doubt, Eliot was a loyal member of the Christian Church of the Anglo-Catholic denomination. Still the influence of Indian philosophy was ever pulling at him like a powerful magnet. His consequent oscillation was like DuSyanta who at the sight of Zakuntalā could neither proceed forward to greet her nor could withdraw his mind from the lure of her bewitching beauty. Eventually, Indian influence prevailed over him in a telling fashion. *The Four Quartets* is a blazing document on which Indian impact is indelibly engrafted. Let us study the following lines from the "Little Gidding":

Between melting and freezing  
The soul's sap quivers. There is no earth smell  
Or smell of living thing. This is spring time  
But not in time's covenant. Now the hedgerow  
Is blanched for an hour with transitory blossom  
Of snow, a bloom more sudden  
Than that of summer, neither budding nor fading  
Not in the scheme of generation.

Where is the summer, the unimaginable

Zero summer.<sup>3</sup>

The whole atmosphere is permeated with Indian philosophical concepts. The 'soul's sap' an almost outlandish phrase for English language is an apt translation of *ātma-rasa* a concept frequently found and elaborately expounded in the Upanishads. In the Vedic literature *rasa* from the Indo-European *eres* a cognate of the Greek *erse*, Latin *ros*, means the vital fluid flowing in trees and plants, that is, sap. However, by the times of the Upanishads the word came to denote the blissful nature of undifferentiated consciousness. Such statements as *raso vai sah*, "That indeed is *rasa*," and *raso labdhvā ānandi bhavati* "having achieved *rasa*, a person becomes blissfully ecstatic" occur in the Upanishads. The 'soul's sap' of the poem, which is almost unintelligible becomes not only clear but symbolically significant in the context of the concept of *rasa*, when read with the phrase "melting and freezing." The former indicates the active, the dynamic aspect of the consciousness as immanent, whereas the latter, represents the transcendental aspect or self-resting state (*ātma-viśrāntiḥ*). Likewise, "the hedgerow is blanched for an hour with transitory blossom of snow," has been regarded either as inelegant or unclear by critics since its symbolic signification could not be properly appreciated. "Blanched", whitened, is evidently the intellectual effulgence, the characteristic of *sattva* (*guṇa*) which is the basis of *rasa* "Snow" again is *sacrosancto* and symbolic of the *sattva* characteristic. But a most important word is "zero summer." Dr. Hayward commenting on it queries, "Is this an allusive reference to the Absolute Zero of physics? I feel a little uneasy about the epithet—slightly Clevelandish?"<sup>4</sup> The psychological reaction of Dr. Hayward who was not acquainted with the Buddhist philosophy was quite typical. No doubt, the word 'zero' is used here in the philosophical sense of *śūnya* as propounded in the *mādhyamika* school of *Nāgārjuna*. There *śūnya* means the ultimate reality which is indescribable in the context of the duality of existence (*asti*) and non-existence (*nāsti*). The 'zero' summer', therefore, signifies the spring-tide efflorescence of ecstatic blissful state arising out of the communion with the ultimate reality.

The poem, therefore, proves to the hilt the influence of the Indian Philosophy on *Four Quartets*. This is, merely, illustrated. Passages pulsating with Indian thought are widely

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<sup>3</sup> "Little Gidding", L. 11-20.

<sup>4</sup> Helen Gardner, *The Composition of Four Quartets*, p. 160.

interspersed in the various poems collected in the *Quartets*. We need not, therefore, apologize for drawing comparisons between the two philosophers of different times and climes, Abhinava and Eliot.

It is true that the theory of *rasa* is the life-blood not only of aesthetic theories of Abhinavagupta but of the entire gamut of Indian philosophers of art. It is also true that the theory of *rasa* was developed in the context and constant interactions with Indian philosophical schools—the *mīmāṃsa*, the *sāṅkhya*, the *Vedānta*, and especially the *Pratyabhijñā* of Kashmir. Further, we concede that in the western aesthetics, the formal and external elements of beauty in a work of art is the primary concern, whereas in ancient Indian aesthetics, *rasa*, the undifferentiated and immediate experience of ecstatic pleasure, evoked by an artistic composition is the focus of consideration.

But, our study of Eliot's theories and poetic compositions compel us to believe that these Indian concepts gradually wafted toward Eliot who used them to create a mystic aroma. He, however, camouflaged it, since he wanted "to feel and think like a European or an American." In the process, however, the systematic exposition suffered. Many a concept glitters like an isolated star in the blue firmament of his thought, but they hardly give an idea about the system of constellations. Like a fascinated child, he picks up colored shingles and shells on the sea-shore on no other basis than his own predilection. The reasoned argument of various concepts which we borrowed is unfortunately absent, creating an atmosphere of mystification without much 'enlightenment. Under the circumstances it is not generally advisable to study aesthetic statements of Western scholars in the light of Indian theories of *rasa*. However, in certain cases the similarity is so striking that one is compelled to compare them despite the different cultural and metaphysical backgrounds. Here, I would like to consider in some detail Eliot's theory of objective-correlative in the context of Abhinavagupta's exposition of *rasa*, enshrined in his commentary on the *Nāṭya-Śāstra* of Bharata.

I may preface my remarks with an exposition of the impersonal and disinterested concern in artistic experience—a concept which frequently recurs in the writing of Eliot. According to Indian theorists, the mundane experiences, both pleasant and unpleasant, are qualitatively different from the aesthetic pleasure. In the former, the distinct states of happiness and unhappiness are caused by the egoistic reactions to the external stimulus resulting into pleasurable or the unpleasurable sensations and emotions. In the aesthetic experience, however, the mental state is informed by ecstatic pleasure which transcends both pleasure (*sukha*) and misery (*duhkha*).

Because of the dissolution of ego, the experience assumes the form of undifferentiated consciousness (*vigalita-vedyāntaram*). This has been variously expressed by Indian philosophers—Vedāntins, Kashmir Śaivas, and others. The Vedāntins lay stress on the immediate self-luminous experience of *bráhmaṇ*, where the experiencer, the experienced, and the experience are undifferentiated. The Kashmir Śaivas, on the other hand, envisage the universalization of experience: the constant simultaneous five-fold activities of the Lord in His transcendental and imminent aspects. It is, in fact, the *anugraha* or grace which is pre-eminently responsible for the universalized state of consciousness. There are other theories in various schools of Indian philosophy but all of them posit the extra-mundane character of the aesthetic consciousness. This is in consonance with Eliot's theory of the transformation of nature in art through the immediate experience which transcends thought and subjectivity. This to a certain extent parallels with the theory of universalization or undifferentiated nature of experience.

Against this background an attempt may be made to study Eliot's theory of objective correlative. He states, "The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an objective-correlative: in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion, such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience are given, the emotion is immediately evoked."<sup>5</sup> The dominant view of Eliot is that the evocation of emotion by means of their complete and concrete objectification is the only way of expressing emotion in art. Poetry, according to Eliot's concept of objective-correlative, has to transform the objects of knowledge into objects of experience without the mediation of thought, argument or subjectivity. Eliot wrote in the "Tradition and the Individual Talent": "The experience, you will notice, the elements which enter the presence of the transforming catalyst, are of two kinds: emotions and feelings. The effect of a work of art upon the person who enjoys it is an experience different in kind from any experience not of art."<sup>6</sup>

Poetry envisions a part of the world bustling with actions, objects and emotions. It is complete in itself—the moon shedding silvery light, the sylvan surroundings, lovers expressing tender emotions not only through gestures but by means of words also. A graphic description of the totality in which objective elements and subjective feelings commingle and merge to

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<sup>5</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber, 1951) p. 145.

<sup>6</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Selected Prose* (Penguin Books, Faber & Faber, 1953) p. 27.

give a unified and integrated picture. This descriptive objectified picture narrated in words or presented through histrionics evokes a reverberating echo (*anuraṇana*) which—though it arises from the picture—is in fact different from it. It transcends the objectivity of the natural elements and bypasses the thought-content. This reverberating echo—which we may take the liberty of calling by the Indian word, *dhvani*—is the soul of *rasa*. The best form of poetry is *vyaṅgya* (suggested), solely dependent on *dhvani*. This concept is similar to the objective-correlative of Eliot, which envisages the evocation of emotions after the cessation of sensations caused by the objectified picture.

The poetic experience, or *rasa*, is in fact a unified entity where suitable objective elements—the concrete images and symbols are internally and suggestively integrated. The basic feeling which is Eliot's intended emotion is brought to the conscious level and universalized through the impersonalized form. In poetry, objects lose their objective quality. They are made correlative agents, objects correlative with emotion.

Here, again, we find an interesting parallel concept in Indian works. Bharata in his *Nāṭya-Śāstra* initiated the philosophy of *rasa* by stating that the manifestations of ecstatic pleasure arises from the contact of the stimulus (*vibhāva*), the psycho-corporal expressions (*anubhāva*), the transitory attendant emotions (*vyabhichāri*) with the permanent emotions (*sthāyī*).<sup>7</sup>

Abhinava in his *Abhinavabhāratī* explains in some detail the concept of integration (*saṁyoga*) of the various constituents of *rasa*. Under the category of *vibhāva*, *personae dramatis* and set of objects—as well as the natural setting of the events which have got to be concordant with emotion—are included. Therefore, the integration would mean the harmonious blending of objective and natural elements and subjectivity or feelings either expressed by the characters or indicated through the events.

Explaining the nature of *saṁyoga*, Abhinava states that as a gastronomic connoisseur, while eating a well prepared dish consisting of various condiments, relish so also an art connoisseur (*sahṛdaya*) enjoys the permanent basic emotions when they are contacted with other constituents of *rasa* namely, the objective and natural settings of the transitory

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<sup>7</sup> *Vibhāvānubhāva-vyabhicāri-saṁyogāt rasa-niṣpattiḥ. Nāṭyaśāstra*, Ch. VI.

emotions.<sup>8</sup> This is further elaborated by theorists through an analogy of a cocktail in which the various elements of medical herbs and sweetening agents like molasses are stirred up to prepare a properly and harmoniously blended liqueur.<sup>9</sup> In other words, the constituent elements divest themselves of their distinctive characteristics and merge into the whole giving it a flavor which is in a way different from their individual traits of taste. This distinctive characteristic is born out of the constituents and is yet different from it. This is *dhvani*, the expression of emotions which as Eliot describes arises from the objective graphic descriptions but which is beyond sensations and thought-content. It may be noted here that in this approach to aesthetic pleasure the blending of the constituents is done at different levels. In the first place, the distinct individual experience and a specified context of experience are eliminated through the process of universalization. The individual experience is dissolved and merged in the stream of human consciousness. Secondly, the objective reality and subjective feelings are submerged in the ecstatic pleasure. Both of these processes are hinted by Eliot.

It may, however, be clearly stated that despite these traces of similarity the entire context is different. If the spiritual stream which sometimes openly swirls around but often times runs in a subterranean current nourishes the entire development of aesthetic philosophy of the early medieval India, the theory of Eliot is based merely on psychological and artistic experiences, influenced by the contemporary European thought.

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<sup>8</sup> *Yathā bahu-dravya-yutair vyañjanair bahubhir yātam āsvādayantī bhuñjānam bhaktam-bhakta-vidohanah.* Abhinava on the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Ch. VI verse 32.

<sup>9</sup> *Guḍādibhir-dravyair-vyañjanair-auśadhibhiś ca śāḍavādayo rasā nirvartyante.* *Abhinavabhāratī* on the *Nāṭya-śāstra*, Ch. VI, *rasa-sūtra*.