

THE VALIDITY OF THE RASA LITERARY CONCEPT: AN APPROACH TO THE DIDACTIC TALE OF *PHRA* *CH AISURIYA*¹

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Abstract

The rasa (emotive aesthetics), one of the major theories of Sanskrit literary criticism, has been expounded and evaluated in many scholarly studies by Indian and other Sanskritists. Some of them maintain that since the rasa deals with the universalized human emotions, it has validity not only for Indian but for other literatures as well. The rasa can be applied to any kind of emotive poetry such as lyric, epic, drama and satire. However, in Thai literature an emotive definition of poetry encompasses a great variety of works. A question is then raised in this paper about whether the rasa can be applied to a Thai poem of didactic nature. Phra Chaisuriya, a versified tale by Sunthon Phu, is selected as an example of study.

Literary Emotions

In a critique of a recent written novel, I concluded that the novel's only flaw was its lack of emotive power. The writer, in his rejoinder, explained that he wanted to rid his work of emotion, since to him, emotion arises from the mind's agitation and illusions tied to an enchantment with the world. Such an explanation seems to accord with the meaning of the Pali word *ārammana*, that is, according to Rhys Davids' Dictionary, the cause of desire or clinging to life. To some extent, 'emotion' is a pejorative word since it tends to suggest a strong or violent feeling. Hence many emotive literary works are labelled as melodramas or soap operas. Likewise, in literary studies, emotive theories are often thought to risk lapsing into subjectivism, so many literary scholars then try to play down emotion. If some emotions appear in art, they must be given cognitive meanings (Chari, 1993: 245).

However, emotion has great significance for many Sanskrit scholars. V. K. Chari (1993: 243), for instance, argues that literature is not merely an emotional discharge of the writer. Rather than the writer's raw emotion that transfers into the work, it is the author's shaping of materials of experience into the controlled experience of the work that is important. It is not any particular emotion like joy, sorrow, fury or the like, but rather a perceived powerful 'quality of life' abstracted from its associated conditions that gives a work emotive force. Composed features of literature such as the sounds of words, metrical form and syntax are surface properties that cannot, by themselves, carry emotive significance. They can do so only in conjunction with the human situation delivered in the work.

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Moreover, Sanskrit theorists of the 10th and the 11th centuries, like Anandavardhana and Abhinavagupta, maintain that the subjects of literature, which seem to be limited by their having been covered again and again by a countless writers, are endlessly revived through recourse to emotive significance. These old subjects can become special, different from the mundane, for a reader who is a '*sahrdaya*' or a connoisseur (Ingalls, 1990: 685). The word *sahrdaya*, which literally means 'having heart', denotes a person able to identify with the subject matter, as the mirror of his/her heart has been polished by the constant study and practice of literary art, and who responds to the subject sympathetically in his/her own heart. Abhinavagupta (Ingalls, 1990: 70-72) compares the reader's heart to a touchstone for testing the true gold of all the emotions in the work. Thus a *sahrdaya* is one who can identify with the heart of the poet through the emotive meaning of the poem.

In the *Rasa* theory, emotive meaning is central to understanding the work. It consists of primary states of mind such as love, fury, grief, fear; and temporary or transient states of mind such as discouragement, apprehension, jealousy, intoxication, or embarrassment. A primary state, as well as some transient states, appears in appropriately with its cause and effect in the work of a poet, the ingredients appear in a special dish prepared by a skilled chef. The reader is thus a taster of a literary dish prepared by the author. The emotive responses in his mind are the literary *rasa*. However, according to Anandavardhana (Ingalls, 1990: 19), *rasa* cannot be directly perceived. If we say 'A young man and his bride were very much in love', we give the hearer no sense at all of what the love was like. This can be

done only by suggestion. The suggestive meaning of poetic diction, called *dhvani*, is therefore significant as a means to reach the *rasa* goal of literature (see also Kusuma Raksamani, 2006, especially Chapter 4).

According to the *Rasa* theory, literary value derives from the reader's emotional reactions to the messages from the poet. What comes after such reactions is an insight that is a type of 'recognitive' knowledge (*pratyabhijñā*). Literature gives us no more knowledge of ourselves; rather it mirrors the psychic states that are already known to us and dramatizes them or presents them as something previously experienced (Chari, 1993: 25-6).

Almost all of literary works are tinged with emotive suggestions, provided they have their contexts for them. Nevertheless, Anandavardhana, as a *Dhvani* theorist, prefers to categorize literary works into a three-tiered hierarchy: 1) literature of suggestion, in which the suggested content is the principle theme; 2) literature of subordinated suggestion, in which the suggested meaning is less important than the expressed or merely serves what is expressed (e.g. in figurative expression, in which suggestion is sometimes found, the suggested is subordinate to the expressed and is merely ornamental), or in which the suggested sense is made explicit through some tell-tale word or phrase; and 3) what may be called 'wit writing' (such as a *konlabot* in Thai) which is predominantly figurative and depends for its effect on mere striking or peculiar sound or sense, with no hint of *rasa* in it (Chari, 1993: 228).

Emotive Significance in a Didactic Literary Work

It is interesting to ask here whether or not the 'suggested content' in the above literary categorization is limited to an emotive content leading to *rasa* perception only. Most traditional Thai literary works are flavoured with savory bits of worldly wisdom and pointed phrases, as noted by Gerini (1904: 3), and possess a strong didactic element usually expounding Buddhist doctrine. Given this situation, how much can they be evaluated from an aesthetic ground? In general, didactic writing has been viewed as opposed to true art, so that 'didacticism' refers (usually pejoratively) to using literary means to reach doctrinal ends (Baldick, 1990: 57). Nevertheless, many oriental poets view the use of literary means to teach doctrine as positive and valuable. Āśvaghosa, a prominent Indian Buddhist poet of the first century A.D., claims in his *Saundarananda*³ (18: 63-64) to have used *kāvya* or literary works as vehicles for Buddhist teachings due to the attractiveness and popularity of literary art.

This poem, dealing thus with the subject of Salvation, has been written in the kāvya style, not to give pleasure, but to further the attainment of tranquillity and with the intention of capturing hearers devoted to other

things. For, that I have handled other subjects in it besides Salvation is in accordance with the laws of kāvya poetry to make it palatable, as sweet is put into a bitter medicine to make it drinkable... Let the reader understand this and study attentively in it that which leads to tranquillity and not that which is merely pleasurable, as only the residue of gold is taken after it has been separated from the metal dust (Johnston, 1975: 116-117).

According to Warder (1974: 145), whatever Āśvaghosa thought of his simple didactic aim, for readers it merely adds the salt of serious purpose to delicious literary dishes. Āśvaghosa has shown that there is nothing wrong with pursuing an ardent moral idea in poetry, provided the moral idea has an aesthetic aim.

In this light, Thai didactic work by Sunthon Phu is worth mentioning here. *Phra Chaisuriya* is a narrative poem, composed in the reign of King Rama III of Chakri dynasty. It is a primer that uses only one type of syllable in each section so that children could master one pattern before attempting the next. In order 'to entice boys and girls to read and learn' (เพื่อล่อใจกุลนารี),⁴ Sunthon Phu composed a narrative story of honest King Chaisuriya who was misled by his nobles and because of this had to flee the condemned city with

³*Saundarananda* 'The Handsome Nanda', a story of Buddha's half brother Nanda, is an epic in 18 cantos. With great difficulty he is induced to become a monk, being eventually weaned away from the pleasure of love. The main theme is the Buddha's skill in bringing another person to enlightenment.

⁴The English translation of the text in this paper is by Srisurang Poonsap whose four versions (Thai, English, French and German) of *Phra Chaisuriya*, were published by PEN International of Thailand, in 1986.

his queen, both living in agony in the deep forest. After listening to a sage, they decide to live in austerity until they ascended to heaven.

The short narrative for children contains interesting descriptive verses depicting the state of calamity and the characters' feelings. A contrast of two literary images appears at the beginning of story. One is an image of a fair city ruled by a good monarch.

His realm was free from adversity.

(อยู่บุรีไม่มีภัย)

His nobles were all conscientious.

(ข้าพเจ้าเหล่าเสนา มีกิริยาอะมาศร)

Merchants who came from faraway lands could sojourn safely in the City.

(พ่อค้ามาแต่ไกล ได้อาศัยในพารา)

His subjects, laymen and monks alike, were quite happy and content in life.

(ไพร่ฟ้าประชาชน ชาวบุรีก็ปรีดา)

The people cultivated their own land and harvested abundant rice and wheat.

(ทำไร่เข้าไถนา ได้เข้าปลาแลสาละ)

The other is an image of the condemned city in the later days.

As time went by, a group of nobles began to seek young and comely girls to play sweet melodies in their fine mansions.

(อยู่มาหมู่ข้าเฝ้า ก็หาพานารี ที่หน้าศาลาดี ทำ
มะโหรที่เคหา)

They forgot the monks' moral teachings, and turned to superstitious nonsense.

(ไม่จำคำพระเจ้า เหมไปเข้าภาษาไสย)

Elders and scholars were looked down upon as worthless and demented derelicts.

(ผู้เฒ่าเหล่าเมธา ว่าใบ้บ้าสาระช้า)

The people suffered from deprivation.

(ไพร่ฟ้าเศร้าปล่ำอุรา)

Officials beat and blamed them without mercy.

(ผู้ที่มิอาญา ไล่ตีค่าไม่ปราณี)

The first image relates the cause and the effect of joy and happiness, the bright side of life quickly disappears. The second image shows us the cause and effect of an undesirable state, all brought on by human beings themselves. It ends up with demonic punishments:

Finally, forest spirits doomed the City, they brought death to the inhabitants.

(ผีป่ามากระทำ มະระณะกัมมชาบุรี).

A great flood inundated the dwellings, leaving people stranded and homeless.

(น้ำป่าเข้าธานี ก็ไม่มีที่อาศัย)

No one dared remain in the City.

(ไม่มีใครในธานี)

The above depiction, helps us understand the primary state of mind (*bhāva*) from the words that denote negative meanings such as *greed, distorted, nonsense, exploiting, worthless, demented, profane, harsh, opinionated, selfish* and so forth. The adjectival force (*viśesanatayā*) of these words, in their appropriate context suggest a degree of the *bhāva* of revulsion and disgust. With this understanding, we gain the aesthetic meaning of the undesirable state that the king had to face. The emotional response in our heart may be the loathing (*bībhatsa rasa*) of the person who is its cause; if there is none, fate is to be blamed.

Moreover, after the king sailed away from home with his queen,

he felt quite discouraged and uncertain; his precious life was hanging by a thread.

(ข้อยทอดรอา ชีวาก็จะประโลย)

This helps us understand the *bhāva* of hopelessness and discouragement of that character.

*To make matter's worst, sea spirits
swarmed over the mast and sank the
doomed vessel.*

(แม่น้ำเจ้าได้ใบเสา เจ้าก้ามจระเข้เอา ลำธารระย้าครว้า
ไป)

When we consider his former status and that he was a good monarch, we know how unfortunate and grief-stricken he was. Our emotional response may be the compassion (*karuna rasa*) we feel for him in our heart. Such is the succession of *rasa*, from the loathsome to compassion, based on the order of the words of the poem, whether heard or read.

After the king and the queen had lived in agony in the deep forest, they met a sage who wished to enlighten them. He preached to them on the law of *karma* and the bliss of paradise. As a result, they were enlightened and began living lives of austerity. After death, they ascended to heaven to live the life of bliss eternally.

The conclusion of the story is full of moral precepts. Before the sage visited the king and the queen, he had contemplated and recognized the causes of calamity; i.e.

The four deadly sins of Savathi;

(กาลกิณีสี่ประการ)

*The moral tradition was reversed; good
deeds were denounced while wicked men
flourished and oppressed the honest and
truthful.*

(ประกอบชอบเป็นผิด กลับจจริตคิดโบราณ สามัญ
อันรพาล ผลาญคนซื่อถือศีลธรรม)

*Students rebelled against their teachers;
children were ungrateful to their parents.*

(ลูกศิษย์คิดล้างครู ลูกไม่รู้จักพ่อแม่)

*And people were at each other's throat;
their unnatural cravings drove them to
exploitation and murder.*

(ต่อเสียดเบียดเบียดกัน ลอบฆ่าฟันคือคตมหา)

*Men and women were greedy for profit
and sinned without shame; they made false
accusations out of spite.*

(โลกลาบาปบิคิด โง่ทั้งจับคิดริษยา)

The sage argued that these sins caused all creatures to suffer calamity as punishment. The Buddhist doctrine was reflected in the sage's sermon on 'the harm of worldly attachment.' (เห็นภัยในขันธสันดาน) Therefore one should 'sever the devil's noose', (ตัดห่วงบ่วงมาร) so that they can 'attain bliss and spiritual love.' (สาราญสำเร็จเมตตา)

With all these precepts, the poet makes his intention clear. Besides aiming to prepare children, the book focuses on moral teaching, both those that appear in the conflicts of the story and those in the direct sermon of one of its characters. The answer presented to the unfortunate king is to denounce worldly life for eternal happiness. In other words, he escapes the state of revulsion or disgust to achieve the state of serenity just as Prince Siddhartha, in *Aśvaghosa's Buddhacarita*, abandoned the state of calamity and disgust to move into a state of austerity.⁵

In this respect, Abhinavagupta explains that the *bībhatsa rasa* (disgust) in the first part of story gives rise to the subsequent *bhāva* of *vairāgya* (disenchantment with

⁵ *Buddhacarita* 'Life of the Buddha', is an epic in 28 cantos. A little less than half is now available in the original, but complete translations in Chinese and Tibetan have been preserved. For a fuller discussion on the *rasa* in the *Buddhacarita*, see Kusuma, 2006: chapter 4.4.5.

the world) or *trsnaksayasukha* (the happiness that comes from the cessation of desire) or *nirveda* (disillusionment). This development helps the reader see a hint of the *santa rasa* (peace) that is the main theme of both the story of *Phra Chaisuriya* and in the *Buddhacarita*.

As mentioned above, in his *Saundarananda*, Āśvaghoṣa claims to have used literary art as a vehicle for didactic teaching. His *Buddhacarita* also uses his poetic attractiveness and emotive content to lead us to the essence of Buddhist teaching. The poem of *Phra Chaisuriya*, likewise, has Sunthon Phu fulfill his intention to use literary means to reach a didactic end. Apart from being a primer for children, the *Phra Chaisuriya* is a beautiful narrative poem whose emotive aesthetics 'entices boys and girls' (พุทธศิลป์ งามๆ) to follow moral precepts.

We may conclude with Abhinavagupta's remarks on how emotive aesthetics and didactic precepts interact in a literary work:

Delight and instruction are not different in nature for they occupy a single realm. [Both are found where rasa is present] It is the appropriateness of the vibhavas [causes of emotion] and the related factors that is the basic cause of literary delight. Our inner understanding of the nature of the vibhavas etc. – that they are appropriate to this or that rasa – may be called our instruction insofar as it ends in that result. (Ingalls, 1990: 437-8)

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