

RASA EXPERIENCE IN PAULO COELHO'S THE ALCHEMIST

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Abstract

Every creative expression can be taken as a valid aspect of spiritual life, as a means of giving expression to one's spiritual quest and spiritual concepts. In moments of creation, the consciousness of the author finds itself in a state of expansion and is pervaded by beatitude. The Vedic texts celebrate poets as Gods, as seers of truth having a subtle, profound and penetrating consciousness. Even novelists who could raise the consciousness of the readers, collect, contain and express his/her vision and experiences with control, clarity and vision, fall under the category of a poet. The premise on which this article rests is the rasaexperience (aesthetic relish) that haunts the reader throughout his/her journey with Santiago the protagonist whose sama (right knowledge) leads him to the Absolute.

Keywords: *Fable, Desert adventure, Quest, Transcendental, Aesthetics, Art emotions, Rasa experience.*

Introduction

A good piece of literary creation that awakens a genuine aesthetic response lifts the readers' entire being to new spiritual possibilities. Indulging, enjoying and celebrating tender and soft emotions is said to be a value in itself. The Indian Aestheticians knew the value of emotions in literature and saw every literary piece as the supreme form of emotive language. Also they saw the potential of every aesthetic experience to transcend egoistic concerns and merge with the collective humanity. Beginning with Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* to Pandit Jagannatha in the 17th century, Indian aestheticians have seen *rasa* as a very subtle state requiring the manipulation of eight lasting emotions in conjunction with their associated groups of feelings that are incidental or transitory. Later other *rasas* like *śānta*, *bhakti* and *vātsalya* were added to the list. The *rasa* theory is malleable, accommodative and is regarded as one of the oldest and most influential theories with a tremendous linguistic potential.

Rasa experience from art emotions

This paper attempts to show how the art emotion expressed in *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho takes the reader beyond the dualities of life to a state of delight against the back drop of peace. It also focuses on the aesthetic rapture derived from reading this text written by an artist who must have had an unlimited vision at the time of creation. As the story unwinds the reader experiences a substratum of peace, because what is individual and particular gets universalized. This peace with its transcendental charm is what the Indian Aestheticians have termed as *Rasa*, which means a reposeful consciousness established when one's self rests on the aesthetic configuration.

There is a magical potency in the words which give rise to the aesthetic equipoise. The word aesthetics derives from the Greek *aisthetikos* meaning "of sense perception." "A.G. Baumgarten introduced the word to stand for a proposed discipline that should do for perception what logic did for discursive knowledge" (Tiwari⁴²). Immanuel Kant saw it as a unitary and self-sufficient type of human experience. Aesthetic experience is definitely a new way of seeing and perceiving the world. Unlike the Western aesthetics the Indian aesthetics is more comprehensive, assimilative and describes the aesthetic experience as *Brahmānanda*. It is an experience that "tease us out of thought" (Keats) and lands the reader in mental equipoise - a state of peace that transcends all understanding.

A qualified reader goes beyond the words spread on the pages and with a mirror-like power of intuition (*prathibana*) momentarily stops diversity and gives place to the manifestation of unity. It is a spiritual state akin to *savikalpasamādhi*. The novel becomes the objective content of such an experience. The words in the novel are charged with meanings which unfold in the minds of the reader as emotional states and evoke the latent emotional traces. Bharatamuni in his *Nāṭyaśāstra* has identified eight dominant emotions (*sthāyibhāvas*) and their corresponding sentiments (*rasas*). The eight dominant emotions recognized in drama are *rati* (love), *hāsa* (laughter), *śoka* (sorrow), *krodha* (anger), *utsāha* (energy), *bhaya* (fear), *jugupsa* (disgust) and *vismaya* (wonder) and their corresponding *rasas* (sentiments) are *śringāra*, *hāsyā*, *karuṇa*, *raudra*, *vira*, *bhayānaka*, *bibhatsa* and *adbhuta* (Seturaman 289). All these eight *rasas* are enjoyed by a competitive reader throughout the novel. As the *vibhavas* (stimulants) – are objectified, individualized and universalized the emotional states evoked in the reader snap the connections with their ego and the *rasa* experience becomes a state of *Samādhi*.

Otto Jespersen, in his *The Philosophy of Grammar*, speaks of three distinct things in a work of art namely expression, suppression and impression. He adds that suggestion is impression through suppression (qtd. in Raghavan and Nagendra 21). This can be roughly equated with *dhvani* in Indian Poetics which means suggestion. While the theory of *rasa* explains the nature of aesthetic experience and its ingredients, the theory of *dhvani* explains the means adopted by the metaphorical or poetic language

to achieve its ends. If the theory of *rasa* is about what a work of art does to us, the theory of *dhvani* is about how the work does that. In *The Alchemist* one could see these three distinctive elements: 'expression, suppression and impression,' and understanding the text demands a sense of not getting the meaning from the expression, but also from what is left unsaid or what is suppressed. A perceptive reader proceeds from the literal meaning spread on the pages to the evocative and significant power of the words, makes a hermeneutical leap and lands at the very soul of the text. Further he/she is pervaded by the same state of consciousness and is immersed in a state of aesthetic rapture. The time space continuum gets transcended, diversity ceases momentarily to exist, thus giving place to the manifestation of unity of the unlimited consciousness. The suggested elements reign supreme. The novel excites the reader aesthetically and generates a new spiritual awakening. Bhatta Nāyaka is of the opinion that a proper aesthetic creation has the peculiar function of generating in the reader a new spiritual creation and in turn the reader has in him/her a special function by which he/she enjoys it (Tiwari 193).

When the dormant emotio motive complexes are triggered by an artistic creation they become affiliated to those types of emotio motive complexes in the text and this mutual affiliation or apperception or implicit recognition of identity transforms the presented artistic universal into artistic joy or what Indian aestheticians have termed as *Rasa*. The pleasure or pain experienced by the reader here is totally dissociated from the egoistic instincts and is technically termed as *Rasāvādana*, *Camatcāra*, *Carvaṇā* which literally means the experiencing of a transcendental exhilaration from the enjoyment of the roused emotions inherent in our own personality (Seturaman 195). As a result of this expression a unity is effected between the individuals own experience and the expression found in the text. There is a revelation and an expansion of the soul beyond its egoic limitations and therefore this experience is also called *Alaukika* (transcendental).

At the surface level *The Alchemist* reads like a fable which has inspired and thrilled millions of readers across the globe. It is a very simple story about an Andalusian shepherd boy named Santiago who moves from his homeland Spain to North Africa in search of a treasure buried in the pyramids of Egypt. A young gypsy woman, a man who calls himself the king of Salem, a camel driver, a crystal shop owner, an Englishman and finally an Alchemist whom he happens to meet on the way, point the young boy in the direction of his quest. There is also a beautiful love story woven into this rich tapestry - the boy's meeting with Fatima, her courage, hope, her wise assistance, and her spirit of adventure and desert patience. What starts out as a boyish adventure to discover exotic places and worldly wealth turns into a quest for the treasure found only within. Lush, evocative and deeply spiritual Santiago's story displays an adventure that is cosmic in its proportion and significance. It turns out to be sweeping quests for the divine treasure hidden at the core of our very being. Santiago's ascent begins only after the discovery that happiness does not come from books, from

the merchant's daughter, money or other possessions. Along with Santiago, the reader also understands that possessions and people of circumstances cannot give one the real bliss. The reader determines to work on himself instead of changing the world.

Coelho could not have been able to contain himself within himself during this powerful artistic creation; and his rich translation of an inner experience into words has aroused the subtle state by a judicious mixture of a host of feelings. To Coelho, instruction is not the purpose of art, but the evocation of joy in a mind potentially capable of realizing it. This piece of art may be apprehended from a psychological angle but as Jung himself has stated "only that aspect of art which consists in the process of artistic creation can be a subject for psychological study but not that which constitutes its essential nature. The question of what art is in itself can never be answered by the psychologist, but must be approached from the side of aesthetics" (Jung76). Concept of beauty in the aesthetic world becomes *Ānanda* in the metaphysical and *Ishwara*(God) in the religious contexts. The *TaittiriyaUpanishad* states, "He is *rasa*, having attained Him the soul becomes full of bliss" (Seturaman395). As quoted by Mulk Raj Anand in his essay "The Aesthetic Hypothesis" "It (*rasa*) is pure, indivisible, self-manifested, compounded equally of joy and consciousness, free of admixture with any other perceptions, the very twin brother of mystic experience (*BrahmasavadanaSahodarah*) and the very life of it is super-sensuous (*lokottara*) wonder (Seturaman395).

From the beginning, till the end *The Alchemist* is replete with the eight lasting emotions in conjunction with their associated groups of feeling that evoke eight different forms of *rasa*. The emotions with their transitory feelings give rise to their corresponding *rasas* and finally all the *rasas* melt and merge in *śāntarasa*. From union with the physical world to his ascension to the core of his own being the story drips with the *rasa* experience. The protagonist travels in pursuit of truth which becomes the *sthāyibhāva* for *śāntarasa*. The wonder of the naïve and innocent boy at his sheep, his dreams, his meeting with the gypsy woman (*adbhuta*) "you came so that you could learn about your dreams' said the old woman" (13), his love for the merchant's daughter and later for Fatima (*srīngāra*), "When he looked into her dark eyes, and saw that her lips were poised between a laugh and silence, he learned the most important part of the language that all the world spoke...It was love" (97), his anger at the man who robbed him (*raudra*) "I'm going to become bitter and distrustful of people because one person betrayed me. I'm going to hate those who have found their treasure because I never found mine" (41), his initial disgust (*bibhātsa*) with Melchizedek, "'Why would a king be talking with a shepherd?' the boy asked, awed and embarrassed" (22), his fun with the gypsy woman (*hāsiya*) "But I want one-tenth of the treasure, if you find it." They boy laughed – out of happiness" (14), his heroic sentiment when he tackles the chief of the tribe when confronted with the death in the desert in the hands of the armed men (*bhayanaka*) "The boy was shaking with fear, but

the alchemist helped him out of the tent (147), his turning into Simum the storm (*vira*) “for generations thereafter, the Arabs recounted the legend of a boy who had turned himself into the wind, almost destroying a military camp, in defiance of the most powerful chief in the desert” (161), the pathetic sentiment he expresses when he is fully robbed and beaten up (*karuna*) “‘I’m digging for treasure...dreamed of a treasure hidden near the Pyramids of Egypt’” (171), and all the corresponding emotions combine into a judicious fusion to give the real *rasa* experience. However, the dominant *rasa* that runs throughout the novel is *śānta*, the ninth *rasa* propounded by Abhinavagupta, which ensues from the boy’s search for truth. The inexpressible finds expression in the fringe of silence and so the experience of aesthetic rapture or the *kāvyañanda* that ensues is akin to *Brahmāñanda*.

The perceptual experience of the author has been translated into the outburst of a novel that in turn leads the reader to a state of pure joy. It is in this transcendental mode of consciousness that the reader closes the text along with Santiago who now knows “where his treasure was (172). The perceptive reader realizes his inherent treasure which is *śānta* or *sāma* or mental equipoise. It is a sort of *āñanda* both for the protagonist and the reader. “The boy stood up shabbily, and looked once more at the pyramids. They seemed to laugh at him and he laughed back, his heart bursting with joy” (172). In the words of Rabindranath Tagore, “Poetry and the arts cherish in them the profound faith of man in the unity of his being with all existence, the final truth of which is the truth of personality. It is a religion directly apprehended and not a system of metaphysics to be analyzed and argued” (Tagore 87). The novel makes its readers feel the ineffable, the mystery of the supreme reality, which takes them beyond all thought into the immediate touch of infinite.

As stated by Carl Gustave Jung—immersion in the state of “participation mystique” is the secret of artistic creation and of the effect which great art has upon us, for at that level of experience it is no longer the weal or woe of the individual that counts, but the life of the collective. That is why every great work of art is objective and impersonal and yet profoundly moving. (Jung 123). In order to arrive at its meaning the reader must allow him/herself to be shaped by the primordial experience, which has the healing and redeeming depths of the collective psyche, and that common rhythm which has awakened the creative instinct in the author. By ‘objective’ and ‘impersonal’ what Jung means is the great detachment on the part of those who know the truth. In fact knowledge of truth alone would be the *sthāyibhāva* (permanent emotion) for the *śānta rasa* that ensues while reading a great work of art. A detached reading of *The Alchemist* and a pilgrimage along with Santiago surrounded by abundance of imagery, the explication of imagination leads the reader to a sort of self-realization. “Knowledge of the truth is just another name for knowledge of the self” says, Abhinavagupta (Devy 66).

The emotions of the protagonist are personally and empirically not connected with anyone in the world, but it is objectified, individualized and universalized. After a long wandering from the sphere of physical beauty, Santiago returns to the same place from where he had started. That is the same small abandoned church with the sycamore tree in the sacristy, and the half destroyed roof. In the epilogue Coelho says, "He remembered the time he had been there with his sheep, it had been a peaceful night ... except for the dream" (175). This is a very poignant statement that speaks of the original peaceful state of every human being often disturbed by dreams. In the wakeful state everything is peace but sorrows come when humans go chasing dreams of materialism.

Ultimately what the reader desires is to secure the liberation of the self, which leads to a knowledge of the truth, a knowledge that is connected with highest happiness or bliss. Also the text induces a peculiar kind of introspection in the reader which is disinterested, self-contained, yet, noble, rich, vast and luminous. *The Alchemist* is replete with guiding intuitions, helpful instructions that would serve to enlighten one's search for the ultimate. Every soul gets the freedom to advance according to its present abilities and also to make its own mistakes and learn useful lessons. The aesthetic rapture bursts forth when one follows the pathway of Santiago totally renounced, penniless and homeless. With the pain of exile from the true source, the reader crosses the desert patch of awakening step by step and the consciousness with which the perceptive reader approaches the text infuses into him/her the vibrations of the consciousness of the novelist creating the text. The mode of expression by Coelho allows the reader to go beyond the conceptual, and arrive at the same excited yet, harmonious state of mind that the artist had while creating the text. For the artist and the perceptive reader it is a *lokottara* (extraordinary) process – an artistic process and not a *laukika* process or a process of the ordinary life.

The very soul of the world is nourished by people's happiness. The novel's greatest appeal to humanity is not to believe in the world's greatest lie that our lives are controlled by fate. Instead, to forge ahead with the hope and trust, that "when you want something the entire universe conspires in helping you to achieve it" (23). Coelho makes his readers conscious of the spirit of unity within each one of them. Through the aesthetic rapture derived from the work, the *sahrdaya* (reader) becomes aware of this great truth that leads him/her to health, harmony, peace and bliss. Since this is the mother tongue of every soul, when it is articulated by an artist, the readers are able to tune in and revel in the *rasa* experience.

Conclusion

Today humanity needs new ways to understand their place in the world, their inherent worth, their purpose in life and the purpose of their sojourn on earth. Unearthing ancient histories, and theories like the *rasa* theory brings into focus that God

himself is *rasa* and so the researcher has attempted to bring good literature to the rescue of humanity. When scientific, political, economic and technological knowledge have only accelerated the existential angst, there is one medium which we can turn to and that is a good piece of literature. In a world strained by scientific revolution, the cumulative thrust towards peace and joy can be seen in such literary texts with their potential to lift humanity and hold the key of promise for a better world. Like science that has taught humanity to submit hypothetical claims to the test of experimentation, this text of Coelho appeals to humanity to experience the presence of the supreme power inwardly.

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