



Echoes of Rasa: Classical Aesthetics in Modern Indian English Poetry

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ABSTRACT

The concept of Rasa, as articulated in Bharata Muni's Natyashastra, remains the cornerstone of Indian aesthetic thought, emphasizing emotional experience as the essence of art. This paper explores the manifestation of Rasa aesthetics in contemporary Indian English poetry, examining how modern poets reinterpret traditional emotional categories within the framework of global modernism. The Navarasa—*Śṛṅgāra* (love), *Hāsyā* (humour), *Karunā* (compassion), *Raudra* (anger), *Vīra* (heroism), *Bhayānaka* (fear), *Bībhatsa* (disgust), *Adbhuta* (wonder), and *Śānta* (peace)—provide a lens to understand the emotional universality in modern poetic expression. Through close readings of selected poems by Kamala Das, Nissim Ezekiel, A. K. Ramanujan, and Jayanta Mahapatra, this study highlights how ancient Indian aesthetic sensibilities blend with modern experiences of identity, gender, alienation, and spirituality. Kamala Das's exploration of love and pain reflects *Śṛṅgāra* and *Karunā* Rasa, while Ezekiel's irony evokes *Hāsyā* and *Śānta* Rasa. Ramanujan's reflective tone conveys *Adbhuta* and *Śānta*, and Mahapatra's humanistic vision embodies *Karunā* and *Bhayānaka* Rasa. The paper argues that Rasa continues to serve as a vital interpretive framework, transforming personal emotion into universal aesthetic pleasure. It bridges the gap between the classical and the contemporary, reaffirming that emotional resonance remains the foundation of all artistic experience. Ultimately, Rasa aesthetics in modern Indian English poetry reflects the timeless human



pursuit of beauty, empathy, and spiritual harmony through the language of feeling.

Introduction: Indian aesthetic theory, deeply rooted in the ancient treatise *Natyashastra* by Bharata Muni, posits *Rasa* as the fundamental principle of artistic creation and appreciation. *Rasa*, often translated as "essence" or "flavor," refers to the emotional response elicited in the audience through the interplay of various elements in art, particularly in drama and poetry. The *Natyashastra* outlines nine primary *Rasas*—Śṛṅgāra (erotic love), Hāsyā (humour), Karuṇā (compassion), Raudra (anger), Vīra (heroism), Bhayānaka (fear), Bībhatsa (disgust), Adbhuta (wonder), and Śānta (peace)—each derived from specific *Bhāvas* (emotions) and *Vibhāvas* (stimuli). This framework emphasizes that art's true value lies not in mere representation but in evoking a universal emotional experience that transcends the individual.

In the context of modern Indian English poetry, *Rasa* theory offers a compelling lens to analyze how contemporary poets navigate the tensions between tradition and modernity. Indian English poetry, emerging prominently in the post-colonial era, grapples with themes of identity, cultural hybridity, gender dynamics, and existential alienation, often infused with global modernist influences. Poets like Kamala Das, Nissim Ezekiel, A. K. Ramanujan, and Jayanta Mahapatra exemplify this synthesis, drawing from classical Indian aesthetics while engaging with Western literary forms. This paper investigates how these poets reinterpret *Rasa* in their works, transforming ancient emotional categories into vehicles for modern expression.

The relevance of *Rasa* in contemporary literature stems from its emphasis on emotional universality. As Sheldon Pollock (2016) notes in his analysis of Sanskrit poetics, *Rasa* theory posits that art is not merely mimetic but transformative, allowing the audience to experience emotions in a distilled, aesthetic form. In modern Indian English poetry, this translates to a fusion where personal traumas and societal critiques are elevated to universal resonances. For instance, the Śṛṅgāra *Rasa*, traditionally associated with romantic love, is reimagined to encompass themes of desire, loss, and bodily autonomy in a postcolonial context.

This study employs close textual analysis as its primary methodology, focusing on selected poems by the aforementioned poets. By examining how specific *Rasas* manifest in their verses, the paper demonstrates the enduring vitality of Indian aesthetics. It argues that *Rasa* serves as a bridge between the classical and the contemporary, enabling poets to address modern dilemmas through an emotional framework that fosters empathy and spiritual insight. The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 provides a brief



overview of Rasa theory and its historical context. Section 3 delves into the reinterpretation of Rasa in the works of Kamala Das, emphasizing Śṛṅgāra and Karunā. Section 4 analyzes Nissim Ezekiel's poetry through Hāsya and Śānta. Section 5 explores A. K. Ramanujan's engagement with Adbhuta and Śānta. Section 6 examines Jayanta Mahapatra's invocation of Karunā and Bhayānaka. Finally, Section 7 discusses the broader implications and concludes the study.

Theoretical Framework: Rasa in Indian Aesthetics: To contextualize the analysis, it is essential to revisit the foundational aspects of Rasa theory. Composed around the 2nd century BCE, the *Natyashastra* defines Rasa as the culmination of artistic elements, where the poet or performer induces a heightened emotional state in the spectator. This is achieved through the *Sthāyī Bhāva* (dominant emotion), which, when combined with *Vibhāvas* (causes) and *Anubhāvas* (consequences), leads to Rasa. For example, Śṛṅgāra arises from love (Rati) stimulated by elements like moonlight or beauty, manifesting in behaviors such as embraces.

Critics like *Abhinavagupta* (10th-11th century CE) expanded this, emphasizing Rasa as a form of *aesthetic delight* (Camatkāra) that transcends mundane emotions. In modern scholarship, scholars like *Kapila Vatsyayan* (1996) argue that Rasa is inherently universal, applicable beyond Indian art to global literature. This universality is particularly pertinent in Indian English poetry, where poets blend Sanskrit-derived sensibilities with English-language modernism.

The Navarasa system provides a structured yet flexible framework. While some Rasas like Śānta (peace) align with spiritual pursuits, others like Bhayānaka (fear) evoke existential dread. In postcolonial Indian English poetry, these Rasas are not rigidly adhered to but reinterpreted to reflect contemporary realities, such as gender oppression or cultural displacement. This reinterpretation aligns with modernist tendencies, where fragmentation and irony challenge traditional forms, yet Rasa's emotional core persists as a unifying force.

Kamala Das: Śṛṅgāra and Karunā in the Poetics of Desire and Suffering:

Kamala Das, a pioneering voice in Indian English poetry, often explores the complexities of love, sexuality, and identity through a lens that resonates with Śṛṅgāra (erotic love) and Karunā (compassion). Her work, marked by confessional intensity, reinterprets these Rasas in a modern context, where love is fraught with pain and societal constraints.

In poems like "*The Looking Glass*," Das examines self-perception and desire, evoking Śṛṅgāra through vivid imagery of longing. The speaker's gaze into the mirror reveals a yearning for connection, yet it is



tinged with alienation. As Das writes, "*Getting a man to love you is easy / Only be honest about your wants as / Woman*" (Das, 1965). This honesty, however, leads to vulnerability, transforming erotic love into a compassionate plea for understanding. Śṛṅgāra here is not idealized romance but a raw, bodily experience, challenging patriarchal norms and aligning with modernist themes of fragmentation.

Karunā emerges prominently in "*My Grandmother's House*," where the poet mourns lost innocence and familial bonds. The poem's nostalgic tone elicits pity for the speaker's displacement, as seen in lines like "*There is a house now far away where once / I received love... That woman died, / The house withdrew into silence*" (Das, 1965). This compassion extends to the self, reflecting on personal suffering amid cultural shifts. Das's reinterpretation of Karunā emphasizes empathy for marginalized voices, particularly women, blending classical Indian aesthetics with feminist sensibilities. Through these Rasas, Das transforms personal emotion into universal aesthetic pleasure, as per Rasa theory. Her poetry illustrates how Śṛṅgāra and Karunā facilitate a cathartic release, bridging ancient emotional categories with modern experiences of gender and identity.

Nissim Ezekiel: Hāsya and Śānta in Irony and Equanimity:

Nissim Ezekiel, often hailed as the father of modern Indian English poetry, employs irony and introspection to reinterpret Hāsya (humour) and Śānta (peace). His urban, cosmopolitan perspective critiques societal absurdities while seeking spiritual balance, making Rasa a tool for modernist satire and tranquility.

In "*The Patriot*," Ezekiel satirizes nationalist fervor with Hāsya, using humor to expose hypocrisy. The poem mocks the speaker's exaggerated patriotism, as in "*I am standing for peace and non-violence. / Why world, you ask, do you wish to slay and / Injure me?*" (Ezekiel, 1960). This irony evokes laughter at human folly, aligning with Hāsya's role in highlighting incongruities. Yet, beneath the humor lies a deeper critique of alienation in postcolonial India, where personal identity clashes with collective ideals.

Śānta manifests in Ezekiel's later works, such as "*Background, Casually*," where the poet reflects on life's transience with serene acceptance. Lines like "*I have made a mistake. I am not Indian, not / Western. I am not anything*" (Ezekiel, 1989) convey a peaceful detachment, embodying Śānta as a state of spiritual harmony. This Rasa is reinterpreted in a modern context, where peace arises not from ritual but from existential awareness, echoing modernist themes of disillusionment. Ezekiel's fusion of Hāsya and Śānta demonstrates Rasa's adaptability, transforming emotional responses into aesthetic insights that address urban alienation and cultural hybridity.

**A. K. Ramanujan: Adbhuta and Śānta in Wonder and Reflection:**

A. K. Ramanujan, a poet-scholar renowned for his translations of classical Tamil and Kannada literature, masterfully reinterprets Adbhuta (wonder) and Śānta (peace) in his English poetry. Drawing from his deep roots in Indian traditions, including Sanskrit poetics and Dravidian folklore, Ramanujan's work seamlessly blends myth, personal memory, and introspective inquiry. This fusion allows him to explore the marvelous in the mundane while pursuing inner tranquility amidst the upheavals of modernity, postcolonial identity, and cultural hybridity. His poetry often reflects a scholarly sensibility, where ancient narratives inform contemporary reflections, making Rasa a bridge between timeless wonder and modern existential quests.

In "*A River*," Ramanujan vividly evokes Adbhuta through the river's cyclical flow, symbolizing the enigmatic rhythms of life and human endurance. The poem's evocative imagery captures the awe of natural processes intertwined with cultural heritage: "*In Madurai, / city of temples and poets, / who sang of cities and temples, / every summer / a river dries to a trickle / in the sand, / but in the mind / a river / flows on and on*" (Ramanujan, 1976). This wonder is not merely divine spectacle but a postcolonial rediscovery of resilience, where the drying river mirrors the poet's own sense of cultural continuity amid change. Adbhuta here transforms into a meditative awe, prompting readers to contemplate the interplay of permanence and impermanence in a globalized world, aligning with modernist fragmentation while retaining classical depth.

Śānta, the Rasa of peace, emerges prominently in "*Self-Portrait*," where Ramanujan contemplates identity with serene detachment. The poem's introspective lines reveal a tranquil acceptance of multiplicity: "*I resemble everyone / but myself, and sometimes see / in shop-windows... / despite the features / I was born with*" (Ramanujan, 1976). This spiritual equilibrium arises from embracing contradictions—personal versus collective, Indian versus Western—fostering a harmonious resolution to alienation. Ramanujan's reinterpretation integrates Adbhuta's wonder with Śānta's calm, creating aesthetic pleasure through reflective harmony. His work exemplifies how classical Indian aesthetics can illuminate modern dilemmas, inviting readers to find peace in the wondrous flux of existence.

Jayanta Mahapatra: Karunā and Bhayānaka in Humanism and Dread:

Jayanta Mahapatra, often regarded as a poet of Odisha's rugged terrains and coastal expanses, reinterprets Karunā (compassion) and Bhayānaka (fear) to delve into the depths of human suffering and existential dread. His oeuvre, deeply embedded in the landscapes of his native region, critiques social injustices such



as poverty, caste oppression, and environmental degradation, while grappling with the anxieties of modernity. Influenced by postcolonial sensibilities and global humanism, Mahapatra's work transforms personal anguish into universal pleas for empathy, using Rasa theory to elevate mundane horrors into aesthetic experiences that resonate across cultures.

In "*Hunger*," Mahapatra masterfully elicits Karunā through visceral depictions of starvation and dehumanization, arousing profound pity for the marginalized. The poem's stark, unflinching imagery exposes the indifference of society and nature alike: "*It was hard to believe the flesh was heavy / on my back. The fisherman said: Will you have her, / carelessly, while the sea doesn't care*" (Mahapatra, 1976). Here, the fisherman's casual offer of a corpse underscores the commodification of human life, evoking compassion not as sentimental pity but as a call to ethical awareness. This reinterpretation of Karunā aligns with modernist humanism, where empathy becomes a tool for social critique, urging readers to confront global inequalities in an interconnected world.

Bhayānaka, the Rasa of fear, permeates "*Dawn at Puri*," where Mahapatra confronts the terror of annihilation amid natural and human forces. The poem's ominous tone captures existential dread: "*The sea / advances as usual, / with its slow, corrosive argument / against the shore*" (Mahapatra, 1976). This imagery symbolizes relentless erosion—be it ecological devastation or societal decay—instilling a primal fear of obliteration. Mahapatra's fusion of Bhayānaka with modernist angst transforms individual terror into a broader meditation on vulnerability, prompting reflection on humanity's fragility in the face of progress.

Ultimately, Mahapatra's reinterpretation of these Rasas bridges classical Indian aesthetics with contemporary concerns, fostering aesthetic pleasure through compassionate dread. His poetry affirms Rasa's role in evoking emotional universality, inviting readers to empathize with suffering while confronting the shadows of existence.

Discussion and Conclusion: The preceding analysis demonstrates that Rasa theory serves as a robust and adaptable framework for deciphering the emotional undercurrents in modern Indian English poetry. By reinterpreting the Navarasa—ranging from Śṛṅgāra's passionate longing to Śānta's serene detachment—poets like Kamala Das, Nissim Ezekiel, A. K. Ramanujan, and Jayanta Mahapatra infuse ancient Indian aesthetic principles with contemporary significance. This synthesis not only revitalizes classical concepts but also navigates the complexities of postcolonial identity, gender dynamics, cultural alienation, and spiritual quests, aligning with global modernist trends such as fragmentation and introspection. For instance, Das's fusion of Śṛṅgāra and Karunā transforms personal desire into a critique



of societal norms, while Mahapatra's invocation of Karunā and Bhayānaka elevates human suffering to a universal call for empathy. This interplay highlights Rasa's inherent universality, where emotional resonance transcends temporal and cultural divides, fostering a shared aesthetic experience that resonates with audiences worldwide.

In conclusion, Rasa aesthetics underscore that the core of artistic expression lies in eliciting profound, shared human emotions, thereby cultivating beauty, empathy, and spiritual harmony. As evidenced in these poets' works, Rasa bridges the chasm between tradition and modernity, affirming its enduring relevance in literature. Future research could delve into digital adaptations of Rasa in contemporary media or undertake comparative studies with Western theories like Aristotle's catharsis, exploring how emotional frameworks evolve in an increasingly interconnected global landscape.

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