

# Beauty (Lie)s In The Eye Of The Beholder

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## Abstract

*This paper explores the relationship between Indian aesthetics, ethics and performance art by engaging in the process, the cultural influences and application of aesthetic judgments on performance artists. A predominantly western aesthetic judgment is applied to artworks created and the application of an alternative as rasa aesthetics in terms of ethics will be discussed.*

*In the context of philosophy and in the search for beauty the West has always focused on the individual by searching outside oneself through research and analysis whilst, the East searches for what is inside you and becoming part of the universe, the truth is given and does not have to be proved. Thus the aesthetic experience of beauty is defined by a state of mind that has a certain focus on a particular object, which engages and fascinates and everything else is excluded from this consciousness to achieve the desired goal.*

**Keywords:** ethics, aesthetics, theory of rasa, performance art

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## Introduction

Western critical and aesthetic theory has been a major source in the interpretation of artworks in a post-imperial, technologically advancing world, which deals with ethical issues by implementing a Western stance on how and if any artworks can provide moral knowledge. If so then ethics is a branch of aesthetics and aesthetics is the critical examination of art, than nature and culture is a part of human conduct and beauty is something that is measured by our values. As humans, we have an innate appreciation for beauty whilst aesthetics and ethics concern the relationship between art and morality, both having seeds in the mind. Rasa implies aesthetic emotion, which is the foundation of Indian aesthetics, a theory that is also related to nature, life, art and drama, which deals with human perception and inspiration associated with the aptitude of the mind. In my view the theory of rasa is attractive today as it conveys the aesthetic experience as a state of expanded consciousness into the human reservoir of lived emotions of individuals in terms of latent impressions by emphasizing basic and permanent emotions as love, anger, and fear.

This paper will further engage with the theory of rasa as an alternative to Western theory where philosophers like Locke, Hume and Immanuel Kant identify beauty as lying in the eye of the beholder rather than in the object, and how the theory of rasa can be used to make meaning of lives, practices and understanding behaviors.

## Beauty from a Western perspective

Beauty is a term that first appeared in the 3rd century BC in Greece. Plato first explicated beauty with the imitation theory by distinguishing the difference between appearance and reality. Whilst the German philosopher Baumgarten claims that beauty is a human experience which is experienced both logically and aesthetically. In terms of logic if one-steps on something sharp it will harm you, this can be viewed as something ugly or painful and if one gazes at a beautiful sunrise then one is able to have an aesthetic experience and appreciate the sense of beauty. Our understanding of beauty has changed during the course of history and the notion of beauty has taken varied values. In

the quest of fulfilling the experience of ecstasy nothing is ugly or distasteful since it is a flection of beauty. The concept of beauty has been diversified to focus and adapt to diverse forms of aesthetic satisfaction.

According to Berleant (2012) the pheonomy of beauty involves three conditions which are intertwined, firstly it is one of a perceiver, secondly it is the focus of perception, and thirdly it is the environment in which the experience takes place. Hamilton (2009) believes that beauty is slippery and allows the perceiver to slip past their state of mind at any given moment, this emotional experience allows one to engage with the moment which creates the shift from the present to the future which also relates to daily task of meaning making. These emotions or feelings are not strictly divided by thinking and feeling or between body, mind and soul as in the European sense but have an integration between the heart, mind and spirit of things according to the Eastern sense. And if beauty is the subject of emotion, than the object of emotion and the situation is abstract and beyond measure and comparison as expressed by rasa.

## Rasa Aesthetics

Bharata composed the *Natyashastra*, between the 6th and the 2nd century BCE of which the theory of rasa is discussed as a key to the treatise. It was promoted, enriched and propagated mainly by Anandavardhana, the most prominent interpreter of the theory of rasa from the 10th century and by his disciple Abhinavagupta. Rasa is closely related to poetry and elevates the elements of beauty and it expresses that human nature is unchanging and our essence is found in our unique individuality in appreciation of the higher faculties of the mind.

“Love of beauty is taste. The creation of beauty is art.”- Ralph Waldo Emerson

Western scholars are generally influenced by the subjectivity of defining what good art is and this is replaced by the subjectivity of defining what beauty is. They further argue that beauty lies or does it (lie) in the eye of the beholder and not in the object itself. Rasa, which is equated to a juice or essence, is a nectar that gives bliss to the mind. Rasa and post -vedic aesthetics rely heavily on the theory of Brahmin, since Brahmin is the essence of all metaphysical entities and the locus of beauty lies in the object and not just in the mind Mohanty (2000). Thus, if each rasa is an emotional energy drawn from our life force than we are able to express this in a certain way. This energy is coloured by our desires, this desire in turn takes on a particular appearance or form through our reaction towards an object Maharajh (2013).

Rasa emotions are further classified in the following way (1) pleasure or delight (*rati/sringara*), (2) laughter or humour (*hasya*), (3) sorrow or pain (*soka*), (4) anger (*krodha*), (5) heroism or courage (*utsaha*), (6) fear (*bhaya*), (7) disgust (*jugupsa*), (8) wonder (*vismaya*), and (9) peace (*shanta*). These emotions, which the human consciousness deals with on an everyday basis, can be something, which is pleasant or unpleasant, desirable or undesirable. These are dichotomous feelings however, rasa is an aesthetic taste, which goes slightly above and beyond the mundane feelings. Thus the ontology is that since “*rasa*” is unique and it is felt it means that it does exist. Rasa emotion is further classified and associated with different colours. These colours also complement emotions and take on a deeper meaning: *sringara* (light green), *hasya* (white), *krodha* (red), *utsaha* (light orange), *bhaya* and *jugupsa*(blue/black), *adbuta* or *vismaya*( yellow) and *shanta*(golden). Thus the rasa emotion and colour associated with it are reflected in the art and design either directly or on a subliminal level in the mind of the viewer.

## The process of rasa aesthetic judgment and Performance art practice

Rasa is made up of three important elements, which are known as *bibhava* the cognitive state represented by words, gestures and internal feelings, *anubhava* is the actual sensing, and *vyabhicharibhava* are subsidiaries that accentuate the experience.

With keeping rasa aesthetics in mind the focus then flows to the three main aspects of art making and in terms of rasa these are form, experience and meaning. The expression of the artists through rasa is able to involve the three different major states of rasa, the *vibhava*, the stimulus potential parallel in the western aesthetic as form are the catalyst emotions, *anubhava* are the emotional reactions or involuntary reaction being the experience in the western aesthetic and *vyacharibhava* are the transient or voluntary reaction parallel to meaning in the western aesthetic. The *bhava* (emotion) and the *sthayibhava* (unconscious meaning) that it is not a direct experience but one experienced by the mind from a memory or an instinct these are the minor states of rasa that are permanent foundational emotions experienced on the inside. This emotion that becomes the rasa as explained by Deutsch (1975), which can be further speculated as a phenomenological moment or experience. Through rasa, Bharata established the fundamental relationship between those that create and those that contemplate artwork or a performance.

Performance art practice includes all the visual arts which include fine art, multimedia, graphic design, photography dance and live performance. The work of art created can vary from works on paper, to living structures as dance and drama, or any other physical and tangible structure as painting and sculptures. As an artist engaged in the process of making art the environment creates a space to deal with that emotion or to act out a role, it allows the artist to draw or write about a traumatic or joyful event, which cannot always be verbalised. This process allows the artists to overcome their fear (*bhaya*) and increase the level of risk taking which leads to *atbhuta* (wonderment) and an ultimate feeling of transcendence together with being one with creation. Jenkins in Norton (2008) writes that there is a joy in expressing one's uniqueness or individuality and in being self-directed, which valid art experiences allow in a constructive manner and creating something new by weaving the spiritual, physical and emotional aspects together.

Artworks are able to create a myriad of emotions from joy to sorrow, disgust, anger, love, humour, wonder and even peace which reflect on human lives and make it rich and varied. Emotions also enhance a different kind of awareness and are universal in nature across cultures and through rasa these mental states are experienced and analysed for both the artist and spectator. Art making is not just about prompting self-awareness, self-confidence and self-expression but also participate in this community and feel privileged about your purpose in life. The process of connecting and knowing with your intuitive self and reflecting on the process is very much the concept of becoming one with Brahmin the ultimate reality. At this point experiencing a rasa goes beyond the mundane experience and creates a more meaningful engagement with making "beautiful things". This emotional energy projects a rasa drawn from our inner most being which fuses with our desires and conditioning to acquire a definite form.

Brahman that is the elevated state of consciousness is achieved when the artist who is the creator of the action and the aesthetic, and the perception, are brought together. The culmination of the two can be classified as the aesthetic experience of rasa the sap or juice as an ultimate metaphysical experience.

This is further articulated, when the State of Being merges with the Supreme Reality and the role of the artist is to then bring the viewer of the object closer to the experience of merging with the supreme consciousness. According to Gomez (2009) the fourfold cognitive states of Vedic epistemological assumption are waking, dreaming, dreamless state and the transcendental state. These four levels of experience or consciousness depend on the permanent mental state that form the basis of rasa or aesthetic emotion and emerge in an appropriately stimulated experience. Therefore the link between the different levels of experience and the individual sense organs redefines and awakens the inner sense organs that allow the experience of beauty to be sensuous on a metaphysical level.

Gomez (2009) comments on the "I- consciousness" which is the limiting concept, if there is the integration, an immersion of the "I" and the object then there is no limitation between the aesthetic

and the metaphysical experience. However disinterest and disengagement can come from both the object and the viewer in terms of the work being defective in nature of its construction, lacks clarity of expression, disproportionate, and so forth and in terms of the viewer the object can be totally alien to one's own being and this can be interpreted on an entirely personal emotional point of view. This is the reason why the aesthetic experience is considered to last as long as the viewer is engaged with the artwork whilst the mystical experience transcends and continues through a period of time.

## Aesthetics and Ethics

Aesthetics from a western context and Hegelian point of view is actually meant as the "philosophy of fine art" and the study of beauty is the study of art or nature. Theories of imitations, illusion, and idealised representation represent a study from the artist's point of view whilst the theories of cognition, inference and mysticism represent the study of the spectator's point of view. In the context of *rasa*, Indian aesthetics is concerned with the science of philosophy and originality of art and the technique involved in making art since they are intertwined. So how does one determine what art is and further explain what is good art? Different criteria are used to determine this by an informed or uninformed mind however; people still make an aesthetic judgment in terms of the space it occupies within the established practice of the art world (galleries, museums and exhibitions).

When the criterion of beauty is used to evaluate a selected artwork or design the subjectivity of defining what is good art and what is beauty comes into play. Some work would display a positive aesthetic whilst some work tends to display a negative impact on the viewer. An artwork's aesthetic value and judgment can only be determined by a summation of the required criterion with each criterion having its own degree of impact on the aesthetic value. In terms of ethics human morals, values and principles are specific to certain human behaviors, cultural beliefs and norms. Ethical values are conceptual entities since they are essentially ideas. However, they also decide how people behave in relation to each other. Beauty is considered to be part of the physical world and not every physical property has aesthetic relevance whether it is solid or hollow, empty or full it makes no difference. Beauty is in the skin of things making beauty just skin deep.

## The influence of western aesthetic judgment on an artwork

Western perspectives according to Blocker (2001) are intellectual frameworks used to analyse and judge implementing terms such as aesthetics, ethics, metaphysics and even philosophy since most scholars use a European approach to understanding basic life goals, norms and knowledge amongst other assumptions and presuppositions in applying theory. The concept of aesthetics stems from the notion of taste. This concept of taste and style drew much attention during the Eighteenth century and emerged as a corrective to rationalism, beauty and the rise of egoism. During this period the judgment of beauty was considered to be the judgment of reason by reasoning it out and applying concepts.

When I look at the process of creating art or dancing my entire body is aware of it the surface, the space and environment responding kinesthetically and almost automatically to the sight and sounds. The idea of being enraptured by the flow of movement the hand is followed by the gaze, where the eye goes the mind follows diligently. The flow continues in that where the mind goes emotions arise and where there is this *bhava* (emotions) there will be *rasa*. This action of body consciousness is the process of aesthetic engagement, which, the West identifies as the form (*vibhava*), meaning (*anubhava*) and experience (*vyacharibhava*). The movement or artwork may not be perfect but being totally immersed in the moment is the beauty, not perfect but rich and irreplaceable, the feeling of being in unison with the universe. This experience of beauty involves a multitude of aspects namely the artists, the viewer and the artwork, this triangulation constitutes the very nature of *rasa* where the object is capable of evoking perceptual and associated responses and creates a situation to

experience the beautiful. The question then is, is this synonymous in any situation or in most of our experiences of beauty? Thus if beauty or aesthetic value is a result of any situation or experience that involves the artist, the object and the viewer does it mean that the focus of perception be beautiful.

Our sensitivity to natural and built environments changes and as Berleant (2012) states that we are blinded and betrayed by beauty and our exclusive worship of economic values. Is beauty a foreign concept and should it be re-conceptualized in terms of the contemporary historical situation of the environment it belongs too. Beauty in the Western tradition is considered to be a metaphysical object readily identified with the truth and reality whilst Indian aesthetics do not consider beauty as an objective reality but with the perception of the beautiful Chaudhury (1965). Having said these emotions are then social phenomena and have deeper significance in context of its cultural meaning. These cultural perspectives have an impact on individual behavior and on the practice of the self in terms of psychological approaches to decision-making, emotions and cognition. Works of art act upon their audiences with reference to the choice of material in terms of perceptual and experiential experiences. Art has the potential to induce its audience to experience something without having to act accordingly as expressed by Van Gerwen (2015). In rasa theory the bodily experiences of basic bhavas or emotions are located centrally in the body and during a performance or creation of an artwork these basic emotions of love, anger or disgust can be observed by both the performer and reproduced in heightened form for the audience.

The 'Mona Lisa' painted by Leonardo da Vinci between 1503 and 1507 is unremarkably one of the most famous paintings in human history. This painting was never signed or dated and there are multiple controversies associated with it namely, who is the mystery portrait off, to whom does the painting belongs too, or is it a self-portrait of da Vinci and so forth. However, the most mesmerizing aspect of this painting is the smile a hallmark of Leonardo's style, which can also be seen in his other, works an upturn on the left side of the mouth. The shadow of the lips and eyes on the face of the sitter creates the effect of allowing subtle yet strong emotions in the viewer of the painting, and one has to decide if the smile is in her eyes or her lips. This emotion can be closely identified with srngara (love) the king of rasas that embodies the notion of, laughter (hasya), and even anger (krodha).

The 'Mona Lisa' creates plethora of emotions in the viewer, is she mocking the viewer, or is she looking at a lover and smiling at him in a sacred, and placid way giving pure pleasure which is an aspect of 'srngara'. The delight that the viewer shares upon gazing at the painting, is also one of deep-seated connectedness and inner perception, which, is self-knowing. Thus self-reflection is prominent in rasa as Gnoli in Sundarajan (2010) states that aesthetic enjoyment is tasting of one's own consciousness, and is a source of pleasure, endowed with extreme pleasantness or beauty which is embodied in the 'Mona Lisa'. It emerges that Leonardo seemed to be so self-absorbed in the painting that he appeared to connect with his spirit and extend on his mental fields of removing all the clutter of ornamentation and detail and just focusing the mind and creating a peaceful atmosphere in his work, a sentiment enjoyed by the viewer as well.

This painting is also unique in displaying the celestial bhava 'shanta rasa' of peace and transcendence. The ultimate goal of an aesthetic experience is abolishing the limited personality of the spectator that is removing the maya or illusion. When the viewer is totally immersed in the object and in this case the painting he or she is experiencing a rasa anubhava (emotional or involuntary reaction) and an eventual sthayibhava (unconscious meaning). This immersion in the work of art as drawn by Sundarajan (2010) that immersion in the aesthetic experience is an expression of transcendence, liberation from the mundane reality. The smile of the 'Mona Lisa' can be conceived from a dialectical angle and based on the philosophy of rasa of self-reflexivity by further looking into the idea of the self and non-self.

## Conclusion

In conclusion the function of ethics is to promote beneficial action, responsible behavior, commitment to community and communion with the sacred. Rasa is not just a sensory or emotive response but a transformative cognition and the knowledge that is gained through that response, it is not a rasa if it does not leave one transformed. Once the artwork is created it enters art practice by conforming to accepted art forms and if there is a lack of artistic merit it's considered to be having lacking the respect of its audience van Gerwen (2015). When approaching the eastern theories one should not look at it as a platform that can be easily manipulated or by romanticising it but also looking at it as modern communication and technology. Chakrabarty (1992) claims that third world historians need to refer to works in European history, however historians of Europe do not feel the need to reciprocate and write Indian histories, even though these may be produced in the third world. Dallmayr (1994) positions the third world as an already bruised society because of decades of colonial domination and confrontation which results in an identity crisis, whilst the west enjoys a 'cushion' of complacency because of the position they occupy. He further explains that historical background cannot be ignored but the conceptual and theoretical contribution has to be recognised.

Thus rasa aesthetics can be studied through literary criticism, theatre, history, sociology, psychology, neuroscience, philosophy religion and art with each area revealing a different aspect of rasa. Rasa can be experienced through subjective and objective waves of bhava in a particular context. Grenz (1999) Art criticism has made us somewhat cynical in appreciating taste and beauty but rasa allows the noble ideal to evolve critical appraisal virtues of personalities of ethics and aesthetics.

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