Multi-level Semantics: an Analysis of Poetic Meaning in Indian and Contemporary Western Theory

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All art is considered to be representative of life, thereby distinguishing itself and transcending bare history whose business it is to record and document facts. Literary criticism today has graduated and evolved from the early Platonic interpretation of art as mere trompe l'oeil, to the belief in semiotized, signbased interpretation. Both Indian and Western Schools of anesthetics have effectively attempted to deal with the rudimentary yet seminal concepts of literature like reader-response, meaning and interpretation and the true nature of the semantic in works of art.

An attempt has been made here to gauge the comparative affinities with regard to the hierarchical pattern of semantic interpretation as propounded by the early Indian Dhvani theorist Anandavardhana, as well as that of the contemporary western phenomenologist, Roman Ingarden. To club these two apparently incomparable, polar schools and bring them under a common penumbra might at first seem cumbersome; but the more one delves into the specific aspect of their modes of analysis, the more will one be convinced of the essential commonality in these apparently different modes of literary criticism.

A highly technical and stratified framework of analysis has been formulated by the Polish philosopher Roman Ingarden in his efforts at evaluating the various "levels" of existence of the literary work of art. Almost parallel to this lies the theory of *dhvani* which dates as far back as the 9th century, and which emphasises upon the full-length study of the poem from the sound- stratum to the level of the entire discourse. This ultimate state which emcompasses within itself the whole semantic range released by the text, is realized in its plenitude only by the *sahrdaya,* or the "Ideal" reader. He is mainly conceived to "close the gaps that constantly appear in any analysis of literary effect and response".[1] The phenomenological theory of art essentially stresses upon the actual text as well as the response to it, as against the Nietzchean dictum "there are no texts, merely interpretations".

The multi-dimensional, stratiform nature of the literary text was recognized and developed by Ingarden, for whom the stratae, decided as four in number, consist of -1) the stratum of units of word sounds 2) the stratum of units of

meaning 3) the stratum of objects represented and 4) the stratum of "schematized" appearances. The *dhvani* approach to the multiphase quality of the text too conceives of a more or less similar hierarchy. The primary level of *abhidha* is realized at the sound stratum while the figurative, metaphorical meaning of the poem is analyzed at the level of *laksana.* The *gunibhútavyangya* supercedes these two in that the reader absorbs the various symbolic elements of the text at this level. The poem manifests itself as a true *dhvanikávya* when the *sahrdaya* realizes and taps all the conceivable semantic potential that can possibly be elicited from the work.

The poem chosen for identifying the various stratae of meaning is Blake's "Tyger" — a poem fecund in meaning and one which releases deeper semantic layers to the informed reader. The basal level conceives of the sound stratum--sound effects which would appeal even to the most untrained of readers, which incorporates into it, metrical devices like the rhyme which affords auditory pleasure. "Tyger, tyger, burning bright,/ In the forest of the night" have an onomatopoeic effect; the *šabdacitra* evoked by *anurananam*, to the Indian theorist. The lines, predominantly trochaic, serve to satisfy the reader's zest for jingle, and appreciate the lines on the basis of the auditory pleasure evoked. The simple "tripping" trochee, here most effectively veils the philosophic profundity conveyed in the poem. Moreover, the child-like repetition of the apostrophe in the opening lines, "Tyger, tyger". achieves the twin purpose of emphasis as well as metrical effectiveness, contributed by sound patterns like rnyme, alliteration and assonance. The lines, rhyming aa, bb, cc, dd (if the last syllable of the fourth line is pronounced/simetrai/) is seen consistently employed throughout. A closer examination would reveal a heavy use of alliteration-- "tyger, tyger", "burning bright", "frame thy fearful", "distant deeps" -- which serve to conjure up word images (vácyacitra) as well as sound images (šabdacitra) through repeated use. The reader who is capable of confining himself solely to the appreciation of sounds, is struck by the repeated use of interrogatives which are highlighted by a drastic cutting short of verbs which create the effect of breathlessness and intense awe. The speaker, obviously terrified at the beauty and ferocity of the tiger, is obviously at a loss for words, but what has been communicated by the rapidly breathed interrogatives could perhaps never have been effected by any other poetic device. Further more, the repetition of the whole of the first stanza (with the single instance of replacing the word "could" with "dare" in the last line) holds up the pictorial image in all its terrifying vividness to the reader who is by now captivated by the vision he has conjured up of the dark, sinister beast. An analysis of this primary level of the poem finds a parallel in Indian aesthetics too. Images, both verbal and pictorial, are considered in detail while evaluating the poem at this level.

The second stratum, that of the comprehension of meaning, also confines itself to a more or less superficial plain, with its preoccupation with poetic techniques and therefore neither contributes much to the thematic profundity of the poem nor to the philosophic interpretations which would inspire a more informed reader. The Indian theorist here brings in the case of the reader who appreciates the various *alamkáras* — metaphor, and other poetic devices — which serve as ornamental yet integral elements. Here the reader of "The Tyger" would incorporate the elements of sounds as well as the meaning which exists at the curface. The poem then is to him merely one which deals, at the physical level, of the process of the creation of a monstrous creature, ferocious, deadly, mortally terrifying, yet strangely beautiful. The tiger, to him, is a personification of everything that is evil, dangerous and awe inspiring. It is however, stripped of all noble attributes, and he is only frighteningly aware of the creature as an incarnation of sheer bestiality. When thus he is able to absorb the nuances of sound as well as the superficial meaning, he transgresses the boundaries of the purely elementary in his "aesthetic progression" of poem-analysis.

The more Blakian reader is at a stage where he can achieve a comprehensive and complete understanding of the sound structures as well as the primary meaning, and well beyond that -- he is now a good way ahead from his less initiated counterpart. He imbibes into his inner being, the best that the poem can offer as a piece of art; the poem is now perceived better, explored deeper. The significance of the seemingly simple line "Did he who made the lamb make thee?" assumes much wider implications here, since the lamb becomes not just a creature diametrically opposed to the terrifying tiger, but becomes evocative of the "unassuming little lamb" drawn by the imaginative genius of the poet. The tiger, who "burns brightly", holds much more meaning - potential than a merely intense exhibition of the physical act of burning; wrath, ardour, fire, all go into the white-hot heat of its creation.

> And what shoulder, and what art,
> Could twist the sinews of thy heart ?
> And when that heart began to beat,
> What dread hand ? and what dread feet ?

The shoulder, the twisted sinews of the stealthily beating heart, carries an awesome aspect of power, of sheer strength, though not merely in its physical aspect. The skill of the creator, positioned in the dark smithy, intent on his craft, moulding and shaping the deadly artifact, are all enveloped in the semantic range of the single word "art". As with anything that is associated with the term art, "the end is ostensibly the making of a significant form, but ultimately the

particularized expression of a creative delight arising from some 'inwardness' of being and driven by a sense of perfection".[2] The *alamkára dhvani* is transcended as far as the *dhvani* theorist is concerned, and he has begun to perceive, to feel the poem in its wholeness and intensity and the work assumes the level of a *guníbhútavyangyakávya.* The indeterminate elements prompt this competent *sahrdaya* to fill the semantic gaps with the power of his aesthetic sensibilities.

At the purely *vácya* level, the tiger appears physically fearsome, demonic and comes to symbolize evil, grossness, violence and cruelty. At this level can be assessed even the graphological influence and effectiveness of the word "tyger" which serves to enhance the fearsomeness of the beast.

At the figurative, metaphorical level of *laksana* too, the tiger would perhaps remain a picture of destruction, an incarnation of purely destructive forces that have gone into its making. From such a reading to the realization of the poem at the level of *vyangya* requires the imagination of a sensitive reader— here, the creature, no longer perceived as a physical being, becomes symbolic not of destruction, but, paradoxically, of creation at its highest and best. This emergence of a positive force from a purely negative, vicious one jolts the reader into an awareness of the sheer beauty of creation.

The poem can further be interpreted as a true *dhvanikávya* where the "figure" of the tiger ceases to exist. The dumbfounded question" Did he who make the lamb make thee ?" provokes the reader now to consider the lamb-tiger amalgam as symbolizing the beauty of creativity, and the skill of the Divine Hand that worked at its creation.

The "Superstratum", the highest level in the Ingarden concept of literary appreciation is, and can, be perceived only by the hypothetical Ideal Reader. Any elucidation of the poem by this reader would envelop in its entirety, the sounds and the layers of meaning, the form and the content, which constitute the "being" of the poem, thereby endorsing the credo of ancient Indian literary criticism "šabdarthau sahitau kávyam" (poetry is a blend of sound and sense) The Ideal Reader who finds his counterpart in the *sahrdaya,* might differ from him in that the latter is not a notional frame of reference like the former. This reader needs no commentary to help him understand the terrible indictment of the world of Blake's Tyger. He is at the same time not indifferent to the metrical and auditory representations in the poem, which to him exist to form a storm-center of meanings, sounds and associations, radiating forth to form an imaginative, cohesive whole.

This analysis of "The Tyger" which effectively lends itself to Ingarden's concept, becomes an effective mode of analysis that suits the added requirements of the application of the Indian critical theory of *dhvani.* In order to attain a wholly unified vision, one should synthesise successfully the various stratae of existence of the work of art: sounds, meaning, the felt experience, the emotional response, and the ultimate awareness of the highest truth the poem wishes to convey. But when this explanation ceases to be a means to the end of unifying the poem in our minds, and is, instead, thought of as the actual "form" of the poem, everything goes wrong, and its "infinite variety" is staled at once.

The cognitive response, rather than the affective, is held to be the essential meaning of any work of art; this was an oft- discussed pre-occupation with Ingarden too. He remarks on the term "cognition" thus:

> It should be taken to mean . . . a primarily passive, receptive experience, in which we, literary consumers, become acquainted with a given work, get to know it somehow, and thereby possibly relate to it in a more or less emotional way, and continuing on to the kind of attitude toward the work which leads to the acquisition of effective knowledge about the work.[3]

The semantic interpretation of the "super stratum", according to Ingarden, depends on the "Unbestimmtheitsstellen" (spots of indeterminate elements) that lie beneath the body of the printed page, and whose vast potential is tapped by the trained, initiated reader, and is never attained by the literary dilettante. Indian classical theory too has laid stress on such an activisation of the reader's imagination which is stimulated by either a concealed meaning or a hiatus in the text:

> gudham sat camatkaroti
> gopyamanataya labdha saundaryam.
> (concealment lends charm and beauty).

No text can adapt itself to suit the aesthetic requirements of each individual reader. The work assumes an opaqueness and obscurity only to the literary philistine whose dialectic capabilities are restricted, or sometimes even absent; this has many a time, nothing to do with the text, but everything to do with its interpretation. The reading activity assumes broader dimensions in both contemporary theory as well as ancient Indian critical theory, since both attempt to dispense with any mode of straitjacket interpretation. Sartre observes:

> The imagination of the spectator has not only a regulating function, but a constitutive one. It does not play; it is called upon to recompose the beautiful object beyond the traces left by the artist.[4]

Interpretation, therefore, is not an onerous task or a painful duty assigned to the reader, but a unique voyage of discovery leading to a state of ultimate aesthetic bliss. Susan Sontag here remarks:

> Interpretation is not an absolute value, a gesture of mind situated in some timeless realm of capabilities . . . it must itself be evaluated with a historical view of human consciousness. In some cultural contexts, interpretation is a liberating act. It is a means of revising, of transvaluing, of escaping the dead past.[5]

Ingarden's multi-tiered method of text-analysis as well as the Indian classificatory system of *abhidha, laksana* and *vyanjana* serve mainly as frameworks of reference; it would indeed be an unrewarding experience if they are to be considered as rigid compartments. Such systems of analysis are only pointers, indicators of the rich semantic potential that are encoded within the text, and serve essentially as hypostasis that help sharpen the reader's perceptive faculties. A loosely structured hierarchy which deals with each layer of meaning, is what the potential reader should cull from such a framework, whose function it is to enable him to react to an aesthetic "situation" in which he is placed.

It has been the bane of most contemporary theories to "theorize", in the most rigid, narrow sense of the term. Similar has been the case with ancient Sanskrit literary theory which attempted to apply its tenets to a corpus of writing which may have given birth to those literary concepts. The recent upsurge and revival of Indian theories of aesthetics have led many to find areas of affinities between classical Indian and contemporary western theories, which have, however, undoubtedly bridged the wide gaps prevalent until now. But what is needed to strengthen this mutual bond, is a thorough application of these conceptually homogeneous theories to individual texts that represent a writer's oeuvre, bearing in mind the fact that no theory can afford to ignore in the process of theorizing, two integral elements, the text, and the reader.

The literary work, like any other work of art, is a product of the entire imagination. A picture, a painting, or a literary work is neither a purely intellectual nor a purely emotional product; it is obviously both at once. We cannot say that it is the product of a purely reflective or active process; it is both at once. It is neither the product of internal choice nor external compulsion, because no essential distinction is made between the two at the time of creation.

The literary work of art therefore, can be said to "exist" in the state of mind of the poet, of which the poem is an objectified manifestation, and also in the state of mind of the sensitive, responsive reader, who reconstructs the work of art through his interpretation of it.

Notes and References

1. Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading : A Theory of Aesthetic Response.* (Baltimore and London : The John Hopkins University Press, 1978). p. 29.
2. K.D. Sethna. *Blake's Tyger : A Christological Interpretation.* (Pondicherry : Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 1989) p. 10.
3. Roman Ingarden, "On the Cognition of the Literary work of Art" in the *Hermeneutics Reader* ed., Kurt Mueller-Vollmer (uk : Basil Blackwell, 1986) p.188
4 .Jean Paul Sartre, "Why Write?" in David Lodge ed. *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism.* (London : Longman, 1972), p. 376.
5. Susan Sontage, "Beyond Interpretation" in David Lodge ed., *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism.* (London : Longman, 1972) p. 655.