

Impersonal Subjectivity and Aesthetic Self in Abhinavagupta and Nietzsche

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Abstract: This paper engages Abhinavagupta and Nietzsche in terms of their views on the classical Sanskrit *nāṭya* and classical Greek tragedy. Although disparate in their aesthetics and philosophical frameworks, the two thinkers converge in characterising the aesthetic experience of *nāṭya* and tragedy as a universalised consciousness. For Abhinavagupta, it is an aesthetic pleasure in a repose (*viśrānti*) in one's own consciousness, which is bliss, while for Nietzsche, it is a metaphysical solace in oneness with *one* living reality. Analysing the aesthetic theories of the two thinkers *vis-a-vis* their metaphysical positions, we have conceptualised the idea of the aesthetic self as the *experiencer* of the transformative experiences of the two dramatic arts in the impersonal modes of subjectivity.

Keywords: Abhinavagupta, Nietzsche, *Nāṭya*, Greek tragedy, impersonal subjectivity, aesthetic self

Introduction

Abhinavagupta (c. 950–1020), an Indian aesthetician and philosopher belonging to the philosophical tradition of Kashmir Śaivism, has developed a full-fledged *Rasa-dhvani* theory in the light of Bharatamuni's *Nāṭyaśāstra* (hereafter *NS*), the first Indian treatise on dramaturgy, and Anandavardhana's *Dhvanyāloka* (hereafter *Dh.*), on which he has written commentaries *Abhinavabhāratī* (hereafter *Abh.*) and *Locana*, respectively. Abhinavagupta's critical appreciation of Bharata's *Rasasūtra*—“*vibhāvānubhāvavyabhicārisaṃyogād rasanīṣpattih*” that “*Rasa* is produced (*niṣpattih*) from a combination (*saṃyoga*) of Determinants (*vibhāva*), Consequents (*anubhāva*), and Complementary Psychological States (*vyabhicāribhāva*)” (Bharata, *NS* 302), in the light of his predecessors' interpretations, especially Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka, leads to his celebrated claim that *Rasāsvāda* is *Brahmāsvāda* (Abhinavagupta, *Locana* 2.4 L). This parallel between aesthetic experience and spiritual experience is rooted in his Śaiva metaphysics of the non-duality of the individual and the Universal Śiva consciousness. Śiva, an all-inclusive supreme, indescribable consciousness (*anuttara*), is not only a manifestation of His freedom (*svātantrya*) in all multiplicities (*prakāśa*) but also *vimarśa*, a reflective awareness of His own being. For Abhinavagupta, the aesthetic rapture is *ānanda*, which is understood to be the level of *Śakti* or *vimarśa*, where the spectator, as a Universalised Subject, enjoys the generalised emotions (present as latent impressions, or *vāsanās*, in each self) awakened by the dramatic situation in one's consciousness, and experiences a self-cogitation when they subdue in the subconscious. *Nāṭya* performs a crucial function of generalisation (*sādhāraṇīkaraṇa*), enabling the *sahṛdaya* to experience a transcendental awareness, a state of pure consciousness, a repose (*viśrānti*) in one's own Self. Ultimately, the aesthetic experience transcends the aesthete from the personal subjectivity to a transcendental experience of tasting the Self. This radical shifting gives birth to an aesthetically mediated self,

the subject of this experience. The subjectivity of this transcendental experience has to be from an impersonal mode, and Abhinavagupta's idea of the Universalised Subject, in his five-level analysis of aesthetic experience, provides this impersonal medium.

Nietzsche (1844–1900), is not primarily interested in developing a theory of aesthetics and approaches art from the “prism of life” (Nietzsche, *ASC* 5). His view about the science of aesthetics is that it is a natural evolution of the operation of two energising forces shaping Western artistic traditions: the Apollonian and the Dionysian. These two forces, named after the Greek deities Apollo and Dionysus, represent distinct artistic impulses: the former associated with order, individuation, and the visual realm, and the latter with excess, self-forgetfulness, and music. The tension and synthesis of these two art impulses, as Nietzsche sees it, constitute the essence of Greek tragedy. In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) (hereafter *BT*), Nietzsche interprets the Greek *Attic* tragedy as a metaphysical experience of the primal truth that our separate individualities are illusory and explains why tragedy elicits pleasure. What makes the tragedy pleasurable is the Dionysiac effect, that is, a merger with the primordial unity (*Ur-Eine*). This aesthetic phenomenon of primordial unity is intertwined with the metaphysical conception of the Will, which Nietzsche takes from Arthur Schopenhauer, who conceived of the whole world as a representation of the Will—a cosmic, irrational force that manifests itself in ceaseless creation and destruction without any motive. As *willing* is deprivation, it is essentially suffering. Nietzsche's celebrated view that life and the world can be aesthetically justified presents this world-Will as an amoral artist god who redeems his suffering by creating humans. He interprets the Apollonian and Dionysian arts in the light of this quasi-metaphysical picture of the world-artist. Thus, the Apollonian is the artistic spirit in which we take redemption in creating our individualities as beautiful semblances, and the Dionysian represents that we are the ‘works of art’ to be destroyed in the hands of the world-artist. The two art energies in the tragic drama present the tragic myth of the hero experiencing the illusoriness of our separate individualities and an aesthetic delight in the indestructibility of life through a momentary union with what Nietzsche calls ‘one living being’ (*BT* § 7, 17). Tragedy, thus, characterises aesthetic delight in immersiveness in universal reality. Taking insights from Abhinavagupta, we have argued that, like *nāṭya*, tragedy also generalises the aesthetic situation, which we have analysed in the phenomenon of the Dionysian, and, further, we have articulated the subjectivity of ‘tragic pleasure’ in the impersonal Dionysiac consciousness. In what follows, we analyse (i) the nature of aesthetic experience in *nāṭya* and tragedy *vis-a-vis* the metaphysical positions of the two thinkers with a focus on how the two dramatic arts generalise the aesthetic situations and provide an impersonal mode of consciousness and (ii) to theorise a plausible account of the aesthetic self in the articulation of impersonal subjectivity.

Aesthetic Experience in *Nāṭya*

Abhinavagupta elaborates his theory of *rasa* based on Bharata's *Rasasūtra* alongside its interpretations offered by various other scholars. For both Bharata and Abhinavagupta, *rasa* constitutes the fundamental element of drama. Bharata has articulated, “*na hi rasādṛte kaścidarthaḥ pravartate*” — “without *Rasa*, no meaning can be conveyed” (Abhinavagupta, *Abh. Vol. I* 290). Abhinavagupta also claims that “*nāṭya eva cha rasāḥ!*” — “drama is *rasa*” (*Abh. Vol. I* 303), underscoring that *rasa* embodies the essence of dramatic performance. Regarding this paramount importance of *rasa* in the dramaturgical process in Abhinavagupta's thoughts, G. T. Deshpande (1989) writes,

...a dramatist cannot proceed with effective situations in drama unless he fixes his mind on the *Rasa* that he wants to present; the actor cannot make a choice of costumes and makeup unless he knows what *Rasa* he has to portray through acting; and the spectator goes to the theatre only to relish *Rasa* in the drama... Thus, *Rasa* is important from whatever angle we look at the drama. (66)¹

Bharata has defined *rasa* as “produced (*niṣpattiḥ*) from a combination (*saṃyoga*) of Determinants (*vibhāva*), Consequents (*anubhāva*), and Complementary Psychological States (*vyabhicāribhāva*)” (NS 302). Abhinavagupta expands on this by asserting that *rasa* is an organic unity and emerges from a structured integration of *vibhāvas*, *anubhāvas*, and *vyabhicāribhāvas*. He clarifies that *rasa* is not an objective entity (*siddha*) that can serve as a knowable object. The *vibhāvas*, etc., do not signify ordinary things but rather contribute to the realisation of its gustation (*carvaṇā*). Hence, *rasa* is not found anywhere in the world except in *kāvya* and *nāṭya*.² In *Locana*, he claims that “the relishing of *Rasa* is a super normal (*alaukika*) delight. It consists in savouring the *vibhāvas*, etc., ... and it must not be degraded to the level of memory and inference, or the like” (*Locana* 1.18 L). Subsequently, Abhinavagupta explains that the realisation of *rasa* in an obstacle (*vighnas*) free³ theatrical performance is akin to directly experiencing one’s own consciousness. In this way, *rasa* is subjective as it constitutes a direct perception, an inner mental experience (*mānasapratyakṣa*) of taste (*āsvādana*), and, hence, an experiential reality. K. P. Mishra (2006) elaborates that for Abhinavagupta, *rasa* is *jñānarūpa* (of the form of knowledge), which aligns with his non-dualistic epistemology, which holds that knowledge (*jñāna*) is not dependent on external objects (*vastu*) but is intrinsic to the knower. Therefore, “*Rasa* cannot exist separately from consciousness” (Mishra 82). Unlike the ordinary situations of love, anger, envy, etc., which can be both pleasurable and painful, drama, a combinatory effect of *vibhāva*, *anubhāva*, etc., elicits pleasure because what is being relished, even the pathetic or sorrowful (*karuṇa*), is the generalised emotions or emotion-essences in one’s own consciousness which “is nothing but *camatkāra*”, the blissfulness of self-cogitation (Deshpande 79). Abhinavagupta elaborates on this by stating that in an aesthetic experience, there is an “absence of sensations of pleasure and pain, etc., as it is the case of entering into our own self (*svātmānupraveśa*), which is immersion (*āveśa*) in the latent traces of our own sentiments of delight, etc., reawakened by the corresponding determinants, etc., which are generalised” (Mishra 114).⁴

In explicating the process of *Rasa*-realisation, Abhinavagupta follows Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka’s notion of generalisation (*sādhāraṇīkaraṇa*), which posits that the aesthetic experience of *nāṭya* places both the object and the subject in a universalised position. Nāyaka argues that *nāṭya* enables the relish of generalised emotions, a power residing in the poetic words, which he terms *bhāvanā* or *bhāvakatva*, leading to *bhoga* or *bhojakatva* in the subject. An important aspect of generalisation is that neither the aesthetic emotions belong to a specific individual nor the aesthete is tied to a particular time, place, or identity. Raniero Gnoli (2015) explains that *bhāvanā*, also known as “the power of revelation... has the faculty of suppressing the thick layer of mental stupor (*moha*) occupying our own consciousness...” (45). Consequently, the aesthete attains a universalised state and experiences bliss (*ānanda*), which is akin to spiritual bliss. This transformation occurs due to the predominance of *sattva*,⁵ as the process of generalisation severs the connection with the personal, allowing for an impersonalised aesthetic realisation. Abhinavagupta concurs with Nāyaka that *Rasāsvāda* bears a resemblance to *Brahmāsvāda* and aligns with his thesis of generalisation, acknowledging that “the relishing of *Rasa* bears a family resemblance to the relishing of the ultimate *brahman*” (*Locana* 2.4 L). However, Abhinava extends the thesis of *sādhāraṇīkaraṇa* by linking it to his metaphysical position of the Self (*ātman*). In doing so, he also refines Nāyaka’s notion of poetic revelation (*bhāvanā*), arguing that *rasa* arises not through linguistic power alone but is a direct experience in consciousness (*mānasapratyakṣa*). To him, generalised emotions exist as latent impressions (*vāsanās*) in all human beings due to their past and present births, allowing for a sympathetic resonance (*hṛdayasaṃvāda*) even with the extraordinary deeds like Rāma’s ocean-crossing which Nāyaka thinks is not possible as the spectators can only identify with the ordinary situations. By providing a locus to the free-floating emotion-essences in the universality of Self, Abhinavagupta has not only asserted the universality of aesthetic emotions but also their relishing within one’s own consciousness.

Furthermore, Abhinavagupta's theory that the Universal Self expands over all limited selves generalises the spectators' consciousness into a collective singularity (*ekaghanatā*). In an obstacle-free theatrical performance, where individual spectators form a collective aesthetic unity and are not engrossed in their personal ego-centric consciousness, the shared generality or *ekaghanatā* transforms into a *ānandaikaghanatā*, that is, aesthetic relishing of drama by all spectators. Abhinavagupta has argued that "pleasure given by a spectacle increases when there are a large number of spectators" (Gnoli, 2015, 57). Further, in such moments, the elimination of the "practical" personalities of the spectators, different each from the other—is succeeded by a state of consciousness, a "knowing subject" which is, unique, "generalised", not circumscribed by any determination of space, time, etc." (Gnoli, XXXVI-XXXVII). This collective absorption mirrors his tantric philosophy, where self-expansion occurs through shared immersion. In *Tantrāloka* (hereafter *TA*), he describes consciousness as "pervasive of all" but tending toward contraction in individuals, whereas mutual reflection expands it into bliss (Abhinavagupta, *TĀ Vol. VII* 28/373b-374a). Similarly, in *nāṭya*, the shared resonance (*hr̥dayasamivāda*) of generalised emotions and audience identification (*tanmayibhāvana*) dissolves fragmented subjectivities into a unified, impersonal aesthetic consciousness. Thus, universalised emotions and collective uniformity, which are essential for the *rasa* experience, find support in Abhinavagupta's theory of the Self.

With an emphasis on generalisation, *nāṭya* leads to a transcendental aesthetic experience where the duality of subject and object dissolves, resulting in a repose (*viśrānti*) within one's own consciousness. In *Comparative Aesthetics* (Vol. I) (1959), K. C. Pandey explicates Abhinavagupta's five-level theory of aesthetic experience: *sensory*, *imaginative*, *emotive*, *kathartic*, and *transcendental*. The first three levels involve sensing, imagining, and emotionally connecting with the drama. At the kathartic level, where spectators identify themselves with dramatic characters and their emotions, self-forgetfulness takes place.⁶ In this state, "the subject is completely freed from all objective references as also from temporal and spatial relations, which are due to limitations of individuality" (Pandey 138). This level, as Nāyaka also argues, allows the aesthete to transcend personal constraints and become a Universalised Subject, a state that goes beyond individual physical, psychological, and volitional activities (Pandey 76). However, even at this stage, the universalised aesthetic object still influences the Universalised Subject. Abhinavagupta further elaborates that on a higher level, the *Vyatireka-Turiyātīta*,⁷ the basic mental state sinks into the subconscious, dissolving the subject-object distinction and enabling the self to experience its *ānanda*, an introverted resting state within itself. Thus, for Abhinavagupta, "the experience of *ānanda*, *vimarśa* or rest of universal subject in itself" (Pandey 141) defines the highest aesthetic experience, where consciousness (*samvedana*), dense with bliss (*ānanadghana*), is directly relished.⁸

This aligns with Abhinavagupta's broader metaphysical stance that the Self is universal, and drama is a realisation of this universality, an experience of pure, undifferentiated bliss (*ānanda*). K. C. Pandey (1959) describes this state as an experience of the Self itself—pure and unmixed bliss—a condition where aesthetic enjoyment transforms into unhindered, transcendental awareness (140-141). As Gauri Mahulikar (2018) explains, at the highest level of *rasa*, "the object ceases to exist, and the self becomes one with the ultimate bliss called *ānanda*. First, the object is relished, and later, the enjoyer himself becomes relish" (73). This means that the spectator, initially engaged with the aesthetic object, eventually dissolves into the very essence of bliss, where subject-object distinction no longer holds.

According to Abhinavagupta, *rasa* consists of repose (*viśrānti*), devoid of impediment and, thus, all *rasas* have the form of bliss, emphasising that while ordinary emotions may be unsettling, their transformation into *rasa* enables a state of purified joy.⁹ Gnoli argues that this repose is "nothing but a state of independence, of liberty from any extraneous solicitation and hence

of rest, of 'lysis' in our own Self" (XLI). The pleasure of aesthetic repose is a "tasting" (*āsvādāna*) of the self, where consciousness becomes aware of its own fullness and absolute freedom (Gnoli XLIV). This moment of repose, also called *ekaghanatā* (a compact mass of light), represents the inherent fullness of the self, a state where desires vanish, leaving only pure awareness of bliss, although it is gustatory. Thus, Abhinavagupta's metaphysical position of the Self provides strong support to his dramaturgy (i) toward the idea of generalisation (*sādhāraṇīkaraṇa*), and (ii) in providing an impersonal medium, that is, the Universalised Subject for the Rasa-relishing. Drawing on Abhinavagupta's theory of aesthetics backed by his metaphysical position, in what follows, we argue that Nietzsche's aesthetics of tragic drama can be analysed *vis-a-vis* his distinct paradigm of the metaphysics of Will, which also provides an impersonal mode of subjectivity in the idea of Dionysiac consciousness.

Aesthetic Experience in Tragedy

Nietzsche's analysis of Greek *Attic* tragedy is rooted in the dynamic interplay of the Apollonian and Dionysian drives (*Triebe*) that "mostly [exist] in open conflict, stimulating and provoking (*reizen*) one another" (*BT* § 1). For Nietzsche, tragedy is a supreme art, a great stimulant of life. With the mutuality of the two opposite art forces, tragedy is an aesthetic phenomenon that presents the primal truth of the illusoriness of our separate individualities in a pleasurable way. The tragedy performs two tasks of revealing the universal suffering through the tragic myth, and also providing joy in suffering. This dual-function is the Dionysiac effect, although the Apolline art provides clarity to the primal truth. Nietzsche has argued that tragedy "arose from the tragic chorus and was originally chorus" (*BT* § 7). Chorus, essentially, is Dionysian music, the dithyrambs sung in the praise of God Dionysian.¹⁰ It symbolises a merger with the primordial unity in the ecstasy of self-dissolution in collective music-making and is the highest realisation that our separate individualities are ultimately illusory. The Greek tragedy as a story of suffering is thus born out of the Dionysiac to which the Apollonian character and stage action provides clarity. Each tragic myth narrates universal suffering in the inevitable downfall of the hero. The tragedy in the "breakdown of the *principium individuationis*"¹¹ (understood as our own individuality in the Apollonian creation as beautiful appearances) offers a glimpse into the essence of the Dionysiac (*BT* § 1). But, at the same time, it "expresses the omnipotent Will behind the *principium individuationis*, as it were, life going on eternally beyond all appearance and despite all destruction" (*BT* § 16). Tragedy, thus, elicits pleasure, a "metaphysical solace", i.e., despite all suffering and "all changing appearances, life is indestructibly mighty and pleasurable" (*BT* § 7). This aesthetic phenomenon of pleurability in the destruction of a hero is predicated upon Schopenhauer's idea of the reality of the 'will to live'.

In *BT*, Nietzsche alludes to Schopenhauer, particularly his metaphysics of the Will of which the whole world is a representation. Schopenhauer describes the Will as the fundamental force of existence, characterised by insatiable striving that leads to suffering. "All willing springs from lack, from deficiency, and thus from suffering" (Schopenhauer *WWR I* 38). It has been argued that the notions of the Dionysian and Apollonian symbolise Schopenhauer's ideas of will and its representation, respectively. Julian Young (1992) argues that the Apollonian reflects Schopenhauer's "world as representation", maintaining the illusory, phenomenal nature of reality through the principle of individuation, while the Dionysian transcends this, revealing the "primordial unity" of existence, akin to Schopenhauer's "universal Will" (33-34). While for Schopenhauer, music, which is a direct copy of the will, can provide a temporary respite from the throb of will, Nietzsche considers music, the aesthetic counterpart of the non-aesthetic Will, as a medium to reach the primordial will, for it is that identification which elicits joy in oneness with 'one living being' (*BT* § 17). He argues, "For brief moments, we are truly the primordial being itself, and we feel its unbounded greed and lust for being; the struggle, the agony, the

destruction of appearances, all this now seems to us to be necessary, given the uncountable excess of forms of existence thrusting and pushing themselves into life, given the exuberant fertility of the world-Will" (*BT* § 17). Raymond Geuss (1999) observes that while the dissolution of identity is feared, it also provides "the highest and most intense kind of pleasure... (which) results from the fact that in losing our individuality, we are... returning to our original state, a state which is metaphysically speaking what we always really were" (XVIII). Nonetheless, as this truth is repulsive, the Apollonian semblance that it is a myth protects us from life-negating mood. As Aaron Ridley (2007) explains, "Borne neat, this energy would destroy us. But (just) touching base with it refreshes our appetite for life and returns us reinvigorated to the world of Apollo" (15).

The Dionysiac effect of a merger with the primordial unity, we contend essentially, is the generalisation of the aesthetic situation that facilitates aesthetic delight. This Dionysiac phenomenon functions in two ways: (i) the generalisation of suffering and aesthetic emotions and (ii) the deindividuation of spectators into a collective consciousness, identifying their unity with the primordial unity. Nietzsche considers that the chorus, the very nerve of theatrical performance, as arousing fear and pity (not in the Aristotelian sense of purgation) provides a vision to the Dionysian abyss, a continuous cycle of destruction and renewal. Nietzsche has argued that each tragic hero on the stage is the suffering god Dionysus. The downfall of the tragic hero represents the dissolution of individuality. The notion of Dionysus as an ambivalent, frenzied, wandering god who was torn apart by the Titans and reborn is an epitome of suffering. Tragedy, thus, generalises suffering and, with it, the emotions of pity and fear, through the impersonalised medium of Dionysian suffering. The primal pain and contradiction are what binds the whole world; joy in fulfilled desires and pain in unfulfilled desires. As a direct access to the abyss of Will, Dionysian music also generalises aesthetic consciousness in the other direction of aesthetic creativity. Nietzsche does not agree with the Schopenhauerian categories of subjective and objective arts. Taking the case of lyric poetry, a Dionysian art and a precursor to tragedy, he emphasises that it is not subjective in nature despite the excessive use of "I" by the poet. His point is that a lyric poet is immersed in the Dionysiac consciousness prior to the display of a chromatic scale of his passions and emotions in his poetry. The Dionysiac consciousness, mirroring the inner stirrings of the Will, rather finds symbolic interpretation through the Apollonian contemplation by way of poetic creativity. In fact, the lyric poet "needs all the stirrings of passion" and, driven by the Apollonian impulse, perceives all of nature as "nothing but that which eternally wills, desires, longs" (*BT* § 5). Likewise, the chorus in the tragedy arouses emotions by offering a "truer, more real, more complete image of existence" (*BT* § 8).

By essence, the Dionysian music is ecstatic and transformative. In the tragic drama, the Dionysian chorus also functions in de-individuating the audience in collective oneness. The loud music of the choric sections decontextualises the audience from their empirical, practical lives and stimulates their emotions to the artistic world of events on the stage. In the tragic chorus, Nietzsche sees the primal dramatic phenomenon, "seeing oneself transformed and acting as though one had truly entered another body, another character" (*BT* § 8). As a matter of fact, enchantment is important to dramatic art. Nietzsche argues, "Enchantment is the precondition of all dramatic art" (*BT* § 8). As tragedy exerts enchantment, this epidemic Dionysiac spell, geared to self-forgetfulness, results in a momentary becoming one with the primordial unity. This aesthetic phenomenon is transformative and dramatic in the sense that one becomes a part of the larger reality. The audience decontextualised is transformed into the aesthetic world of drama, that is, experiencing a merger with the primordial unity that elicits pleasure in the metaphysical solace. As Christopher Janaway (2014) explains, "The Dionysian effect of tragedy is its alleged ability to dissolve the sense of individuality and merge the participant or spectator into a "primal oneness" or "primal being" (*das Ur-Eine* or *Ursein*)" (45). However, despite fear

and pity in the tragic annihilation of individuality, the tragedy elicits joy in that “we are happily alive, not as individuals, but as the *one* living being [or reality], with whose procreative lust we have become one” (*BT* § 16). In generalising suffering and aesthetic emotions as well as spectators’ consciousness, tragedy transforms the painful reality into an aesthetic delight. The Dionysiac consciousness, which leads one to immerse in the primordial unity, is nothing but an aesthetically mediated consciousness, one that provides an impersonal medium to experience pleasure in tragedy.

We have analysed how both *nāṭya* and tragedy characterise aesthetic experiences as pleasurable, an experience of universal reality, that is, relishing one’s own consciousness and becoming one with the primordial unity, respectively. We have argued that the metaphysical positions of Abhinavagupta and Nietzsche, namely, the Universal Self and the world-Will, respectively, provide bases to the twofold function of generalisation, making *nāṭya* and tragedy a universalised experience. Situating the two dramatic theories in their metaphysical conceptions is not only insightful in understanding the nature of aesthetic experience, it is also insightful in dealing with the question about the subjectivity of this experience. The aesthetic experience of the two dramatic arts is transformative not only in decontextualising the aesthetes from their particularities but also in making it a new engagement with oneself. Thus, the legitimate question here is *what it is like* for an aesthetic experience to have its impact on the nature of self? The self in such transcendental experiences of dramatic arts transforms from the subjectivity encumbered in the personal to a de-centred space of impersonality. We conceptualise the idea of the aesthetic self of the transformed experiences in the impersonal mode of consciousness.

Impersonalised Subjectivity and Aesthetic Self

The discussion on the aesthetic experience in *nāṭya* and tragedy reveals that both dramatic arts emphasise the transformative nature of the aesthetic experience. The aesthetic experience, characterised by universalised consciousness, is impactful as one no longer remains the same self. There is a discontinuity from the self, encumbered in the personal, to what it is to experience from a universal plane, i.e., relishing the self’s blissfulness in *nāṭya* and a metaphysical joy of being one with the primordial unity in tragedy. What brings Abhinavagupta and Nietzsche on the same platform, despite their differences, is that both perceive the aesthetic experience as pleasurable although the locus of pleasure is understood by them differently. For Abhinavagupta, aesthetic experience is a delight (*ānanda*) as the very nature of the Self is bliss, and one experiences basic emotions rising and subdued within one’s consciousness. The *ekaghanatā* (compact mass) of consciousness, devoid of any obstacles, is blissful. The nature of joy in tragedy, despite the destruction of a hero, is pleasurable in being part of ‘*one* living reality’.

Another significant common feature that we find both in Abhinavagupta and Nietzsche is that they emphasise aesthetic experience as subjective. Abhinavagupta has argued that the *rasa* is a gustatory experience fundamentally distinct from the ordinary cognition of objective things. It is also not the permanent mental state residing in one’s consciousness. Rather, it is relishing them awakened due to the dramatic presentation. Gnoli translates one of the passages of *Abh.*, in which *rasa* is described as:

... just that reality (*artha*) by which the determinants, the consequents, and the transitory feelings, after having reached a perfect combination (*samyag yoga*), relation (*sambandha*), [and] conspiration (*aikāgrya*)... make the matter of a gustation consisting of a form of consciousness free of obstacle and different from the ordinary ones. This *Rasa* differs from the permanent feelings, consists solely in this state of gustation and is not an objective thing (*siddhasvabhāva*), lasts exactly as long as the gustation, and does not lie on any time separate from it. (78)

The gustatory nature of aesthetic experience is a mark of it being an experience by a subject even though the subject is on the universalised plane. In other words, it is not an owner-less

experience. Hence, the question of inquiring about the nature of the subjectivity of this experience becomes a legitimate one. The gustation as a perception in one's consciousness, devoid of all externalities, is a clear indicator that subjectivity here is no longer geared in the personal. It rather marks a freedom from the personal, empirical mode of consciousness. The aesthetic context of tragedy, with the primacy of the Dionysiac immersiveness that decontextualises the spectators from their particularities, makes the tragic pleasure an experience, although a momentary one. The Dionysiac ecstasy of fusion with the primordial unity is an exposure to tragic truth and, yet, an aesthetic delight in life's indestructibility. What is central to both *nāṭya* and tragedy is that there is a discontinuity of the self engaged in the personal to have an aesthetic pleasure. As the nature of aesthetic pleasure pertains to the experience of rest in one's own consciousness or being part of a living reality, self-dissolution becomes axiomatic to such a universalised experience. Immersiveness in universalised experience, nonetheless, has an intense reflexivity of experiencing oneself transformed. This transformative experience requires a new self, an aesthetic self, the *experiencer* of the aesthetic rapture. The aesthetic self, which both *nāṭya* and tragedy account for, draws its dynamism from a universalised or impersonalised plane.

Abhinavagupta's exposition of the *rasa* is an experience where the subject-object duality vanishes in the Universalised Subject. In other words, the subjectivity becomes de-personalised. We can say that the Universalised Subject is an impersonalised mode of subjectivity to experience repose in the Self. In Nietzsche's analysis of tragedy, we find that the Dionysiac consciousness, as it mirrors the non-aesthetic will, is an impersonalised mode of enjoying the aesthetic spectacle of oneness with the primordial unity. The transformed self, the aesthetic self, thus, draws its subjectivity from the impersonal modes of consciousness that the two dramatic arts provide. An important point about the universalised experience of the two dramatic arts is that there is a reflexive awareness of the transformative moments. That is to say, the subjectivity of the aesthetic pleasure in immersiveness in a universalised experience has a reflective consciousness. This is clearly elucidated by Abhinavagupta, where the repose in one's own Self is the *ānanda* or *vimarśa* aspect of consciousness with the subdued affections (which also make it distinct from the spiritual experience of a perfect *yogin*), distinctly a reflective awareness of relishing the fullness of consciousness. Although the Nietzschean paradigm is entirely different from that of Abhinavagupta, we can also appreciate this point about the reflexivity of 'tragic pleasure'. What is undeniable is that the 'tragic pleasure' is an experience of the subject, the truly aesthetic spectator, experiencing momentarily the illusoriness of one's own individuality in becoming part of a primordial unity. The very reason that it is momentary is because it is repulsive, life-negating and, yet, the spectator desires to take delight in it confirms the subjectivity of the aesthetic spectacle.

The conceptualisation of the transformative nature of the two dramatic arts is textured in the unique nature of aesthetic experience that is characterised by universalised consciousness. What is important here is that aesthetic pleasure is derived in a sort of "oneness" with the universal reality. For such an experience, there has to be freedom from the first-personal salience, that is, subjectivity centred in personal concerns, as well as freedom from the aesthetic emotion-essences. It has been argued that aesthetic creativity, as well as receptivity of art-emotions, takes place from an impersonal plane. In his complex phenomenology of aesthetic emotions, K. C. Bhattacharyya, one of the finest contemporary Indian philosophers, in his essay, "The Concept of Rasa" (2011), has spoken about the semi-mythological idea of the 'Heart Universal', an impersonal, *some one* person or *any one* person from whose centre one experiences aesthetic emotions. He has argued that the subject of aesthetic emotions is a contemplative subject, a 'felt-person-in-general', distanced both from the first-order feelings toward an object and a sympathetic response toward the object with which a person is directly involved. Thus, he argues that "the character in the drama is not imagined by me as an actual person: I imagine

someone imagining the character as an actual person, and I sympathise with this imaginary ‘someone’ as the second person” (Bhattacharya 199). In his article, “Impersonal Subjectivity of Aesthetic Emotion”, Bijoy H. Boruah (2016) builds on the same framework and argues for a ‘secondary self’, an aesthetic self, as the *experiencer* of the fictional objects. For him, freedom from the first-personal salience is salient to the cultivation of a disinterested attitude to emotionally responding to the fictional character. The discontinuity of the self, which is usually the centre of consciousness engaged in personal concerns, is what he calls the “radical crossing of ontic boundary”, giving birth to a new self, the aesthetic self that draws its subjective dynamism of fresh engagement with the fictional object from an impersonal mode of subjectivity (136). The aesthetic self, for him, is the subject of a new unity between the subject and the object in the aesthetic appreciation of a fictional world. And as he asserts, “It is only as an unindividuated, de-centred self, an impersonal *someone*, that I can be the subject of an aesthetic experience” (136). What is common in Bhattacharya’s notion of the ‘imaginary second person’ and Boruah’s idea of the ‘secondary self’ or aesthetic self is the centrality of the question of aesthetic appreciativeness of artistic emotions. The dramatic contexts of *nāṭya* and tragedy, characterising aesthetic experience as a universalised consciousness, however, tend to overcome the engagement with the aesthetic object. In Abhinavagupta’s case, the subject-object duality is overcome in the dramatic experience, and there is an intense introversion of the subject, the impersonalised, Universalised Subject, to experience a repose in one’s own Self. Similarly, tragedy elicits pleasure in the experience of being part of *one* living reality. The two dramatic arts rather generalise the aesthetic emotions as well as the aesthetes in the collective spectators’ unity to the extent of providing impersonalised modes of consciousness where the aesthetic self is the bearer of a reflexive, transformative self-experience.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the nature of aesthetic experience in *nāṭya* and tragedy as expounded by Abhinavagupta and Nietzsche, respectively. Analysing their aesthetics *vis-a-vis* their metaphysical positions has shed important light on their dramaturgies and further explicated the ground to conceptualise the idea of subjectivity of the aesthetic experience. The investigation of this question becomes important; for the aesthetic experience of *nāṭya* and tragedy are universalised experiences of aesthetic pleasure in immersiveness in the universal nature of reality. Although the two thinkers present contrasting world-views, a blissful experience in repose in Abhinavagupta, and the experience of primordial reality that is suffused with the fear of the loss of individuality in Nietzsche, it is the pleasurable dimension of the universalised experience in the two dramatic art forms, that has provided us with the context of exploring the notion of subjectivity. We have argued that the metaphysical themes of the Universal Self and world-Will in Abhinavagupta and Nietzsche, respectively, not only provide support to the idea of generalisation in the two dramatic arts but they also provide the impersonal modes of subjectivity. The Universalised Subject and Dionysiac consciousness (an aesthetic counterpart of the non-aesthetic Will) in the two dramatic arts, respectively, serve as the impersonal mediums of consciousness for the aesthetic self to be the bearer of the transformative moments of experiencing a different plane of reality.

Notes

- ¹ *Ato vyākhyātṛ-ṇaṭa-sāmājikābhīprāyeṇa tasyaiva prādhānyam...* | (*Abh. Vol. I 291*)
- ² *Siddhasya kasyacit prameyabhūtasya rasasyābhāvāt* | *Kim tasy etaddhi vibhāvādāya iti* | *Alaukika evāyaṃ carvaṇopayogī vibhāvādīvyavahārah* | *Kvānyatretthaṃ dṛṣṭam iti ced bhūṣaṇam etad asmākam alaukikatva-siddhau* | (*Abh. Vol. I 299*)
- ³ Abhinavagupta identifies seven obstacles in aesthetic experience: (1) *Pratipattāvayogyatā sambhāvanā virahonāma*, the lack of verisimilitude. A consent of heart is possible if the characters are of extra-ordinary nature; (2) *Svaḡataparagatatvaniyamena deśakālaviśeṣāvesaḡ*, which involves experiencing the emotions in a personal manner negating the aesthetic pleasure; (3) *Nijasukhādivivaśībhāvah*, where the spectator is too engrossed in oneself; (4) *Pratītyupāyavākalyam* is the absence of proper means of perception due to an actor's lack of skills or efforts; (5) *Sphuṭatvābhāvah*, the absence of clarity in perception. In poetry, drama, and dance, unambiguous words and distinct *abhinaya* are essential to elicit the desired reaction from spectators; (6) *Apradhānatā*, referring to the lack of a predominant factor, where minor elements overshadow main characters or complex ideas; and (7) *Sarśāyayogaśca*, the presence of doubt in the recognition of *sthāyībhāva* and corresponding *rasa*. (See Mishra 119-131 for detailed accounts).
- ⁴ *Atra tu svātmaikatattvaniyamāsambhāvāt na viśayāveśavaivaśyaṃ svānupra-veśātparagatatvaniyamābhāvāt na tāśtathyāspḡuṭatve, tad vibhāvādisādhāraṇyavaśasamprabuddhoccitanijaratnīvanāveśavaśācca na vighnāntarādīnām sambhava ityevocām bahuśaḡ* | (*Abh. Vol. I 299*)
- ⁵ Nāyaka draws on Sāmkhya's three *guṇas*—*sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*—to explain how human experiences are shaped by their interactions. In ordinary life, these *guṇas* manifest in different degrees, with often one prevailing over the other, leading to *bhoga*, or experiences of pleasure, pain, and insentience. Nāyaka claims that the aesthetic experience of *nātya* is characterized by *sattva*, infused with bliss (*ānanda*) and akin to the tasting (*āsvāda*) of the supreme *Brahman*. However, Abhinavagupta challenges this view because, in both *Śaiva* and *Vedānta* traditions, *sattva*—along with the other *guṇas*—is regarded as a product of *māyā*. For Abhinavagupta, however, the aesthetic experience is transcendental. It does not belong to the field of *māyā* and is free from all *guṇas*.
- ⁶ Abhinavagupta's *kathartic* level is not be conflated with the Aristotelian *catharsis* in tragedy which implies the purgation of emotions such as pity and fear. In *nātya*, *katharsis* is not cleansing but a transformation of emotions into universalised forms through generalisation (*sādhāraṇīkaraṇa*), leading to aesthetic repose. Nietzsche also differs from the Aristotelian notion of *catharsis* claiming that such notion reduces tragedy to mere psychological or moral responses, thus overlooking its aesthetic significance. By describing *catharsis* as a “pathological discharge”, Nietzsche rejects the idea that the purpose of tragedy is to heal or provide moral lessons (*BT* §22).
- ⁷ Abhinavagupta posits that Śaivism prescribes five states of experience: wakefulness (*Jāgrat*), dream (*Svapna*), sound sleep (*Suśupti*), transcendental (*Turīya*), and pure consciousness (*Turīyātīta*) (*TĀ Vol VI 10/228b-229a*). The last stage, i.e., *Turīyātīta* signifies a complete transcendence of objectivity. This state is, however, further categorized into two: (i) *Vyatireka-Turīyātīta*, where objectivity remains subtly in the subconscious, and (ii) *Avyatireka-Turīyātīta*, where objectivity is completely absent. The latter represents the state of transcendence, marking a state from where there is no descent to lower states (*Pandey 141-142*).
- ⁸ *Asmānmate samvedanam evānandaghanam āsvādyate* | (*Abh Vol. I 304*)
- ⁹ *Hṛdayaviśrāntir antarāyaśūnyaviśrāntīśarīratvāt* | ... *Ityanandarūpatī sarvarasānām* | (*Abh Vol. I 297*)
- ¹⁰ Throughout Nietzsche's works, from *BT* to his later writings, the Dionysian remains a central theme in his philosophy, often surpassing the significance of the Apollonian. This is notably highlighted in *Twilight of the Idols (TI)*, where he proclaims himself “the final disciple of the philosopher Dionysus” (Nietzsche *TI 91*), reinforcing the Dionysian as central to his philosophy. In *Ecce Homo (EH)*, he reiterates his identity as “a disciple of the philosopher Dionysus” (Nietzsche *EH 3*), further establishing the Dionysian as a fundamental principle in his thought.
- ¹¹ This Schopenhauerian idea of *principium individuationis*, the individuation or separation of things to which we apply the principle of sufficient reason ordinarily is an illusion. The reality of ‘Will’, which we know in our own willing, non-empirically, is beyond individuation and has a primordial unity.

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