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A note on the some key terms of Sanskrit literary Criticism

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Abstract

We often Sanskrit classics mentioned with respect, but our interest in them, if we are to be honest, is decidedly tepid. Sanskrit critical theories are usually taken for granted or ignored altogether. Though eminent scholars have written histories of Sanskrit Poetics, very few have undertaken the task of demonstrating the practical application of these theories to living literatures. The demonstration, however desirable, is rendered difficult because scholars themselves do not seem to be unanimous on the precise meaning of even the key words in Sanskrit literary theory. It is proposed to discuss the significance of a few such terms in this short article.

Keywords: Criticism, Sanskrit, Literary, अलंकारः, रसः, रीति, गुणः

Introduction

Poetry, says Bhamaha, is शब्द and अर्थ fused together. The English equivalents usually provided are “word” and “meaning” and matter is left at that. None is any the wiser for this so-called definition of poetry. Every cinema poster and every grocer’s bill may be poetry at that rate. But the ancient writers themselves could not have been vague; for from the earliest critic, Bharata, down to the latest critic of today these terms were used and understood precisely. All the elements of the poetic art directed to please the ear came under शब्द while अर्थ embraced what we call the poetic theme or subject. The fusion of the two was the poetic process. This was indeed the foundation on which the theorists began to rear the structures of their deeper analyses.

The first and foremost critical concept in Sanskrit literary theory in अलंकारः. Literally it means ornament, and is usually translated as “figure of speech” in English. The critic of today at once equates it with the eternal truism about the extraneous nature of all embellishment and jumps to the conclusion that the ancient theorists were engrossed in cataloguing or indexing a number of needless tropes. But, as a matter of fact, ancient like Bhamaha were trying to prove that beauty in poetry is distinct from beauty in other arts, and they used the word अलंकारः in its widest aesthetic application to include imagery as well as emotion (रसादि). They were aware that, more often than not, imagery was itself the language of poetic emotion, though they did not rule out the possibility that emotion might sometimes succeed without imagery. In other words, imagery (अलंकारः) was not, in the opinion of Bhamaha and Dandin, a superimposed embellishment of poetry, but its integral constituent (आत्मान्).

They never pursued the trivial metaphor of body and soul to explain शब्दार्थयोः and अलंकारः, a metaphor which became a convenient device in the hands of later writers to bring the doctrine of अलंकारः into cheap disrepute. Rightly understood, the doctrine of अलंकारः in its dual aspect- one relating to sound impressions and the other to poetic images- will be seen to touch the very heart of the matter. It emphasizes how the indirect use of language (गमकत्व) or circuitous speech (वक्रोक्ति) is of the very essence of the poetic process. It also keeps the door open for a few exceptions which may be pure poetry by sheer sweep of personal or universalized emotion

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(रसवाद, प्रेयस्, ऊर्जस्विन्, समाहित and भाविक, - अलंकारः). Vamana shifted the emphasis from अलंकार to what he called रीति (translated usually as “style”) by narrowing down the significance of the word अलंकार. He wanted the metaphor of the body and soul, sagely avoided by Bhamaha, to work. It could not; he therefore has to posit that the intrinsic beauty of poetic शब्द and अर्थ (a beauty designated as अलंकार by Bhamaha) was analyzable into गुणाः (usually translated as “qualities”; “constitute excellences” is better) which certainly related not to the exterior body but to the interior personality as a whole. For the vindication of the metaphor a poetic soul was still needed, and Vamana announced with triumph the age-old category of conventional styles under a new name रीति.

रीति being itself an abstraction, Vamana had to exercise all his skill to distinguish, on the one hand, ten गुणाः of शब्द to include such features of craftsmanship as verbal felicity, dignity, compactness, and gradual ascent or descent in syllabic quality and quantity; and, on the other, ten गुणा of अर्थ to cover diverse elements of poetic art like compactness of idea, looseness, Clarity, wittiness, evenness, of thought, the creative spark, indirect manner, impressiveness and emotional fervor. The गुणाः too being abstractions, Vamana’s doctrine could hardly win any following. To the extent that he inflated his गुणाः-Bhamaha recognized only three-Vamana had to depreciate the अलंकारः. While this theory fitted into the metaphor of body and soul very conveniently, it switched off criticism from imagery to a hundred elusive details. The essential and the insignificant were all heaped together in a jumble. The statement that all these twenty गुणाः are present in the best style. The वैदर्भि, while a few alone are instanced in the other two, is a poor solution indeed of the basic problem. It is curious that even the question of the revelation of poetic personality is well-nigh absent in the doctrine of styles.

The pursuit of the metaphor was continued, and it was given to Anandavardhana to clear the jungle and point to the essentials of poetry from all sides. He placed his finger on the indirect element in all great poetry- a fact already hinted at by Bhamaha-analyzed it most minutely and precisely for the first time and demonstrated that it was the soul of poetry. Though he said “soul”, he did not, like Vamana, equate it with the soul of man, but compared it with the irresistible charm of lovely women. And in this indirect of suggested wealth of poetry he included not only poetic emotion but also imagery and ideas (वस्तु). He expounded this first element of poetry under the name ध्वनि. While emotions and feelings could not be appealingly communication in any way other than the indirect, the other two elements, अलंकार and वस्तु, could be conveyed directly also. But, the moment the suggestive element appeared in a piece, it would be poetry- of the first order if pre-dominantly beautiful or of the second order if subordinate in beauty to the directly communicated meaning (गुणीभूतव्यङ्ग्य). If the indirect element were absent altogether or almost absent, it would cease to be poetry and be something like science or, if full of figures, something like a painting (चित्र). We should not forget here that images indirectly conveyed are of the first class of poetry, and even direct images having the undertone of suggestion are of the second class mentioned.

Anandavardhana hastens to add that both classes of poetry are equally charming in point of beauty. It is only when imagery has no poetic purpose to serve that it fails. It would be a mistake to think that Anandavardhana under rated the value of अलंकार. In fact he explained its function more searchingly than even its first profounder, Bhamaha. He gave a decent burial to the medley of Vamana’s गुणः and retained only the original three of Bhamaha (sweetness, lucidity and brilliance). And even these three were associated by him, not with style primarily, but with poetic emotion (रसः). The poetic personality received due attention from him for the first time. Nor was रसः over-emphasized, though in theory it was raised to the highest status of ध्वनि, because it’s almost universal association with अलंकारः was duly acknowledged. This is the highest point reached by Sanskrit literary criticism.

Then the word रसः was interpreted by Abhinavagupta as a synonym for aesthetic experience, and the claims of रसः so understood shoved away the claims of poetic imagery. Poetic imagery came to be counted as less intrinsic to poetry than रसः. If Mammata tried to hold the balance even once again, Visvanatha pulled in the opposite direction. To the latest writers the reconciliation between the two became a dilemma. Among the words in Sanskrit poetics whose meaning changes from writer to writer, अलंकारः and रसः are the most elusive and yet the most important. In the famous definition of Bharata, रसः is a thought-feeling synthesis instanced primarily in the representation or acting (नाट्यं). By the combined effect of the characters in excitant natural setting (विभाव), their emotional gestures (अनुभाव) and fleeting moods (व्यभिचारिभाव), रसः is said to be dominant emotions (स्थायिभाव) as causes, effects and accessories. Now the fundamental question is about the locus of these भावाः which are transformed into रसः. Since all these are bodied forth only in the imagination of the creative artist in the first instance, it seems pretty certain that the locus meant by Bharata was the artist’s mind. That is why Valmiki, Kalidasa and Anandavardhana could repeat with one voice that the poet’s sorrow (शोक) transfigured itself into poetry (श्लोक). The process whereby the poet’s भाव is communicated to readers is perforce ध्वनि or suggestion, because a direct statement of an emotional state ceases to be emotive to the hearer. Such is the essence of Anandavardhana’s theory, which has been stretched to needless lengths amid academic hair-splitting by Abhinavagupta. To the latter, both the भाव and the रस are associated only with the mind of the critic because he alone has aesthetic experience (आस्वाद).

Conclusion: For the fact that the same key terms have been used in different senses by different writers, leading to a good deal of confusion, the findings of Sanskrit writers may be of great moment even to literary criticism today. This article is a modest attempt towards clearing up some of the outstanding misunderstandings.

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