

A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE CONCEPT OF “MOVEMENT”- *NATYA SASTRA* AND CUBISM

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Abstract:

The focus of this paper shall be movements (as in body movements, gestures and postures) and the associated discourses as stated in the Natyasastra. I shall be using the principles and techniques of the Modern movement of Cubism to critically analyze whatever would be said about Natyasastra.

Key Words: *Movement, Cubism, gestures, postures, modern.*

The home of Indian tradition is adorned by the beautiful spouse, *Natyasastra*, authored by Bharat Muni, the Sage. Expanding over six thousand verses, it is also considered to be the oldest work on the theory and practice of Indian performances and its theatrical aspects, architecture, grammar, language, phonetics, painting and also disciplines like mythology, philosophy and geography.

If I am to provide a simple description, *Natyasastra* is an all-inclusive treatise on dance, drama and music. Aestheticism is no stranger to the Indian tradition, and we owe a lot in this respect to the great philosophers and scholars of our past, especially Bharat Muni, because it was his intellect that laid the cornerstones for understanding the art forms in a much different manner, such that the body, the mind and the sentiments (or emotions) began to be considered as elements on the same platter, each requiring the others to understand the wholeness of the art.

What I found to be intriguing about *Natyasastra* is the way it looks at movements (as in the movement of the body, the gestures of limbs and body postures). Movement, in this respect is grace coded within itself- Bharat Muni saw the bodily movements in art not as mere actions, but he could perceive it as a form of language.

Now I would like to interrupt with a question. What do we mean by language? Apart from a medium of communication, language is also an art of combining words, logically connecting phrases and sentences with the thread of grammar, and conveying meaning at two levels- the surface level and the deeper level. Sometimes a word or a sentence may mean one thing, but on analyzing it deeper, we may find other meanings as well. And if we are to place that sentence in a particular context, then the meaning might turn out to be entirely different.

Coming back to the topic of our discussion, the same applies to the body movements also. A particular posture might mean something, or even nothing to a common man, but it provides an ocean of meanings to an artist. And if the artist places it in a context, one single posture might convey a whole realm of meanings, perhaps an entirely different meaning to him.

The word “Natyā” literally means the gesticulations of an actor or a dancer on stage. It is not merely a display of movements, but a combination of dance, song and musical instruments- an elegant clasp of all the theatrical functions. “Natyā” comes with emotional implications as it is hugely concerned with how the thoughts are sentimentalized into various facial expressions and the bodily movements and postures. It comprises of three stages. Beginning with the composition of a dramatic piece, it moves on to the production of the work on stage by the artists, which is finally produced in the visual form in front of the audience, which is the final stage of “Natyā”.

Certain characteristics of the Sanskrit theatre can be found in “natya” because the “pathya” or the

text is taken from the Rig Veda, the "gita" or the songs are taken from the Sama Veda, the "abhinaya" or, the techniques of conveying the meanings of the poem or the drama to the audience through acting is taken from the Yajur Veda and the "rasa" or the aesthetic experience is taken from the Atharva Veda.

As stated before, the focus of my discussion shall be on the discourses regarding gestures and movements as said in *Natyasastra*, and this shall be then critically analyzed using the modernist movement of Cubism. *Natyasastra* being a very wide and elaborate discourse, it is difficult to mention all its aspects and areas of focus. Therefore, I take the liberty to narrow down one aspect from the whole and then use it for my purpose, so I shall be mentioning only those aspects from *Natyasastra* that are relevant for my analyses.

"Anudarsana" is a term I would like to explain at this point. The performance of an actor can reach the culmination point only if the audience reciprocates the same feeling and understanding. The ingenuity of the dramatist and the exertions of the actor should enable the audience to relate themselves to the world that is portrayed on the stage, the world that actually belongs to a different time and space.

According to Bharat Muni, *Natya* comprised of five elements, but this was later developed into eleven by his student Kohala. These elements are Rasa, Bhava, Abhinaya, Dharmi, Vritti, Pravrtti, which constitute the interior of the "Natya", and Siddhi, Svaya, Atodya, Gana and Ranga which are external. I shall now give a brief account of how these elements work together when a play has to be staged. It is interesting to note how the journey of "Natya" starts from Rasa and ends in Rasa as well. The three stages of "Natya" has been explained already, wherein I stated that it begins with the creativity of the poet, who creates the play from Rasa. The consuming nature of rasa leads the poet to the expression of Bhavas and then it projects the Dharmi, Vritti and Pravritti of the play, according to which the actor on the stage performs the Abhinaya, accompanied by music and orchestra. This ultimately leads to the production of Rasas through the expression of the bhavas. Thus, it can be interestingly inferred that "Natya" creates a cyclic path for Rasa.

Knowledge was born out of the conception between the human mind and the world outside. Knowledge led to the creation of the arts and the sciences. Philosophies and the schools of wisdom were born out of man's imagination, which makes him the most rational of all beings on earth. *Darsanasastra*, or the science derived from the process of observation is the product of *Bahir Drishti* (the view of the outside world) and *Antar Drishti* (the mental observation of things seen by the eyes).

The exact point of origin of the various forms of dances in India is still obscure. However, there is a common belief that the first "nada" (sound), or rather the first musical sound was that produced by the "damaru" (drum) of Lord Siva. It accrues mythological associations to the origin of these dance forms. But what is to be understood from this is that art was venerated always, such that it was even bestows association with the Divine.

There has always been the proclivity for associating dance with beauty and grace. When I proceed further, I shall elaborate on how and why beauty, grace and charm have come to occupy primal positions in our aesthetic traditions. The concept of the "Apsaras" or the dancing nymphs who occupy the court of Indra is a familiar concept to those who have knowledge regarding Indian Aestheticism. Bharat Muni describes the origin of "Apsaras" in *Natyasastra*, that "Kaiski" or the graceful movement or style could not be followed by the male artists completely. Therefore Lord (*Brahman*) created from his mind these "Apsaras" who were grace personified. It is fascinating to know that they were actually the creation of the human imagination. Art, especially dance, found its completion in beauty with the arrival of the female on the scene. Consequently, it can be said that movements were of two types, the male (the masculine, energetic moves) and the female (the womanly, coquettish moves). They complemented one another on stage to arrive at a blissful depiction of the art form. Thus, the "Tandava" (manly) and the "Lasya" (womanly) branch of fine arts were born.

Another aspect of the dance that I would like to discuss here is the "Rekha" or the lies in dancing

(This would also form an important argument for me when I would introduce Cubism into this discussion later). The visible lines or "rekhas" are a distinctive feature of the Indian form of dance. It does not mean that there are lines literally, but, for the sake of convenience it is considered so. Every art, for this purpose, is a combination or a mixture of lines. It is interesting to decode that even the alphabets of our language are just lines, curved this way or that, and assigned names for convenience such that it almost gives the feeling that they are just lines. The same applies in art as well as dance. The much familiar term is "Rekha Chitra" used by painters, how they used to represent the ideas or pictures in their minds into paintings on canvas using lines. Music too, in that sense is a combination of lines (notations). The various kinds of movements and postures of dancing, if drawn on a paper will again resemble sketches made of lines. Also, if we are to look at the body of a dancer during dance, it can be seen that both the hands would be outstretched to form a pose such that they would be parallel to the ground, while the body would be straight, erect. Thus, it almost forms a perpendicular structure, or rather a perpendicular set of line, which forms the skeleton of the dance form. As a result, it has to be inferred accordingly that lines form an Indian part of our aesthetic culture, especially dance.

I think it is appropriate to talk about "Mudra" and certain associated terms now. It is the movement of the fingers of the hands during dance, to explain in simple terms. It is also the hand gesture practiced during the time of worship. Bodily acting, which is the real medium of acting as well as communication in drama is divided into three types: *Sarira* (movement of the limbs, head, hands, chest, side, hip and feet), *Mukhaja* (movement of the face i.e. the eyebrows, nostrils, lips, cheek and chin) and *Cestakrta* (movement of the whole body, such as standing and sitting). With respect to the movement of the hands and feet alone, Bharat Muni identifies four types of movement: *Cari* (aerial movement), *Sthanaka* (stance), *Mandala* (circular movement), and *Gati* (walking). The bends of the body are called "bhangas", which is essential to produce rhythm in the dance. It can be found in *Natyasastra* the various movements of the body as well as parts of the body, its name, significance, meaning and connotations.

Any discussion on *Natyasastra* is incomplete without the Rasa theory. It was Bharat Muni who first spoke about the theory, but it was Abhinva Gupta who developed it into a systematic poetic principle. Rasa forms the intellect or the emotional side of the various body gestures that have been mentioned all along in this discussion. Rasa is the "niryasa", the essence of any concrete or abstract object. In very simple terms, Rasa means 'juice', 'flavour' or 'essence' of something; it simply means that which is kernel to an object without which it cannot be fully realized or understood. Rasa is the root for all creativity and artistic performances. The Rasa theory and the Dhvani theory are not contradictory perceptions. Dhvani is the technique of expression, whereas Rasa is the ultimate effect on the reader or the audience. For Anandavardhana, Dhvani is the soul of poetry.

The origin of the idea of Rasa can be traced to "bhava". Bhava is the concrete situation and condition for a prescribed time period and Rasa is the aesthetic experience of that happening. Bhava is an abstract idea like Rasa. It is quintessence of a specific situation combined with some psychological sense of aesthetic beauty. Rasa depends on Bhava, Bhava is derived from meaning. This meaning may be *Vachya* (verbal) or *Vyangya* (figurative). Figurative meaning is superior to the literal.

Rasas are nine in number, the last one being added later. They are Sringara rasa (erotic), Hasya rasa (comic), Karuna rasa (pathetic), Raudra rasa (furious), Vira rasa (heroic), Bhayanaka rasa (terrible), Bibatsa rasa (odious) and Adbhuta rasa (marvelous). The ninth rasa is Santha (peaceful), which was added later. Every Bhava possesses its respective Rasa. For example, let me choose the Sringara rasa. The corresponding Bhava is "Rati" which connotes pleasure, delight, joy, satisfaction and affection.

What makes the Indian mode of representation different from that of the West is that, in the Western mode the action is acted out on stage. Say, for example, the death of a person is acted out on the stage. But what can be seen in the Indian system is not action, but reaction. It shows how a person (the actor) reacts to a particular situation. The "Ranjana" (pleasure) and the "Sobha" (beauty) are infused in the Indian

tradition, along with the accompaniment of music and dance to make this act of reaction an experience of delight. The heart of the rasa system comprises of the elaborate performance (or rather the reaction) of the actor along with the surroundings as mentioned in the theatrical treatises through movement, facial expression and other gestures.

Natyasastra is all about art, as said before. But for the purpose of my assignment I need not elaborate on all the aspects of it. Rasa theory, its associated discourses and certain elements of the both were described so that the discussion would not seem scanty and baseless. The purpose of my assignment is to focus on how movement is depicted in *Natyasastra* (for which I have described some of them in detail), and the second part of my assignment shall be how it can be critically analyzed using certain characteristic features of some of the Cubist paintings.

The twentieth century avant-garde movement of Cubism revolutionized European painting and sculpturing. The resonance was also seen in architecture, literature and music. Pablo Picasso, Paul Cezanne and Georges Braque were the Brobdingnagian figures of the movement. What the Cubists primarily do is the breaking up of an object into fragment, which is then analyzed and reconfigured in an abstract form, as if all the face of the single object is made visible at a given time on a single plane. The plurality in viewpoints is emphasized by the intersection of the broken bits at random angles.

The natural forms are reduced, fragmented or broken into abstract, usually geometric structures rendered as a set of detached planes. Braque scorned the rigidity of forms and he showed a lot of enthusiasm to reduce the given object into geometric representations and cubes. Much of the Cubist works, be it painting or sculpture, is characterized by distortion and primitivism (influenced by the African masks). The given object is depicted as though all its faces from the various angles are depicted on a flattened surface. We also find that there is rampant use of "scaffolds" or grids, which are the thick black lines that are used by the artist to demarcate one fragment from the other. It can be said that Cubism is four dimensional, i.e. it attempts at representing time as well. Projecting an object as though seen from all sides, this art stands out among all other pictorial art representations in this respect.

The boundaries of the given object are pictured as though they merge with the background. Each plane of portrayal intermingles with the other planes such that it results in the creation of an ambiguous sense of space. Multiplicity as well as differentiation of the given object is blended in chorus with its comprehensive global milieu. Another important characteristic feature of Cubism is that it treats space as though it were a tangible object.

If the Indian aesthetic tradition of *Natyasastra* is an emotional, artistic and appealing response to works of art, Cubism is an intellectual, abstract, intangible response to the work of art. Cubism is not all about perception, but it is about perception as a practice which comprises of the recollection of the seen object and the experience of seeing something over time.

The Cubists' obsession with the void spaces is always a much discussed topic. The void is called "negative space" by certain art analysts. There are a few examples in this respect, such as *Woman Combing Her Hair* by Aleskander Archipenko (1915) which is a sculpture and another artist Julio Gonzalez has also worked on a cubist abstraction on the same subject (1933), but it is more abstract and incoherent, built up like a skeleton with random objects. It bears no resemblance to the typical concepts, or even the modernist concept of a woman. The sculpture has no face, but only a hole which is suggestive. The object becomes void than the subject itself in the second cubist representation.

On the surface level, it might seem almost impossible to find any connection between the movements as mentioned in *Natyasastra* and Cubism. I would like to clarify that my aim is not to find similarities between the both, but to use Cubist techniques and certain Cubist paintings to criticize the depiction of movements in the works of art.

Art is a perpetual attempt at trying to find stability in a world that is changing incessantly, i.e. art, be it painting or sculpture freezes a moment in time in order to create a work of art. Any piece of art is always

stillness encoded; a moment is captured in all its inertness and upheld as a static entity. This is the modernist perspective on art. Therefore, they ridicule the traditionalist design of freezing a moment. So what they began to do was to portray the art in all its kinetic fervor. They aimed at detaching from the fundamental concepts, and baptized newer forms of representation is art, of which one is Cubism.

To make it clearer, I would like to explain the Cubist painting by Marcel Duchamp, *The Nude Descending a Staircase, No.2*. The basic idea or the skeleton of the painting is to show the stepping down of a nude person along a staircase. But the painting surprised me because the nude (or the person) was all over the staircase. In fact, it was even difficult for me to discern that there was indeed a person in the painting. Any conventional painting which portrays someone descending a staircase would definitely show the person, the staircase and most importantly the person standing still, though on a step, or between two steps, as though the picture as frozen a moment in the process of descending the stairs.

Modernist painters of Cubism thus attempted at challenging the traditional structures of having to lock time in the limits of a framed painting. They tried to add the dimension of time into their work, which the traditionalists were unable to do. When the various dance movements as said in the *Natyasastra* are looked at, we see that it is not a time bound, still representation of art, but that it is four dimensional. The aspect of time is attached within itself. Though the dancer poses for some time, it is never stillness that is depicted. There is movement and locomotion. The potential energy of the *Rasa* is aesthetically manifested into kinetic motion of the limbs such that graceful gestures are produced.

The art forms in the Indian aesthetic tradition as well as the Cubist paintings are art forms in their own respect with certain differences and similarities. As said earlier in this assignment, every art is a combination or a mixture of lines. "Rekhas" or the lines in dancing can be compared to the "scaffolds" or the bold lines seen in Cubist paintings. "Rekhas" however, do not exist in the dance. It is spun out of imagination, a creation of the mind to understand the form more easily and to make the process of comprehension well defined. But the "scaffolds" form an integral part of Cubist paintings. To bring about more of a contrast, I would like to compare the "scaffolds" with "bhangas" or the bends of the body during representation of a posture in dance. They add more aesthetic value to dance and aid in adding grace to the movement of the body. The "scaffolds" are bold, straight and projecting such that it demarcates and separates one fragment from the other, causing confusion and discordance in the painting.

The fragmentation of objects and its intersection at random angles in all the planes suggest an ambiguous sense of space as said earlier in this discussion. The artist tries to achieve something that is logically impossible, but by depicting the object from all angles at the same time, the unfathomable construct of time gets installed in the painting, making the viewer feel as though time has been locked into a frame of art piece. Whereas a posture dance or drama as detailed in *Natyasastra* makes us conscious of time, how it passes by and how it has been gracefully consumed by time.

Another aspect I would like to detail is the depiction of the human face in both these art forms. There is no face in both the sculptures of *Woman Combing her Hair*. Archipenko's sculpture has no face, but a hole. The body and the curves of the woman are neatly depicted by him, which accumulates all the importance on the face, because that which is never depicted is always discussed than that which has been conventionally represented. Gonzalez's work of the woman does not even look like a woman. It seems like an artistic representation, an interrogation into the conventional methods of portraying a woman. It is terribly fascinating to notice that much of *Natyasastra* is all about aesthetic movements. There has been a lot of discourses on how the limbs should move, what the body posture has to be and how the expression needs to be articulated in the face. It is furthermore interesting to notice that it is not the face in general, but even the eyes, the nose and all other facial features have to be under the influence of the emotion such that it becomes "art-come-alive".

I would now like to cite some examples from Cubist paintings. *The Three Dancers* by Picasso (1925) is another abstract Cubist painting, wherein nothing related to the title can be found in a logical,

coherent form. This painting shows three dancers, but none of them are well defined. The face of the first dancer is distorted and the dancer on the extreme right is not clear. The painting as a whole is pale. There is no charm or grace that can be seen in the Indian dance forms. One of them is seen holding a guitar, which is also distorted and fragmented. It highly contradicts the idea of the discourses on music and instruments as said in the *Natyasastra*.

Another of Picasso's painting *The Weeping Woman* shows the face of a woman with large drops of tears on her cheeks. The face, it looks, as though it is a juxtaposition of two different angles. Picasso meant to show the universality of pain through this painting, but if it is looked at from the angle of Indian aestheticism, it nowhere comes near the "Karuna" rasa where, the sorrowful, monotonous face is depicted in all its emotional diversities.

An important artist that needs to be mentioned here is the Cubist musical dance painter Georgy Kurasov. Most of his works depict an understanding of the human form, especially that of the sensuous woman. However, the paintings are geometrical. Some of his paintings are called "The Dance" primarily because they depict dance and dance movement. Some of such paintings are *The Gypsy Dance*, *The Egyptian Dancers*, *Tango Night* and *Classical Dance*. The painting *Classical Dance* bears resemblance to some of the Indian dance forms, but this is only with respect to the posture. The dress, the background, the expression on the face and even the posture of the fingers makes it differ greatly from the Indian dance forms. Though the women are sensuous, they lack the charm and the grace of conventional dancers. It is grim and less appealing when compared to our dance forms like "bharatnatyam".

Natyasastra and Cubism differ greatly from one another in most aspects. All what I wanted to show was a comparison, an analytical study of the movements depicted by the both. It can be seen that they have a few similarities, which but serves entirely different functions for the both. The "rekha" serves an entirely different purpose when compared to the "scaffolds" in Cubist paintings. The common thread that runs along the both is the depiction of movements. Cubism as a form of art has a lot of limitations, primarily because it either sculpts on some tangible object or paints the ideas on canvas. On the other hand, the various dance forms focus on movements, as in the body movements. But they both try to depict time in whatever way possible. The differences, thus talk of the rigidity of Cubism and the flexibility of the dance movements with regard to the concept of movement.

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