

Revisiting Masterpieces of Literature Through Indian Aesthetics: *A Myth Of Devotion, a river sutra & NAVEEN PATNAIK*

Dr. Kalikinkar Pattanayak

Former Associate Professor in English, Khallikote University

[\(Kalikinkar.pattanayak@gmail.com\)](mailto:Kalikinkar.pattanayak@gmail.com)

Abstract:

T. S. Eliot's statement that novelty is better than repetition holds good in creation and revaluation of masterpieces of literature. Indian Aesthetics is based upon the principle that intuition rather than intellect is secret to the deeper understanding and maximum aesthetic enjoyment of literary work. Intuition is a faculty that is higher than reasoning. Life is so mysterious and universe so complex that intuitive perception of reality leads to optimum aesthetic pleasure because reasoning fails at a particular point to evaluate the beauty, the wonder and the mystery behind every phenomenon: universal, natural, super-natural or human. The exponents of Indian Aesthetics: Bharat, Kuntaka, Abhinavagupta, Mahima Bhatta, Annadavardhana, Bhartrhari, Dandin and so on, in ancient times, Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo in modern times, share one feeling that expressions in any literary masterpiece should be artistic not ordinary, oblique rather than direct, special rather than casual. The literary artist must possess dristi (vision or sight) by which he can transform an ordinary object into an extra-ordinary phenomenon of beauty. Viewed in this light three literary works: "A Myth Of Devotion", a master poem by Louise Gluck, "a river sutra", an enchanting novel by Gita Mehta, NAVEEN PATNAIK, an exciting biography by Ruben Banerjee arrest attention of the scholars and common readers because of originality and dexterity in style. The titles of three literary works have been written in three different ways: A Myth Of Devotion has been written in the usual way, Mehta uses all small letters in the title of her fiction but Banerjee prefers all capitals. The stylistic deviance is not without a reason. Gluck deals with usual human predicament, Mehta discovers that the river rather than any human guru needs to be man's teacher but river has been ignored to play the role of teacher by the common mass. The aim of this paper is to analyse and underline the stylistic devices through Indian Aesthetics that make Gluck, Mehta and Banerjee popular in the domain of literature.

Keywords: *Indian Aesthetics, dristi (vision or sight), intuition, oblique, special, Gluck, Mehta, Banerjee*

I

In 2020 Louise Gluck, the American litterateur, wins the Nobel prize for literature. The originality (and innovativeness) of her poetry instils a desire in the practitioners of literature to know her literary technique. Gita Mehta who was born to Biju Patnaik, the ex-chief minister of Odisha, now lives in London, New York and India; She has varied experiences as an authoress(a story teller) with a special command over English language. Her *a river sutra* which TIME OUT declares the 'seductive prose of the highest order'- (the cover page of *a river sutra*), merits attention of the lovers of literature. Ruben

Banerjee's NAVEEN PATNAIK published in 2018 is written on the life of the Juggernaut in Odisha politics. Banerjee, a journalist, unravels the psyche of Patnaik with penetrating insight and knowledge. These three literary works capture the imagination of readers not only for their themes that are relevant in the present context but also for the elegant and fascinating style. This paper discovers the source of beauty in literary works, as expounded by the Aestheticians of India, which accounts for their popularity.

This paper has been divided into five sections. The opening section is an introduction which spells out the design of the project. The second section analyses Gluck's poem in the light of Indian Aesthetics. The third section sheds light upon Meheta's literary devices and focuses on their suitability to the text as designed by the Aestheticians of India. The fourth section dwells upon the literary techniques and embellishments of Banerjee to be analyzed through the prism of Indian Aesthetics. The fifth section is the conclusion in which the artistic designs of three authors are compared and contrasted so as to justify the application of Indian Aesthetics in the production and enjoyment of literary texts.

The major schools of Indian Aesthetics : *Riti* School that focuses on style; *Vakrokti* that emphasizes an obliquity in expression; *Dhvani* theory that stresses on suggestivity; *Rasa* theory that attaches importance to aesthetic enjoyment; *Anuman* theory that presupposes that inference is secret to the creation of literature, and *Aucitya*, the theory of propriety, merit attention. All these theories, though apparently different in their principles and methods agree on the point that literary expressions should be original, innovative, and creative rather than dull, stereotyped and common-place. All of them agree on the fact that a good literary work is a thing of beauty which is a joy for ever; its loveliness increases it never passes into nothingness. They establish the view of Shakespeare that a literary artist 'gives to airy nothing a local habitation and name'. The artist is a creator and creates his own world in the domain of literature which is beautiful, symbolic and ideal. Literature is the art of the desirable and the literary artist projects an ideal world or presents the tension between the ideal and the actual which a serious reader should perceive. The Indian Aestheticians have framed their principles, devised their methods which remain as guidelines for any litterateur of repute. Borrowing the language from Oscar Wilde the leader of Aesthetic Movement in the west it can be stated that the conclusion of Indian Aestheticians is that good literature is moral; 'bad literature has a moral'. It means that literary artist must give a holistic picture of his world in which it is difficult to find inconsistency or incoherence. Harmony that manifests in the symphony of sounds, color and ideas is the watchword of every literary artist who follows the Indian Aesthetics. Considered in this light, these three masterpieces of literature as discussed in the paper in the short length of about 2,500 words, are finest specimens of literature that transport the readers to the world of the sublime; a kind of transportation that two noted Indian Aestheticians: Sri Aurobindo and Rabindranath Tagore long for.

II

A Myth Of Devotion, a representative poem by Louise Gluck (<https://poets.org/>), gives the picture of a duplicate of the earth in which death, not love is the solution to the end of human miseries. Devotion that is purified love is a myth, not a fact, in modern world. The poem tells a complex story in Greek mythology in which Hades the protagonist tried to create a replica of the earth in which his love and passion for Persephone would be materialized but the kind of materialization that the poem depicts is shocking. Here the protagonist expresses helplessness in the profession and practice of love to his beloved:

He wants to say *I Love You, nothing can hurt you*
but he thinks

this is a lie, so he says in the end
you're dead, nothing can hurt you
which seems to him
a more promising beginning, more true.(poets.org)

The passage above, can be analyzed in the light of the theory of Vakrokti (striking expression). Borrowing the ideas of Bhababhuti and Kuntaka, who propound the theories of Vakrokti it can be asserted that in case of master literary artists 'sense rushes after their words'. Gluck's words contain profound truths. They can be subject to multiple interpretations. Here death is truer than love to end all troubles of human existence-an ironical remark indeed! Hence, Hades uses darkness to symbolize his passion for love. Darkness is usually used as a representation of loneliness and rejection but the speaker uses it in a different sense. Thus, in the hands of Gluck symbols change, flash and glitter. They are dynamic-a secret to successful poetic craftsmanship!

III

Meheta's *a river sutra* has a unique structure. Neel Mukherjee comments in the introduction: a suite of stories, one following the other, all loosely connected to a frame with characters coming in, playing their part and then disappearing... the narrator provides one cohering principle for the book but is too shadowy, too much upon interlocutor, even a mostly a passive hearer to be called a protagonist(XI).

Thus, the structure of the fiction is unusual and novel; it corresponds to that of the Mahabharat or the Ramayan, the Indian Classics that juxtapose tales into an organic whole. The reasons behind the variation of tales is to sharpen curiosity about multi-faceted human life upon this planet: wonderful and unpredictable. The authoress believes like P.B. Shelly that life is a multi-coloured glass that stains the white radiance of eternity. These stories reveal the indomitable longings of human heart along with beneficent powers of the river Narmada. The plot of the novel is woven around the life of an elderly bureaucrat who runs a guest house on the sacred banks of the Narmada, a holy river of India. Those who arrest his attention are a young executive fascinated by an enigmatic lover, a Jain monk who renounces the world and voluntarily embraces hardships; a frustrated woman with melodious voice and a saint who saves a child from taking resort to prostitution. Thus the fiction moves along a variety of complex tales that provoke thought and evoke curiosity: A perceptive reader exclaims in the language of Shakespeare: 'what a piece of work is man...!' The novelist dexterously juxtaposes the profane with the spiritual, opulence with the poverty, restlessness with tranquility and so on and gives the impression that human life is a paradox and full of contraries. *a river sutra* begins with an epigraph :

Listen, O brother
Man is the greatest truth.
Nothing beyond.

(Love Songs of Chandidas)

The epigraph forms the basis of the various tales in the novel: the truth about human predicament and human existence. The ideas that the stories contain have relevance today. For example, now-a-days the people are advised to put on masks as a preventive measure for Coronavirus. This gesture is shown by a Jain monk for different reasons. In *a river sutra* a Jain monk says "this mask prevents us from killing some blameless insect by sudden inhalation". A gesture of non-violence! Such a gesture of non-violence is needed today for a different purpose.

In *a river sutra* the river is symbolic. The river has a continuous flow despite impediments; it looks enchanting and fresh. The choice of the name 'Narmada' is not without a meaning. 'Narmada' means a whore; a whore lives an adventurous life- a life that lures, but full of blemishes, a life that offers troubled pleasures. The stories that blend and constitute the fiction deal with various facets of human life: 'enchanting... somewhat comic, somewhat tragic and always filled with insights' NEWYORK TIMES (quoted in the back page of *a river sutra*).

Suggestion, Anandvardhana would view is the soul of literature, especially of poetry. The suggested sense arises out of an idea, a figure of speech or an emotion. The poetry that *a river sutra* contains needs to be analyzed in the light of *dhvani* theory. The grateful tribals of the Vano village invoke the spirit of the Narmada in poetic language:

Salutation in the morning and at night
to the, O Narmada!
Defend me from the serpent's poison (*a river sutra*:4)

The expression 'serpent's poison' radiates meaning: In literal sense, it means snake's poison, but its associated meaning is evil that obstructs the smooth flow of life. It is pictured in Shankaracharya's hymn:

O holy Narmada!
you remove the stains of evil.
You release the wheel of suffering
you lift the burdens of the world. (ibid.180)

The Narmada tells the river *sutra* that river is the liberator: It liberates the humans from sufferings, worldly burdens and above all, clutches of evils; it can dissolve the fear of time

IV

NAVEEN PATNAIK reads like a fascinating biography in which Banerjee- the biographer deals with the life of Naveen from various angles: Political, Social and Psychological. He focuses on the public image and private life with interesting details that enhance the readability of the text. The book is divided into six chapters excluding introduction. The first chapter is entitled '*Mere Pitaji Ko... Bahut Pyar Tha*': the expression in Hindi makes the utterance appealing and symbolic. Behind the success of Naveen Babu lies the blessings of his father, the charismatic leader, Biju Babu. The last chapter titled "What after Naveen?" is inferential in character. Mahima Bhatta, a leading exponent in Indian Aesthetics, conceives of inference as the basic principle of writing great literature; in fact, such a chapter adds grandeur to the biography. The chapters entitled: "The First Steps", "The Uninterrupted Reign", "Why Naveen Wins", "The 2019 Challenge" are thought-provoking. They focus on Naveen the man and the politician. On politics, Banerjee utters the unpleasant truth:

Politics, by and large, is a sordid, murky and fiercely competitive affair, it is a treacherous vocation where everyone is out to pull everyone else down by any means, fair or foul. The world of politics in Odisha is no different... The politics of the *Aaya Ram, Gaya Ram* kind.

(Patnaik: 8)

Banerjee's conception of politics corresponds to that of Samuel Johnson: Politics is the last refuge of scoundrels. Bernard Shaw agrees on it. The murky side of politics creates *jugupsa*, the aesthetic of disgust. *Rasa theory* is the unique contribution to the world of aesthetics. About *Rasa theory* Bharata holds that *Rasa* is the resultant of the unification of '*vibhavas*' (determinants), '*anubhas*' (consequents) and '*vyabicharibhavas*' (transitory feelings) (Tiwari 52). Determinants are the objective conditions or situations. The consequences are physical perceptions. The situations

prevailing in Odisha politics are not fair; hence the feelings about politics are not good of an enlightened citizen. Banerjee perceives that Naveen intuitively knows the problems of Odias, and thus he aptly analyzes the psychology of voters and wins.

V

To conclude, revisiting masterpieces of literature through Indian aesthetics is a valued suggestion not only from the aesthetic stand-point but also from the academic perspective. The greatest contribution of Indian aesthetics to the domain of world aesthetics lies in *rasa-dhvani* theories. These theories advocate that a piece of literature will yield maximum aesthetic enjoyment if the reader has *sahridaya* (proper taste) and a man of culture. Bhartrhari's concept of *sphota* is unique. What is articulated and listened to is "*dhvani* but this *dhvani* is the manifesting agent of *sphota* which is unheard". (Seturaman: x) Suggestion is the link between words on the page and vision of the reader. The profounder is the suggestion, the deeper is the aesthetic delight. The literary text *A Myth Of Devotion* highlights the grim reality that devotion which is a human emotion: pure, total, and unsullied is a myth, not possible in real life. The fiction *a river sutra* throws light upon a formula that if a man establishes close rapport with the river that symbolizes the eternal flow, freedom and flexibility in movement he will be liberated from sorrows and sufferings that characterize the life of an ordinary mortal. NAVEEN PATNAIK- the biography deals with the story of a politician who succeeds because he understands the psychology of the common people and intricacies of the game that is politics. He follows unconsciously the words of the aesthete: Oscar Wilde that success is conditional and he is always eager to study the conditions and fulfil them. Politics was in his 'genes'; he decided to give up wearing 'jeans' in order to identify himself with the poor Odias. His decision about dress and address is appropriate-here lies his success as a politician. Thus, these three literary texts, succinctly analyzed through the prism of Indian aesthetics, open out the vistas before the reading public that the comprehension of Indian Aesthetics is essential to read the masterpieces of literature for better understanding and enjoyment.

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