International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences
Vol-9, Issue-3; May-Jun, 2024

Peer-Reviewed Journal
Journal Home Page Available: https://ijels.com/
Journal DOI: 10.22161/ijels

Aesthetic Experience and Universal Consciousness: Parallels between Nietzschean *Tragedy* and Abhinavagupta's *Nāṭya*

Virosh Singh Baghel

Research Scholar, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, BITS Pilani, Pilani, Rajasthan (India)
Email: p20190066@pilani.bits-pilani.ac.in (BITS mail); viroshsinghbaghel@gmail.com (personal)

Received: 02 May 2024; Received in revised form: 05 Jun 2024; Accepted: 16 Jun 2024; Available online: 22 Jun, 2024

Abstract—*Nietzsche argues that tragedy, a synthesis of the Apollonian and Dionysian artistic principles, uncovers the universal essence of human existence—suffering—offering metaphysical solace to its spectators that helps them bear this reality and affirm life amidst the "terrors and horrors of existence." Apollo and Dionysus represent individuality and universality in tragedy. The Apollonian aspects—plot, stage, and characters—highlight individual distinctions, whereas the Dionysian element, music–the chorus–embodies the universalised consciousness of human fragility. This Dionysian effect, infused through music, fosters a state of self-forgetfulness in the spectators, dissolving their individuality. Abhinavagupta believes that drama (nāṭya), which is the object of aesthetic experience, presents the generalised emotions through sādhāraṇīkaraṇa in which the empathetic spectator (sahṛdaya) identifies oneself with that of the character, and its situations. This transforms the aesthetic spectacle into a collective consciousness (ekaghanatā) in which all the spectators are de-contextualised from their spatio-temporal boundaries and experience the aesthetic taste, i.e., rasa. Abhinavagupta also argues that such aesthetic experience (rasāsvāda) is akin to spiritual experience (brahmāsvāda), aligning his aesthetic theory with the philosophy of Kashmir Śaivism. The paper aims to identify and analyse the universal elements inherent in the aesthetic experience of tragedy and nāṭya, aiming to extrapolate the concept of universalised consciousness through these art forms.*

Keywords—***Abhinavagupta, Aesthetic Experience, Nāṭya, Nietzsche, Tragedy, Universalised consciousness***

I. INTRODUCTION

Friedrich Nietzsche and Abhinavagupta share a common understanding of the aesthetic experience—particularly experiencing tragedy and nāṭya—as a potent means through which spectators attain a state of self-forgetfulness, which is unbounded by spatial and temporal aspects and enables them to have a universalised experience of consciousness. In *The Birth of Tragedy* (hereafter *BT*), Nietzsche articulates the experience of tragedy as a metaphysical solace that enables individuals to confront and affirm life's inherent suffering through art. According to him, the duality of *Apollonian* and *Dionysian* principles underpins the essence of Greek tragedy, creating a medium through which spectators can experience a profound sense of unity with the primordial forces of nature. This experience, Nietzsche argues, allows for the temporary transcendence of individual boundaries and culminates into a shared, universalised consciousness that justifies existence as an aesthetic phenomenon. Parallel to Nietzsche's view, Abhinavagupta, drawing from the rich lineage of *Śaiva-Tantra* tradition, presents a nuanced theory of aesthetic experience in which experiencing aesthetic taste, known as *rasa*, serves as a conduit for achieving a state of universalised consciousness.

Abhinavagupta posits that through empathetic engagement with drama (*nāṭya*), individuals can transcend their egoic boundaries, merging their consciousness with the collective whole. This experience, akin to spiritual realisation, engenders a profound sense of bliss (*ānanda*) and oneness (*ekaghanatā*), highlighting the intrinsic capacity of aesthetic experience to elevate human consciousness beyond the confines of mundane existence. The juxtaposition of Nietzsche's and Abhinavagupta's perspectives offers a fertile ground for investigating the mutual relationship between art, especially tragedy and nāṭya, and the pursuit of a universalised consciousness. This paper aims to comprehensively analyse the perspectives of both thinkers regarding the aesthetic experience that generates a profound sense of unity among the individuals (spectators) and elevates their ordinary consciousness to a universalised state. This analysis leads to the argument that certain universal components exist within the aesthetic experience, enabling the spectators to comprehend universality despite being impacted by individuality.

II. NIETZSCHE ON TRAGEDY AND THE UNIVERSALISED EXPERIENCE OF CONSCIOUSNESS

In *BT*, Nietzsche contends that "art is the highest task and the true metaphysical activity of this life" (BT, Preface) because it can transform our metaphysical framework that shapes our beliefs and influences our experience and understanding of the apparent world.[1] He argues that life is full of suffering and can only be affirmed through art because "only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* is existence and the world eternally justified" (BT, 5). He means to say that the world and human beings are merely an "artistic projection" (BT, 5) of the real creator-artist, the *primordial unity*, i.e., nature, which resembles a child playing in the sand, creating random shapes only to destroy them later (BT, 24). This notion is inspired by Schopenhauer's philosophy,[2] which posits that the world, including all entities and causal relations, is a *representation* of a metaphysical 'Will' that transcends individuation and differentiation. Nietzsche characterises the primordial unity, the "non-individuated reality," as akin to a child playing on the beach, whimsically creating and destroying forms out of the sand, finding joy in creation and destruction (Geuss, 1999, XXIV). Such contradiction of creation and destruction, producing both pleasure and pain, is represented by the Greek gods Apollo (creation) and Dionysus (destruction), highlighting the cyclical nature of life and death.

Nietzsche argues that the inherent contradiction of human experience, marked by the coexistence of pleasure and pain, is effectively conveyed through art, especially Greek tragedy, which distracts individuals from the "burden and heaviness" of existence (BT, 18), producing a genuine affirmation of life. Tragedy combines two contrasting artistic principles: the *Apollonian* and the *Dionysian*. Apollo, the god of measured restraint and the "divine image (*Götterbild*) of the *principium individuationis*" (BT, 1) celebrating individual distinctiveness, is realised in tragedy through plot, narrative, and characters. Conversely, Dionysus, associated with unrestrained revelry and disorder, challenges the principle of individuation, often depicted in tragedy by the chorus. Nietzsche states, "*Tragedy arose from the tragic chorus* and was originally chorus and nothing but chorus" (BT, 7), highlighting that tragedy evolved from ancient Dionysian religious rituals. Initially, tragedy was a communal ceremony where large groups of men sang *Dithyrambs* to honour Dionysus, often dressing as *Satyrs*—mythical half-human, half-goat followers of Dionysus symbolising wild, instinctual nature. These satyrs, embodying Dionysus's spirit, represented the untamed aspects of nature and humanity, signifying chaos, *ecstasy*, and the transcendence of societal and personal boundaries. Nietzsche, thus, posits that the essence and primal form of tragedy is captured in the *satyric* chorus, which involves the "collective music-making," marked by intoxication (*Rausch*), fostering communal unity and enabling individuals to engage with the fundamental reality. It permits a temporary transcendence of the individual ego and establishes a metaphysical connection with the universal essence of life.

Moreover, when discussing the Dionysian music–the chorus, Nietzsche appears to have drawn inspiration from Schopenhauer's idea of music, considering it as a universal language while contending it as a form of "world-symbolism" (BT, 6) that communicates to all individuals irrespective of their analytical systems. It (music) is considered the "language of Dionysus," which has a universal quality that "shake[s] us to our very foundations," directly impacting the body and indeed controlling the body because it involves "a new world of symbols" (BT, 2). Thus, according to Nietzsche, when listening to the Dionysian *dithyrambs* and then, at a later refined stage of tragedy, the *tragic* chorus, "man is stimulated to the highest intensification of his symbolic powers," i.e., the symbolism that involves the whole of the body to dance and juggle in ecstasy, that leads to "the destruction of the veil of maya," and the formation of a

[1] A. E. Denham, p.170 (2014)

[2] Nietzsche & Geuss, BT § 1, p.17 (Footnote 26) (1999) (Originally published in 1872)

"oneness as the genius of humankind, indeed of nature itself" (BT, 2). Here, Nietzsche seems to suggest that through the intoxication elicited by music, an individual experiences the "height of self-abandonment" (BT, 2), losing all *Apollonian* capacities linked to dream imagery. This immersion in Dionysiac *ecstasy* leads to self-forgetfulness, a feeling of oneness with nature. Thus, Nietzsche argues that in a tragedy, when the spectator identifies with the tragic hero, he is dominantly affected by the Dionysian chorus, which communicates the tragic truth of the hero's downfall. This truth leaves the spectator shocked and aware of his ephemeral existence, shielded by the Apollonian elements of orderly scenes, narratives, and objects. As a result, the spectator gets de-contextualised from spatial-temporal settings and "feels himself to be not simply united, reconciled or merged with his neighbour, but quite literally one with […] the mysterious primordial unity" (BT, 1).

Tragedy, thus, becomes "a supreme *art*" (BT, 22) because it reveals to us the innate sufferings of life while also highlighting the *metaphysical solace* which communicates with the spectators that "life is indestructibly mighty and pleasurable" (BT, 7), enabling them to justify life amidst the harshness of existence. Despite providing a grimmer look of reality, tragedy provides a 'tragic pleasure' that liberates us from the "greedy urge for [worldly] existence and reminds us with warning hand that there is […] a higher delight, for which the fighting hero is preparing himself […] not by his victories but by his destruction" (BT, 21). This represents an encounter with transcendence, a momentary experience wherein one transforms into a higher being capable of enduring and even elevating the inherent terror of life. Thus, in Nietzsche's view, the Dionysian, in the form of a chorus which infuses *Rausch*, takes the individual to the very essence of reality, metaphysically transmuting him into the collective realm of unity with nature. Dennis Sweet (1999) argues that the purpose of tragedy, for Nietzsche, is "to bring the spectator to a peculiar psychological state whereby the ordinary sense of individuality is lost, and an aesthetic experience of the wholeness and unity of nature is achieved" (Sweet, 1999, p.354). Likewise, Lucy Huskinson (2004) argues that tragedy "takes the individual to the very essence of reality, and it metaphysically transmutes him into the collective realm of unity with nature" (Huskinson, 2004, p.17). Thus, the tragic experience, in Nietzsche's view, transforms our ordinary consciousness into an aesthetic one, allowing us to grasp the metaphysical comfort in life's indestructibility and the *illusoriness* of individuality. This process induces a universal resonance, fostering a shared experience of *self-forgetfulness* and unity with nature, thereby facilitating an experience of universalised consciousness that helps us justify life and perceive the world as an *aesthetic phenomenon*.

III. ABHINAVAGUPTA AND THE UNIVERSALISED EXPERIENCE OF CONSCIOUSNESS IN NĀṬYA

Abhinavagupta developed his aesthetics based on the philosophy of the *Śaiva-Tantra* tradition,[3] contending that self-realisation is not only related to the spiritual-yogic practices but can be attained through *Tantric yoga*, which aims at both *bhukti* (enjoyment) and *mukti* (liberation), both of which can be pursued side by side,[4] and highlights the importance of experiencing beauty through aesthetic experience, or *rasāsvāda*. Following the natural corollary of the *Śaivite* thought, Abhinavagupta situates the aesthetic experience within the second level of tattvas, named *Śakti*, defined by self-awareness. He argues that the essence of aesthetically pleasing experience stems from an uninterrupted mental state (*sthāyīn*), perceived through innate consciousness and personal experience, not external stimuli. Thus, the aesthetic or *rasa* relishing is self-evident and can only be fully appreciated through direct engagement and subjective perception.[5]

In his *Abhinavabhāratī*, Abhinavagupta claims that "the aesthetic enjoyment of rasa consists of a completely extraordinary sense of wonder or mystic delight (*camatkāra*) and is totally different (*vilakṣaṇa eva*) from memory or recollection (*smṛti*), *inference*, and worldly feelings of happiness, etc." (Kulkarni, 1998, p.58).[6] In claiming so, he points towards the universal essence of rasa because he says it "consists exclusively in aesthetic relish," which itself consists in knowledge which is completely "different from all other empirical or mundane kinds of knowledge" (Kulkarni, 1998, p.59).[7] Likewise, in his *Locana*, Abhinavagupta posits that rasa is non-worldly (*alaukika*) because it arises from *vyañjanā* or *dhvani*, the poetic and literary power of suggestion, which is also considered the "most significant part of the poetry."[8] He exemplifies this by describing a man's joy

[3] See K. C. Pandey, p.86 (1959); Masson and Patwardhan, XI (1985); K. P. Mishra, Preface (2006)

[4] B.N. Pandit, p.5 (1990)

[5] *Sā ca rasanā na pramāṇavyāpāro na kārakavyāpāraḥ svayam tu nāprāmāṇikaḥ* – (Abhinavagupta, 2010, Ch.6 § p.299)

[6] *Tathā hi laukikacittavṛttyaṇumāne kā rasatāı tenālaukikacamatkārātmā rasāsvādaḥ smṛtyanumāna-laukikasaṃvedanavilakṣaṇa evaı*– (Abhinavagupta, 2010, Ch.6 § p.298)

[7] *sā ca rasanā na pramāṇavyāpāro na kārakavyāpāraḥı svayaṃ tu nāprāmāṇikaḥı svasaṃvedanasiddhatvātı rasanā ca bodharūpaivaı kintu bodhāntarebhyo laukikebhyo vilakṣaṇaivaı* - (Abhinavagupta, 2010, Ch.6 § p.299)

[8] Ajay Singh, p.233 (2022)

upon hearing, "*A boy is born to you*," a joy sparked by direct meaning (*abhidhā*). However, the evoked rasa, or emotional essence, does not originate like this joy. It is not produced by denotation nor through indirect means like metaphor (*lakṣaṇa*), quality expression (*guṇavṛtti*), or devotion (*bhakti*). Rather, "this process of tasting arises in a sensitive person through his empathy upon apprehending the vibhāvas and anubhāvas, an empathy made possible by his heart's being in tune (*hṛdayasaṁvāda*) with the poetic message" (Abhinavagupta, 1990, 1.4 g *L*, p.108). Additionally, Abhinavagupta posits that rasa is an aesthetic pleasure that largely stems from a unique form of knowledge or consciousness. If rasa were expressible solely through literal word meanings, it would be, thus, worldly (*laukika*). But, rasa, when suggested through alliteration that lacks direct sense, highlights experiences not found in daily life, which serves as additional proof for the *alaukikatva* (non-worldliness) of rasa (Kulkarni, 1998, p.56). Thus, according to Abhinavagupta, rasa is an aesthetic relish that cannot be directly produced in the physical world. Instead, it is invoked through drama or *nāṭya*, regarded as the object of aesthetic experience. Abhinavagupta claims that "*nāṭyameva rasāḥ*" or "drama is rasa" (Abhinavagupta, 2010, p.303) because drama engages us with sight and sound, and its comprehension is not merely intellectual but is realised through direct experience in the form of aesthetic relish, or enjoyment (Mishra, 2006, p.62).[9]

Abhinavagupta, aligning with Bharata, holds that rasa emerges from bhāva rather than the other way around, with bhāva meaning "to bring into being" or "to pervade." For example, *sthāyibhāvas*, the enduring emotional states shaped by latent impressions (*vāsanas*) and memories (*saṃskāras*) from past experiences, are universal in all rational beings and serve as the source of rasa. Abhinava asserts that when a nāṭya depicts a specific combination of vibhāvas, etc., it stimulates the spectator's inherent sthāyibhāva, enabling them to savour the corresponding rasa. For instance, if the combination of *vibhāva*, etc., stimulates the sthāyīn of sorrow (*śoka*), already present in the spectator's mind, he experiences the pathetic/sorrowful (*karuṇa*) rasa. Thus, bhāvas are of a universal essence out of which the rasa arises, ultimately resulting in an unadulterated and universalised experience because the elements, such as vibhāvas, etc., are also *alaukika*.[10] However, such relishing is not possible until one becomes a *sahṛdaya* who shares *hṛdayasaṁvāda* with the poet, i.e., when the artistic creation resonates with the innate sensibilities of the sahṛdaya.

Consequently, the *hṛdayasaṁvāda* with the poet leads to the state of generalisation (*sādhāraṇīkaraṇa*) whereby the depicted events and their associated emotions (*vibhāvas*, etc.) are generalised and become universally applicable. As a result, the process of sādhāraṇīkaraṇa embodies a universality that diminishes the spectators' sense of individuality, separating them from the everyday emotions experienced in ordinary life and leading them to a site called *tanmayībhāva*, in which they identify themselves (their emotions) with the emotion portrayed in the situation. Identifying oneself with the characters and situations leads to a de-contextualisation of personal emotions, fostering a connection with the universal aspects of the performance. According to Abhinavagupta, such a state "nourishes the generality and forms a uniformity (*ekaghanatā*) among the perceptions of all the spectators. All the spectators experience the same rasa because they all have the same latent impressions of that permanent mental state in their mind" (Mishra, 2006, p.109).[11] This collective experience—which is more or less similar to the Dionysian experience in Nietzsche—occurs as spectators shedding their individual consciousness, feeling a sense of unity, and collectively savouring the rasa with equal intensity. Masson and Patwardhan (1985) argue that when such identification (*tanmayībhāvana*) takes place, "the ego is transcended, and for the duration of the aesthetic experience, the normal waking "I" [*aham*] is suspended," thus culminating into a stage where "all normal emotions are gone" and "the hard knot of "selfness" has been untied" that, ultimately results "in an unprecedented state of mental and emotional calm" (Masson and Patwardhan, 1985, VII; Kulkarni, 1998, pp.14-15). Subsequently, the spectator's self becomes increasingly united with the mental states (*cittavṛttis*) that arise in response to the aesthetic experience. Ultimately, this union of self and mental states leads to a state "where the self is manifested united with cittavṛttis […] [and] is called by the synonymous words like camatkāra, carvaṇā, nirveśa, bhoga etc." (Mishra, 2006, pp.68-69).[12] Upon experiencing *camatkāra*, the spectator attains a state of pure emotion, elevating them to a heightened level of pleasure (*ānanda*), distinct from ordinary life experiences. This intense, undiluted joy, termed *ānandaikaghana*,[13] mirrors the bliss

[9] *Bhinnavṛttāntāsvādana-rūpasaṃvedanasaṃvedyaṃ vastu rasasvabhāvamiti vakṣyāmaḥ* – (Abhinavagupta, 2010, Ch.1 § p.3)

[10] Abhinavagupta, Ch.6 § p.298 (2010); V. M. Kulkarni, p.58 (1998)

[11] *Yasyāṃ vastusatāṃ kāvyārpitānāṃ ca deśakālapramātrādīnāṃ niyamahetūnāṃ anyonyapratibandhavalāt atyantamapasaraṇe sa eva sādhāraṇabhāvaḥ sutarāṃ puṣyati। ata eva sarvasāmājikānāmekaghanatayaiva pratipattiḥ sutarāṃ rasaparipoṣāya* – (Abhinavagupta, 2010, Ch.6 § p.295)

[12] *Ata eva vicitro rasāsvādana-camatkāra-varṇaniveśa-bhogādhyavasāya-paryāyaḥ। tatra yad avabhāsate vastu tannāṭyam* – (Abhinavagupta, 2010, Ch.1 § p.38)

[13] J. L. Masson and M. V. Patwardhan, VII (1985)

of spiritual experiences (*brahmāsvāda*) and is closely linked to self-realisation.

Abhinavagupta contends that both experiences involve self-forgetfulness and are marked by an absence of material desire, categorising them as non-worldly (*alaukika*). They eliminate the subject-object duality, merging the self with the external world. Additionally, there is a loss of time and space awareness, resulting in total immersion in the present moment without consciousness of the surroundings. Ultimately, both experiences culminate in a universal sense of repose (*viśrānti*), indicating a fulfilment where no further action is required. Analysing Abhinava's perspective, Loriliai Biernacki (2011) contends that according to Abhinavagupta, the aesthetic experience "involves melting and an opening of the heart, and it is comparable to the state of the highest bliss" (Biernacki, 2011, p.263) because it is a sibling (*sahodara*) of the experience of Brahman, who is the bearer of the universalised consciousness. Thus, for Abhinavagupta, the aesthetic experience, bearing a resemblance to spiritual experience, entails certain universal elements like the ownerlessness of the self and surpassing one's individualised consciousness, which makes it reasonable to argue that consciousness becomes universalised in an aesthetic experience of nāṭya.

IV. CONCLUSION

The paper has argued that both Nietzsche and Abhinavagupta emphasise that the aesthetic experience of tragedy and nāṭya is not just a simple experience of drama on stage but rather a transformative process that requires the spectator's empathetic engagement, leading to the dissolution of individual boundaries and the realisation of a shared universal consciousness. Nietzsche talks about the importance of *Dionysian* music–the *chorus*–that provides a *metaphysical solace* with the help of *Apollonian* imagery, that life is indestructible and individuality is an *illusion*. Consequently, the spectator foregoes life's challenges, albeit momentarily, and merges with others and the primordial nature, experiencing a universalised consciousness in the tragic moments of life. Abhinavagupta emphasises the importance of drama and talks about the necessity of being a sahṛdaya who can share a sympathetic response with the poet, leading to a generalisation of emotions that results in a uniformity of the spectators. As a result, they all experience a sense of wonder (*camatkāra*), which, ultimately, is an experience of unadulterated bliss, known as *ānandaikaghana*, akin to the bliss of a spiritual experience (*brahmāsvāda*). It implies that the experience of tragedy and nāṭya leads to an expansion of consciousness, causing the individual to lose their sense of individuality and be immersed in shared emotions. This, in turn, de-contextualises them and unites their consciousness with the collective whole, giving them a glimpse of a universalised sense of consciousness.

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