

THE ACTOR IN TRADITIONAL INDIAN DRAMA

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ABSTRACT

In drama putative emotions are engendered with the help of actual movement and gestures of actors. A dramatic representation, according to Bharata, has the following constituents: actors, make-up and dresses, movement and gestures of actors, conjuring of fictional personages and situations with the help of bodily movements, suppression of the real nature of actors and the rendering of putative emotions. It can hardly be denied that actors 'really' move and perform on the stage but, while in actual situations we move in a common shared space; in drama the acting area marks out the boundary of fictional space. The actor constantly oscillates between real and fictional time in terms of the characteristic autonomy of the latter. In a dramatic work, the actor takes on an alien temperament (parabhava) by suppressing his own nature. The actors are aware that what they are rendering on the stage are not their personal emotions, and to that extent they are detached from them. But, to the extent that it is necessary for them to concentrate on the various nuances of emotive experiences, this concentration is possible only if they imaginatively reconstruct these emotions by internalizing them.

Key Words: Real Time, Fictional Time, Fictional Space, Emotive Experience, Internalization, Act, Gestures, Imitation, Representation.

To a large extent, speaking about drama is speaking about what happens to actor on stage, the actor is the pivot around which the entire dramatic performance revolves. With reference to traditional Indian drama, the following two observations made by Bharata are very significant in highlighting the role of an actor in the dramatic performance:

(1) Thus, which is achieved by the performance of actors after restraining their own nature, and by the movement of their different limbs, is known as *nataka*.¹

(2) Just as the soul of man on entering the body of another being, renounces his own nature connected with a different body and assumes another character, so a person having covered with a different color and costume adopts the behavior connected with the clothes he will wear.²

These two passages show that in drama putative emotions are engendered with the help of actual movement and gestures of actors. A dramatic representation, according to Bharata, has the following constituents: actors, make-up and dresses, movement and gestures of actors, conjuring of fictional personages and situations with the help of bodily movements, suppression of the real nature of actors and the rendering of putative emotions.

Referring to actors, Bharata thinks that it is necessary for them to be sensitive to the different nuances of feelings and emotions; and to have a sense of rhythm, suppleness of body, and self-confidence to conduct themselves on stage. Only then will they be able to render through their bodily gestures and language an imaginary personage. It can hardly be denied that actors 'really' move and perform on the stage but, while in actual situations we move in a common shared space, in drama the acting area marks out the boundary of fictional space. Although actors are really moving in this space, their movements are essentially made to generate a fictional situation born out of an imaginary sequence of space and time. This fictional space and time provides us with a spatio-temporal matrix of a dramatic work. Fictional time and space are parasitical upon lived space and time, because they depend on the latter for their unfolding. Furthermore, for its own existence, the fictional space-time matrix also follows the paradigm of lived space and time. But it is autonomous with respect to the dramatic work in the sense that, once the dramatic performance begins the space and time that it conjures are impervious to the lived space and time. Similarly fictional actions and emotions are parasitic upon real actions and emotions, and are not continuous with them. The actor really moves and weeps on the stage, but this movement and emotional expression is to project a fictional person. In reality, space and time form a continuum; one is inconceivable without the other.

Bharata discusses the space in theatre in terms of the acting area available to actors on the stage, for that marks the area of fictional action. It is only in this particular area that the actor talks, moves or gesticulates, and thus engenders a fictional personage. Away from this fictional area, even though an actor may be dressed in his requisite costumes, his gestures would not be projecting the role he intends to play. The actor constantly oscillates between real and fictional time in terms of the characteristic autonomy of the latter. While real time is sharable by all beings living in a particular historical epoch, virtual time in a dramatic work unfolds essentially in the acting area and is limited to the different acts (*anka*) of the play. Fictional time is indicated in various ways – by stage sets, music and dialogue as well as opening and closing of the scenes. Regarding the indication of time through dramatic situations, Bharata stipulates:

“Incidents in a play occurring for a *Kshana*, a *Muhurta*, a *Yaama* and a day are to be accommodated in an Act in pursuance of the Germ (*Bija*) of the play. But a month or a year is to be considered finished with the end of an Act; and events occurring more than one year after, should not be put in an Act.”³

The above passage shows that dramatic action condenses time, and renders in a few hours events spread over many years. Bharata is also aware that, if a single act were to span more than a year, then this will become unconvincing to the spectators.

In a dramatic work, the actor takes on an alien temperament (*parabhava*) by suppressing his own nature. The actor is aware that what he is rendering are not 'his' feelings; neither are they the feelings of the playwright. They have putative feelings which have the structure

of 'as if': 'If I were in the play of Rama whose wife was abducted by Ravana, how I shall feel?' The actor puts himself in this hypothetical situation by evaluating and interpreting its various implications. Having done that, he calls forth his own emotive experiences and acts out his imaginary situations through his language (*vachikabhinaya*) and gesture (*angikabhinaya*). As Stanislavski puts it: "...all action in the theatre must have an inner justification, be logical, coherent and real.... it acts as a lever to lift us out of the world of actuality into the realm of imagination."⁴

The term used by Bharata to characterize dramatic action is *anukaranaam* which has been generally translated into English as imitation, copy or resemblance. In his commentary on *Natyashastra*, Abhinavagupta says that *natya* cannot be an imitation, because the actor does not imitate the actions of Rama, Sita, or Dushyanta, for they are not present before him. Furthermore, if drama is to be taken as imitation, then the spectator would feel that the actor is a buffoon who mimics the behavior of kings and queens. That would only end in a cheap comedy. Drama is far too sophisticated to be equated with mere mimicry. Abhinavagupta, therefore, substitutes the term *anukirtanam* for *anukaranam*, and holds that actor imitates neither emotions of the person rendered by equating his own with them, because he himself is not feeling anything; nor does he emulate the accompanying atmosphere of any particular emotion (*vibhavas*). All he does imitate is the bodily symptoms (*anubhaavas*) of these emotions. These symptomatic expressions, too, are not linked with his particular pain or pleasure but only with pain and pleasure in general.⁵

One can easily agree with Abhinavagupta that drama is not an imitation in such a literal sense; otherwise it would reduce itself into a burlesque. Perhaps it is not correct to think that imitation is the only meaning of *anukarana*. One could hardly contest that there is a typification involved in all dramatization. This is obvious from the kind of instructions Bharata gives to actors enacting different kinds of roles. If one is acting out the role of a king, one must walk with an upright posture and dress in a certain way; one must not laugh boisterously and must speak in Sanskrit. These instructions are borne out of the desire for typification of kingly behavior.

However, if roles are only reduced to types, then acting would become extremely mechanical. Thus what is missed by Abhinavagupta in his understanding of Bharata is the role of particulars in drama. There is no doubt that emotions in drama are generalized; that is why each person is able to identify his own life with them; this generalization, however, is through concrete particulars. Rama is a king, he belongs to the kingly type; but inasmuch as the *Uttaramcharitam* is a play revolving round the life of Rama, the concrete particulars of Rama's life are equally important for this rendering. Aristotle beautifully elaborated this idea by showing how poetry is the manifestation of universals through particulars. The same point can be understood in terms of the relationship between 'tokens' and 'types'. Rama is the token of righteous type of a king. But inasmuch as drama is not a lecture on morals, it does not instruct people to follow the path of morality by giving them sermons. On the contrary, it concretizes different types of human

situations, according to the different kinds of temperament of people (*svabhaava*); and shows the audiences the consequences of good or bad actions. This relationship between action and their consequences influences them to follow the path of virtue. Because of its moral content, Bharata calls *Natyashastra* the fifth Veda, asserting that it gives direction to people's conduct like the Vedas. The only difference lies in the mode of its instruction. While the four Vedas involve injunctions for ritualistic practices, the *Natyaveda* instructs with the help of entertainment, because it is playful (*kreedaniya*). The life of the protagonist of the play becomes an ideal for people to follow. Thus, in drama the details of the life of the hero are extremely important; it is, indeed, these which form the basis of the dramatic plot (*itivritta*).

Abhinavagupta underplays the role of the actor in the creation of a dramatic situation. To say that the actor does not feel anything for himself does not imply that he does not imaginatively reconstruct the emotive experience of the character he portrays. This fact is well brought out by Bharata's emphasis on *sattvikabhinaya* which highlights the value of internalization of the emotive experience on the part of actor. If this internalization was not necessary, then the actor's gestures (*angikabhinaya*), dialogue delivery (*vachikabhinaya*), costumes and make-up (*aharyabhinaya*) should have been enough for projecting the requisite dramatic situation. The fact that Bharata thinks it important for the actor to internalize the emotive experiences of the projected personage shows that he recognizes the value of actor's putative feelings. Explaining the nature of *Sattvika bhavas* Bharata writes:

“Now it may be questioned, ‘are these states (*Bhava*) called Temperamental because other states (determinants, Consequents and Transitory States) are said to be without the Temperament?’”⁶

The actors are aware that what they are rendering on the stage are not their personal emotions, and to that extent they are detached from them. But, to the extent that it is necessary for them to concentrate on the various nuances of emotive experiences, this concentration is possible only if they imaginatively reconstruct these emotions by internalizing them. Here the actor's body becomes a medium to engender the fictional situation. Unlike painting, sculpture or music where the fictional is rendered through lines, colors, volumes or sounds, which abstract from the situation as such, here the actor himself embodies the fictional through his gestures, language, emotive expressions and make-up. Thus, by his words and gestures the actor projects another's temperament (*parabhava*).

REFERENCES:

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3. *ibid.*, p. 240.
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