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Poetry in Motion: An Aesthetic Analysis of Vyloppilly's "Oonjalil" using Rasa Theory

M. N. Atheena

Associate Professor, Department of Malayalam, NSS College Cherthala, Kochuramapuram P.O., Alappuzha, Kerala - 688556, India; atheenamn@gmail.com

Abstract

The present study attempts an aesthetic analysis of Vyloppilly Sreedhara Menon's "*Oonjalil*" through the theoretical lens of Bharata's Rasa Theory. The study underscores the centrality of *Srngara Rasa* in the poem, with *rati* as its *stayibhava*, while examining the interplay of *vibhavas*, *anubhavas*, and *vyabhicaribhavas* in evoking aesthetic relish (*rasanubhava*). Drawing upon Abhinavagupta's doctrine of *abhivyakti* and Bhatta Nayaka's theory of *sadharanikarana*, the paper elucidates how "*Oonjalil*" transcends individual experience to attain a universalized, alaukika aesthetic state. The poet's deft use of evocative imagery, dramatic monologue, and suggestive allusions situates the poem within a sophisticated poetic tradition. Further, the study highlights the paradoxical coexistence of nostalgia and temporality, demonstrating how Vyloppilly elevates romantic yearning into an aestheticized perception of reality. By engaging with classical Indian aesthetics, this analysis offers fresh insights into the poem's emotional intensity, structural elegance, and poetic transcendence.

Keywords: *Dhvani*, *Rasanubhava*, Rasa Theory, *Rasasutra*, *Sadharanikarana*, *Srngara*, *Vyloppilly*.

1. Introduction

Bharatamuni asserts that Rasa constitutes the most fundamental element of dramaturgy. Notably, he states that nothing transpires in the absence of Rasa—*nahi rasaadrate kascidartha pravartate*—for without Rasa, no meaning is realized (Bhaskaran, 2004). The Alamkarikas, who succeeded Bharata, concur with this foundational principle, affirming that Rasa forms the very essence of poetry. However, it is imperative to acknowledge that individuals differ in their perceptions of concepts such as *Rasaswaroopa* and *Rasaswadaprakara*.

The Sanskrit term rasa encompasses a wide semantic range, denoting sap, juice, essence, water, flavour, and sentiments. Within the Vedas, rasa is primarily understood as relish, taste, and the quintessence of verbal meaning. The *Charaka Samhita* classifies rasa (taste) into six distinct types, collectively known as *Shadrasa*: Madhura (sweet), Amla (sour), Lavana (salty), Katu (pungent), Kashaya (astringent), and Tikta (bitter). The *Viswakosa* extends the semantic scope of rasa to include Gandha (smell), Svad (taste), Madhura (sweet), Tikta (bitter), Visha (poison), Raga (melody), the *Navarasas* (Sringara, Hasya, Karuna, Raudra, Vira, Bhayanaka, Bibhatsa, Adbhuta, and Shanta), *Dehabhatu* (tissues of the body), *Paradam* (the absolute), juice, water, and essence. The *Somarasa* mentioned in the Vedas is the divine beverage favoured by the devas. In the domain of aesthetics, the term rasa makes its earliest appearance in Vatsyayana's *Kamasutra*.

Originally, the term rasa appears to have been employed in a worldly sense. When diverse tastes such as sweet, salty, and sour are combined, they give rise to a new rasa distinct from its components. Though *dravya*, *vyanjana*, and *aushadhis* (medicinal ingredients) like jaggery, curd, or tamarind contribute their respective tastes to the whole in the formation of *Shadrasa*, it becomes impossible to distinguish them individually once they coalesce into a unified experience. Gastronomes and connoisseurs blend these diverse flavours during a satisfying repast, evoking in

*Author for correspondence

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themselves emotional states such as *harsha* (happiness). Similarly, *sahrdayas* relish the rasas that are invoked metaphorically and suggestively in aesthetic contexts, such as the enjoyment of a theatrical performance or the reading of a poem. Consequently, these aesthetic experiences have traditionally been designated by the term rasa. The source and objective correlative of *alaukika* rasas (extraordinary or otherworldly emotional states), such as *natya* rasas, are indeed the *laukika* rasas (worldly rasas) themselves. The consensus among scholars is that *natya* rasa and *kavya* rasa are fundamentally the same.

2. What is Rasa in Poetry?

Rasa constitutes the very soul not only of drama but also of poetry, as encapsulated in the dictum *Kavyasyatma* Rasa. In the heart of a *sahrdaya* endowed with refined aesthetic sensibility, rasa in poetry manifests itself in the same manner as it does in drama. The aesthetic enjoyment experienced by a spectator witnessing a dramatic performance and the delight relished by a *sahrdaya* while engaging with poetry are fundamentally identical. In drama, emotions are conveyed through an intricate interplay of language, style, dialogue delivery, and costume. In contrast, poetry attains its aesthetic appeal through elements such as *riti* (style), *guna* (merit), and *alankara* (figures of speech), all of which render it an object of aesthetic pleasure. Formal devices such as symbols, imagery, and figures of speech play an indispensable role in enhancing the relishability of poetry. The similarities between poetry and drama are striking; while the appreciation of poetry is predominantly aural, dramatic experience engages both visual and auditory faculties. Upon relishing a poem, a lingering impression remains in the mind of the reader. As one delves deeper into this experience, a vast emotional landscape unfolds within the psyche. This tranquil yet profound aesthetic immersion is what is termed *rasanubhava* in poetry.

Bharata's seminal formulation of rasa theory is enshrined in the *rasasutra*: *Tatra vibhavanubhava vyabhicari samyogad rasanishpattih* (Sukumarapillai, 1977). There exists a broad consensus among aestheticians regarding the foundational elements of rasa—*vibhava*, *anubhava*, and *vyabhicaribhava*. However, considerable exegetical debate has emerged around the precise meaning of *samyoga* and *nishpattih* within Bharata's cryptic formulation. Theories such as *Bhatta Lollata's Utpatti Vada, Sri Sankuka's Anumiti Vada*, *Bhatta Nayaka's Bhukti Vada*, and Abhinavagupta's Abhivyakti Vada constitute the most significant interpretations in this regard. While a detailed exposition of these theories falls outside the scope of the present study, it is nevertheless crucial to acknowledge that Bhatta Nayaka's conceptualization of *sadharanikarana* (universalization or generalization) in *Bhukti* Vada was later assimilated by Abhinavagupta, who, building upon it, developed his doctrine of *Abhivyakti* Vada. This progression of thought has since been widely accepted.

Abhinavagupta's perspective on the evocation of rasa posits that it is actualized through *abhivyakti*. Aesthetic experience, *rasanubhava*, and aesthetic relish are all instances of the *abhivyakti* of diverse bhavas as they manifest in the *sahrdaya* in the form of *vasanas*. This experience, however, is not *laukika* (worldly); rather, it is an *alaukika* phenomenon arising from the transcendence of *vibhava*, *anubhava*, and *vyabhicaribhava* beyond the mundane realm. Without these elements, *rasabhivyakti* remains an impossibility. Nevertheless, it would be erroneous to assert that rasa is produced by mere worldly causes, for rasa is inherently *alaukika*. If rasa were subject to the ordinary principles of causality, its resulting experience would also be *laukika*. In mundane existence, sorrow manifests as sorrow and fear as fear. However, within the realm of literature, emotions such as fear and sorrow undergo a metamorphosis into blissful aesthetic states. This transformation is facilitated by the process of *sadharanikarana*, which enables emotional states to transcend their personal and contingent dimensions, attaining a universalized and alaukika character. Consequently, even seemingly negative emotional states, when situated within the literary or artistic domain, become sublimated into sources of aesthetic delight. In this state of aesthetic immersion, the *sahrdaya* experiences a temporary effacement of self-centered consciousness, thereby achieving an aestheticized perception of reality. Viswanadha Kaviraja affirms that subjective bias is absent in the experience of rasa. Abhinavagupta goes even further, asserting that the power of *dhvani*, as realized through *aucitya*, *guna*, *alankara*, and other aesthetic principles, is sufficient to engender this transformation.

The concept of *sadharanikarana* was first introduced by Bhatta Nayaka, who, in an effort to challenge the dhvani theory, formulated a tripartite framework comprising *abhidhayakatva*, *bhavakatva*, and *bhojakatva*. Abhidha refers to the primary, literal meaning of words. *Bhavakatva*, according to Bhatta Nayaka, represents the universalized manifestation of *vibhavas*, wherein these determinants shed their empirical specificity and assume an *alaukika* status. While dramatic performance evokes rasa through the power of enacted representation, poetry achieves the same effect through *guna*, *alankara*, and other aesthetic devices. Due to the faculty of imagination, bhavas undergo a process of generalization and universalization. Within this schema, *abhidhayakatva* pertains to *artha*, *bhavakatva* to rasa, and *bhojakatva* to the *sahrdaya*. Abhidha enables the apprehension of literal meaning, *bhavakatva* facilitates *sadharanikarana*, and, through *sadharanikarana*, the faculty of *bhojakatva* allows the *sahrdaya* to internalize and relish rasa. This experience is often likened to the supreme state of aesthetic bliss, *Brahmananda*.

3. Rasa in the Poetry of Vailoppilly

Rasavinyasa finds effortless expression in *Mahakavyas* (epics), owing to their expansive and all-encompassing narrative framework. The evocation of rasa through the depiction of *vibhavas* and other associated elements is both seamless and convenient in such a broad canvas. In contrast, the more concise structure of *Khandakavyas* (narrative poetry or shorter epics) renders this process somewhat less accessible. The challenge intensifies further in the condensed and meticulously crafted realm of modern poetry, where the economy of expression imposes formidable constraints upon *Rasavinyasa*. This difficulty is especially pronounced in the evocatively rich poetic compositions of Vailoppilly, where diagnosing and analysing rasa becomes an exceedingly intricate and sophisticated task.

4. Analysing "Oonjalil"

"*Oonjalil*" ("On the Swing") is a poem that explores an unusual and deeply poignant form of marital love. Recognizing that only fleeting, ephemeral moments hold true significance in human life, the poet envisions such cherished experiences as the very certainties that sustain existence. Amidst the relentless struggles for survival and the persistent misunderstandings that afflict and corrode human relationships, these rare, serendipitous moments of joy serve as the sole sources of solace that render life endurable.

The protagonists of the poem are an aged married couple approaching the twilight of their lives. The intoxicating beauty of the moonlit night, the all-encompassing mist, and the fragrant breeze awaken in the hero a nostalgic and amorous yearning. The memories of a flower-adorned *Thiruvathira* night, thirty years past, flood his consciousness with an overwhelming sense of romantic reminiscence. The esteemed critic Ayyappa Panikker lauds this poem as a singularly unique creative masterpiece, perfected in the emotional intensity of *Sambhoga Srngara* (love in union) and silhouetted against the ethereal glow of misty moonlight (Ayyappapanikker K., 1985).

When examined through the theoretical framework of Bharata's rasa theory, it becomes evident that the predominant rasa of this poem is *Srngara*, with *rati* (love) as its *stayibhava*. The protagonists, bound by decades of conjugal love and companionship, serve as *alambana vibhavas* to each other. *Vibhavas*, in the context of aesthetic theory, denote the characters and situations that act as catalysts for the evocation (*vibhavana*) of rasa. In everyday communication, the causal factor of an emotional response is termed *karana*; in literature, this corresponds to *vibhava*. *Vibhavas* are classified into two distinct types: *alambana vibhava* and *uddipana vibhava*. In *Srngara* rasa, the characters themselves function as *alambana vibhavas* for one another, thereby facilitating the aesthetic experience of rasa in the sahrdaya. In "*Oonjalil*," the elderly couple unequivocally fulfill this role as *alambana vibhavas*.

It is only natural that one might question whether *Srngara* retains its relevance for protagonists who have long surpassed the prime of youth. A compelling counterargument lies in the assertion that while time may have etched its marks upon their physical forms, it has left their minds and emotions unscathed. The ravages of old age may erode the corporeal frame, but they do not necessarily diminish the Vasana of the human soul. The soul, untethered by the constraints of temporal decay, continues to experience love and desire with undiminished fervour until the very moment

it departs from its mortal vessel. As Kumaranasan eloquently observes (Kumaranasan, 1973),

"Vasanas flourish while life prevails,
Till breath departs and the body fails" (144).
A similar sentiment is expressed by Idasseri in his "Asokamanjari" (Nair I. G., 1988).
"Upon this Asoka tree as my eyes gaze,
A fire dormant in my dead veins is set ablaze.
Asleep for four decades, yet flames now arise,
While blood streams in this body, my spirit flies" (701).

(Both translations are mine.)

The situations and circumstances that serve to stimulate rasa are termed *uddipana vibhavas* (excitants). Elements such as the moon, a cool breeze, solitude, and sweet music have the power to incite love. In "*Oonjalil*", the seductive beauty of the *Thiruvathira* night bathed in moonlight, the chilling mist, the fragrant breeze, and the enveloping solitude function as *uddipana vibhavas*. Each of these elements rekindles in the hero's mind the fond reminiscences of their early days of conjugal bliss. The memories of the heroine's youthful physical charms and their shared experience of swaying on the swing until daybreak suffice to awaken rati in the romantic heart of the hero.

Anubhava refers to the abhinaya (expression) conveyed through *vak* (speech), *anga* (bodily gestures), and *sattva* (internal disposition). These are the visible effects experienced by characters when subjected to an emotion. They serve as the externalized bodily expressions through which an internal emotional state is made manifest. The etymology of *anubhava* can be traced to its fundamental nature: these responses are experienced (*anubhava*) by the characters themselves. The prefix anu connotes that which follows or accompanies; thus, if *vibhava* is the *karana* (cause), *anubhava* is the *karya* (effect). *Anubhavas* are categorized into two types—internal and external.

In the enraptured heart of the lover, where memories of early conjugal love continue to resonate, his beloved remains an enchantress. He gently offers to sway the swing if she consents to sit upon it. Her response is a tender smile—the sole remnant of her youthful charm. This smile, significantly, plays a pivotal role in sustaining *srngara* as the *angirasa* of the poem. Though the lover's words elicit no explicit verbal response from her, it is imperative to recognize the presence of implicit, condescending non-verbal cues. Her smile, in its quiet luminosity, subtly conveys her inner emotions. Given that *anubhava* constitutes the external manifestation of the *sthayi* bhava as induced internally, the heroine's smile in "*Oonjalil*" may be unequivocally identified as an *anubhava*.

Another striking observation demands attention: despite hearing her lover's impassioned words, she does not utter a single reply. Her only response is a smile. (The reader might recall the lines, "Her sole response, sans words yet bright, / was the sweetness of her smile's light" from the poem "Kudiyozhikkal".) This renders "*Oonjalil*" suggestive of the traits of a dramatic monologue. The poem also vividly captures the romantic goosebumps that seize the hero as he listens to the heroine sing '*Kalyani Kalavani*'. In this instance, both her song and the hero's horripilation serve as *anubhavas*. The physiological responses induced by emotional states find expression through bodily gestures, and the hero's goosebumps serve as a powerful vehicle for conveying his lovesick, romantic turmoil to the *sahrdaya*.

The etymology of *vyabhicari* in *vyabhicaribhava* can be traced to the Sanskrit verb *vyabhicar*, which is derived from vi- (a prefix denoting separation, deviation, or divergence), abhi- (a prefix signifying intensity or directionality), and car (a verbal root meaning "to move," "to act," or "to wander"). Thus, *vyabhicari* connotes movement, deviation, or transitory action. These fleeting emotional states, which arise and dissolve, reinforce the *stayibhava*. If the *stayibhava* is to be likened to a sovereign, the *vyabhicaribhavas* function as its attendant courtiers. That which moves towards rasa in myriad ways is designated as *sancaribhava* (*Vividhamabhimukhyena raseshu caranti: iti vyabhicarinah*). These emotional states do not attain the intensity requisite for full-fledged emotions, nor do they endure for long. Lacking independent status, they remain transient, subsidiary, and ephemeral.

In "*Oonjalil*", Vailoppilly alludes to the green-and-red-eyed warplane that soars like a predatory bird, a reference that evokes notions of 'human invincibility' (Gopinadhapillai N. R., 79). The poet may also be subtly alluding to the encroachment of materialism and mechanized culture upon the idyllic simplicity of village

life. However, he staunchly affirms his conviction that the menace of scientific advancement is ephemeral, whereas the eternal beauty of nature shall ultimately triumph. It is to underscore the enduring radiance of the *Thiruvathira* fireball that the poem accentuates the nightmarish specter of scientific progress. This functions as a *vyabhicaribhava* within the poem.

It is true that the warplane motif might initially seem incongruous in a poem where the rasa is *srngara*, and *rati* serves as the *stayi* bhava. Nevertheless, the sheer strength and vitality of the *stayin* allows even the ostensibly discordant *vyabhicaribhava* to be assimilated, rendering it an inadvertent yet effective aid. While war trauma (as exemplified in the poem "Padakkathile *Poompatta*") engenders sorrow and melancholia in the human soul, life is ultimately enriched by the enduring verities embodied in the *Thiruvathira* star. Consequently, even sorrow becomes an aesthetic experience.

Poignant and arresting images abound in "*Oonjalil*": golden strings brimming on the heroine's weasand inducing goosebumps in the hero, the heroine's metamorphosis into the daughter of Sage Kanva, and the poetic transfiguration of Vailoppilly into the 'Kalidasa of Malayalam' (Akkitham, 1986). The romantic imagination of the poet is consummately encapsulated in the superposition of the heroine as the Kanya of Kanvamamuni (the virgin daughter of Sage Kanva). Imagining her tenderness towards birds and animals, flora and fauna, the poet envisions the moonlit yard as the banks of the river Malini, the night sky with its moon and stars as wild jasmine (*vanajyotsna*) in full bloom, and the shadows beneath the mango tree as the resting *Dirghapanga*. The sahrdaya, who is captivated by this transformation of the front yard into the hermitage of Kanva, must also contemplate the profound mental transfiguration undergone by both the hero and the heroine. Thus, by infusing the genius of Kalidasa into the *Thiruvathira* night, Vailoppilly elevates *srngara* rasa in "*Oonjalil*" to its most exquisite and transcendent pinnacle.

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