



DEFINING ART AND AESTHETICS IN MYTHOLOGICAL TELE- REPRESENTATIONS

DR. DIVYA WALIA

Freelance Academic Editor
and Proof reader
INDIA

ABSTRACT

Rabindranath Tagore was against defining art because he believed that “definition of a thing which has a life growth is really limiting one’s vision in order to be able to see clearly”. He unconsciously defined it as the response of man’s creative soul to the Real” (Sharma 2) Since aesthetics is an important aspect of art which helps us in deciphering the nature of art, it is imperative to look at aesthetics before judging or reviewing any example of creative expression.

In Indian culture, mythological texts or representations hold considerable importance for being rich not only in spiritual worth but in aesthetic value too. Richard Chase defined “Myth as an aesthetic device for bringing the imaginary but powerful world of preternatural focus into a manageable collaboration with the objective/i.e. experienced/facts of life in such a way as to excite a sense of reality amenable to both the unconscious passions and the conscious mind.” (qtd. in Bruner 1960: 276) This capability of art to express emotional sentiments is referred to as Rasa in Sanskrit. Therefore, we have many writers in Hindi and Sanskrit discussing the beautiful forms of Lord Krishna or Rama or their devotional experiences with immense sensual appeal as a Rasa poetry, another name for aesthetics, precisely in poetry.

However, with the changing time the way we perceive art has definitely undergone a lot of transformation. Now art and aestheticism are being manipulated for entertainment and popularity. This paper will attempt to look at the concept of aestheticism in detail to understand it in the context of Indian mythology and will present examples of different tele series based on mythological stories to show the changing dynamics of art and creativity.

DR. DIVYA WALIA

1Page



INTRODUCTION

Rabindranath Tagore was against defining art because he believed that “defining a thing which has a life growth is really limiting one’s vision in order to be able to see clearly”. He unconsciously defined it as the response of man’s creative soul to the Real” (Sharma 2) Since aesthetics is an important aspect of art which helps us in deciphering the nature of art, it is imperative to look at aesthetics before judging or reviewing any example of creative expression.

In Indian culture, mythological texts or representations hold considerable importance for being rich not only in spiritual worth but in aesthetic value too. Richard Chase defined “Myth as an aesthetic device for bringing the imaginary but powerful world of preternatural focus into a manageable collaboration with the objective/i.e. experienced/facts of life in such a way as to excite a sense of reality amenable to both the unconscious passions and the conscious mind.” (qtd. in Bruner 1960: 276) This capability of art to express emotional sentiments is referred to as Rasa in Sanskrit. Therefore, we have many writers in Hindi and Sanskrit discussing the beautiful forms of Lord Krishna or Rama or their devotional experiences with immense sensual appeal as a Rasa poetry, the basis of aesthetics in poetry. In the literary compositions, the emotion of Bhakti as a feeling of adoration towards God was long considered only a minor feeling fit only for Stothras, but not capable of being developed into a separate rasa as the sole theme of a whole poem or drama..... It is the Bhagavata that gave the great impetus to the study of Bhakti from an increasingly aesthetic point of view.” The Rasas were first described by Bharata Muni भरत मुनी, an ancient Indian musicologist and theatrologist, in the Nāṭya Śāstra (Sanskrit: नाट्य शास्त्र, Nāṭyaśāstra), a Sanskrit Hindu text on dramatic theory and the performing arts, written between 200 BCE and 200 CE. Indian world of art, literature and media is based on aesthetic theory of rasa which refers to the essence of any artwork, capable of inducing emotional responses from the viewers. “Of particular concern to Indian drama and literature are the term 'Bhava' or the state of mind and rasa referring generally to the emotional flavors/essence crafted into the work by the writer and relished by a 'sensitive spectator'...”

The modern Indian television evolved by utilizing the concept of aesthetics to impress the audience. The cinema of yesteryears had at its root, theatre and drama and all the cinematic creations aimed at arousing various emotions of fear, disgust, humour, horror etc. But the aesthetic experiences are not limited to these mundane emotions. Aesthetic emotions also refer to emotions that are felt during aesthetic activity and/or appreciation.

These emotions may be of the everyday variety (such as fear, wonder or sympathy) or may be specific to aesthetic contexts. Examples of the latter include the sublime, the beautiful, and



the kitsch. In each of these respects, the emotion usually constitutes only a part of the overall aesthetic experience, but may play a more or less definitive role for that state.

Over the recent years, movies and tele series based on mythological texts or stories have taken the aesthetic experience for the viewers to a different level. Mythological stories are already rich in spiritual and aesthetic content and thus have the capability to appeal to the masses. In the words of Paul Ford, “Indian creation stories and other spiritual myths are repeatedly portrayed across the genres of art and life, and the resemblances of life and love to these stories are imbued with aesthetic beauty.” The cinematic and televisual media were peculiarly appropriate vehicles for the experience of the divine within the Indian religious context. This is partly because Hinduism lacks explicit distinctions between this world and the otherworld, and between the gods and human beings.

When represented and recreated on the celluloid, the emotional appeal of mythology touches a much higher plane thus enhancing the aesthetic experience of the viewers. It has been almost three decades that we all watched Ramanand Sagar’s The Ramayana on the television. Being the first of its kind, its journey to be a visual production on tele screen was not easy. Sagar was a deeply religious man, with a life-long devotion to the Tulsidas’s Ramcharitmanas, and was “involved for some twenty-five years in a group that met regularly to recite and discuss the Hindi epic” (Lutgendorf 1995, p. 325). His initial proposal to present Ramayana as a tele series of fifty-two episodes was rejected by Doordarshan mainly because the producers felt that the series could incite social discord. Finally, from January 1987 to 31 July 1988, this great epic ruled the Indian television with eighty and one hundred million Indians watching Ramayan, a 78-episode television series directed by Ramanand Sagar (Kumar 2006, 38).

Needless to say, once on screen, the tele representation of this great epic captured and won the heart of the Indian viewers. Indian mythology holds great reverence in the minds of the people and such tele series gave the viewers an opportunity to witness a new spiritual and aesthetic experience precisely of seeing the divine and experiencing the bhaav and bhakti. “Ramayana concretised a religious and aesthetic vision that was deeply imbricated with Hindu nationalism”, and it was received religiously by the enthusiastic viewers in their daily lives.”

However, these aesthetic aspirations of seeing the divine and experiencing devotion were well manipulated by the cinema makers; they could use their own imagination to reiterate the concept of gods and goddesses in the minds of the viewers. Even technology played an importance part in recreating the divine world that had existed till now in multiple visions in the minds of the devotees. “In the opening scene, Shiva and Brahma persuade Vishnu that he



must descend to earth as an avatar to save the world from destruction. Elizabeth Burch comments on the use of the split screen (with the lower half showing the ocean and the upper half the sun) which is utilised to transmit this theological message. She argues that this technique means that the characters “float suspended, electronically... against a dense background that is ‘painted’ to be shimmering ... The technical aspects ... relate to the religious narrative and audiences must know the story ... to know that. Vishnu is ... the ocean (Nara), which was spread everywhere before the creation of the universe ... In

Ramayana, Vishnu is represented in human form in the upper portion of the screen with the other gods” (Burch 2005, 509). This kind of artistic manipulation not only entertained the audience but also let them have an aesthetic experience of the seeing or coming closer to the Real.

Moreover, the projections of the myths and depictions of deities involve use of archaic costumes and locations as well. The makers of the tele series took good care to create that unrealistic world in the most realistic ways. Thus, we see the deities embellished with riches and jewellery, archaic yet glamorous. Such caricatures have greater appeal to the viewers as they see human forms just like themselves but at the same spiritually fascinating to the mind and spirit. Intensive research was carried out for the jewellery, clothes, weapons, armour, and crowns to create a distinct period look. The exotic locations ranging from earth to heaven comprising palatial buildings, dense forests, battlefields, mountain tops, river banks and other landscapes all added to make the story become powerful, appealing as well as convincing. Though the serial was being telecast with a purpose to reinforce moral and cultural values, yet one could sense the pleasure the viewers derived out of that weekly visit to the world of gods and goddesses and the spiritual experience it rendered. Similarly, the archaic phrases, addresses and expressions were also utilized to give the spectators a glimpse of the times they had only imagined so far. Such experiences on spiritual and aesthetic plane have a greater impact on the minds of the viewers. The key term here is “spectator devotees”, as images (both mental and physical) have always been important in the Indian tradition (Patton 2005, 16). Diana Eck explains that Hindus rarely say they are going to the temple to worship; rather they go to “stand in the presence of the deity and to behold the image with one’s own eyes, to see and be seen by the deity” (Eck 1985, 3). This kind of a worship gives them an opportunity to enjoy art, experience its aesthetics while also filling their minds with bhaav and bhakti towards their lord. The tele producers have well addressed these experiences through tele-creations of mythological stories and their increasing popularity even today reflects the need for human mind to seek artistic experiences imbued with spirituality in their mundane day to day routine.



Media today has evolved tremendously in its depictions and projections of reality. While, earlier the attempt would be to copy the original, today, it is mainly to recreate the original and as such art and aesthetics have received new dimensions. Aesthetics as an experience of beauty is well employed by the tele and film producers. Mythology is just one of the examples where the visual medium has demonstrated the scope of creativity and aesthetics. The recreations of that extra terrestrial world and its characters with superhuman qualities and appearance have immense sensory appeal for the masses, making it possible for them achieve new heights of artistic experience. In times to come, we can expect an even more colourful world full of aesthetic experiences for the joy of the audience as technology would make it possible to not only reach to the unknown but also project it through visual medium.

WORK CITED

- Bruner, Jerome S. (1960). 'Myth and Identity'. In Henry A. Murray (ed), Myth and Mythmaking. New York: George Braziller. 276-287
- Burch, Elizabeth. "Media Literacy, Cultural Proximity and TV Aesthetics: Why Indian soap operas work in Nepal and the Hindu diaspora." Media, Culture & Society 24. 2002. 571-579.
- Burch, Elizabeth. "Media Literacy, Aesthetics and Culture." Pp. 503-517 in Handbook of Visual Communication: Theory, Methods, and Media, edited by Ken Smith, Sandra Moriarty, Gretchen Barbatsis and Keith Kenney, Mahwah, NJ and London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc., 2005.
- Eck, Diana L. Darsan: Seeing the Divine in Image in India. 2nd edition. Chambersburg, PA: Anima Books, 1985
- Sharma, Kaushal K. Rabindranath Tagore's Aesthetics. New Delhi: Abhinav Publ., 1988. Print