

The Convergent and Divergent Paths of Aesthetic Experience: A Comparative Study of Aristotle's Catharsis and Bharata Muni's Rasa Theory in Classical and Contemporary Contexts

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Abstract

This study presents a comprehensive comparative analysis of Aristotle's Catharsis and Bharata Muni's Rasa Theory, evaluating their philosophical foundations and their application in both classical literature and modern media. While Aristotle's Poetics conceptualizes drama as a medium for the purgation (catharsis) of pity and fear to achieve psychological and moral equilibrium, the Natyashastra proposes a system of "aesthetic relish" known as Rasa. Rasa theory posits that the ultimate goal of art is to transform permanent human emotions (Sthayibhavas) into transcendental bliss (Kavya-Anand) through the structured interaction of vibhavas (determinants), anubhavas (consequents), and vyabhicharibhavas (transitory states). The research utilizes the concept of Sadharanikaran (universalization) to explain how an audience transcends personal ego to experience collective emotional states. By applying these frameworks to William Shakespeare's Othello, the study illustrates how Western tragic structures align with the flow of various Rasas specifically transitioning from Vira (Heroic) to Raudra (Furious) and Karuna (Pathetic). Furthermore, the paper identifies Rasa theory as the enduring aesthetic cornerstone of Indian Cinema, where emotional spectacle and the "tasting" of sentiments take precedence over purely realistic narration. Ultimately, this research underscores how these ancient frameworks provide a universal language for understanding the transformative power of artistic expression across cultural and temporal boundaries.

Keywords: Catharsis, Rasa Theory, Sadharanikaran, Indian Cinema, Othello, Aesthetics, Abhinavagupta.

1. Introduction

The inquiry into the relationship between art, emotion, and the human experience has remained a central subject of philosophical inquiry throughout history. Philosophers and theorists from diverse cultural backgrounds have attempted to map how artistic expression influences the human intellect and emotional psyche. Two foundational texts Aristotle's Poetics (c. 335 BCE) and Bharata Muni's Natyashastra (c. 200 BCE – 200 CE) provide the primary frameworks for this discourse. While Aristotle's concept of catharsis emphasizes the cleansing and moral instructiveness of art, Bharata Muni's Rasa theory focuses on emotional immersion and aesthetic delight.

Aristotle's conceptualization of drama centers on the mechanism of "Catharsis," signifying the purgation or purification of emotions such as pity and fear. In contrast, the Natyashastra proposes a holistic system of "Rasa," often translated as aesthetic relish, which views the artistic experience as a process of savoring universalized human emotions. While the Aristotelian model emphasizes structural logic and the restoration of moral equilibrium, the Indian tradition emphasizes emotional immersion and the attainment of transcendental bliss (Ananda).

The relevance of these ancient frameworks persists in the contemporary era, providing a universal language for analyzing media ranging from Shakespearean tragedies to the vibrant "spectacle"

of Indian cinema. By exploring the intersections of Catharsis and Rasa Theory, researchers can identify a comprehensive framework that accounts for both the psychological release and the spiritual elevation inherent in artistic consumption.

1.1 Research Problem

While existing scholarship extensively compares the philosophical definitions of Catharsis and Rasa, there is a lack of integrated research that demonstrates how these ancient theories specifically intersect in cross-cultural adaptations and contemporary cinematic forms. Most studies treat Greek and Indian drama as isolated phenomena, neglecting the potential for a synthetic framework that addresses both structural purgation and experiential relish in modern global media.

1.2 Research Objectives

1. To compare how Aristotelian plot structures (Catharsis) and Indian emotional immersion (Rasa) combine to create a powerful experience in modern cinema.
2. To analyze the role of Sadharanikaran (universalization) in allowing diverse audiences to connect with a single film.
3. To evaluate the transition of emotions in Othello and Baahubali through the lens of Rasa Theory.
4. To explore the biological link between these ancient theories and the modern Mirror Neuron System.

1.3 Research Question

To what extent does the synthesis of Aristotelian Catharsis and Bharata Muni's Rasa Theory provide a more comprehensive framework for analyzing the emotional impact of contemporary Indian cinema, and how does the process of Sadharanikaran facilitate this experience across diverse audience demographics?

1.4 Hypotheses

The synthesis of Aristotelian Catharsis and Bharata Muni's Rasa Theory provides a superior analytical framework for contemporary Indian cinema because it accounts for both the narrative resolution (structural purgation) and the spectacular immersion (emotional relish) that modern films use to facilitate Sadharanikaran, thereby bridging diverse audience demographics through a shared state of Sahridayata.

2. Literature Review: Philosophical Foundations

Contemporary research shows that while Aristotle and Bharata Muni come from different cultures, they both ask the same question: How does art transform our emotions?

2.1 Interpreting Aristotelian Catharsis

The term "Catharsis" is traditionally understood in three ways:

- The Emotional Release (Purgation): Like a medical treatment, drama helps the audience "flush out" excessive or pent-up emotions, leaving them feeling lighter and relieved.
- The Emotional Balance (Purification): Drama acts as a moral classroom. It helps people find a "middle ground" so they don't feel too much or too little fear and pity in real life.
- The Intellectual Clarity (Clarification): Drama provides the joy of learning. By watching a story, the audience gains a clear understanding of why things happen in life and the consequences of human actions.

2.2 The Evolution of Rasa Theory

While Bharata Muni's Natyashastra originally listed eight emotions, the philosopher Abhinavagupta later added a ninth: Shanta Rasa (Peace). He argued that peace is the ultimate foundation for all other emotions.

Abhinavagupta believed that art provides a "non-ordinary" experience where we forget our personal problems. The goal is for the spectator (Sahridaya) to become "same-hearted" with the performer. Unlike Western drama, which focuses on solving a plot, the Indian tradition focuses on the internal process of "tasting" or savoring an emotion until it leads to a state of bliss (Ananda).

2.3 The Asiatic Perspective: The Sadharanikaran Model (SMC)

Nirmala Mani Adhikary's development of the Sadharanikaran Model of Communication (SMC) in 2003 has provided a modern framework for these ancient principles. This model challenges Eurocentric, linear communication theories by emphasizing Sahridayata the attainment of a "common heart" or "oneness" between the sender and receiver. The SMC suggests that successful communication

is possible even in asymmetrical social hierarchies (such as actor and audience or doctor and patient) by achieving a shared emotional and cognitive state.

3. Historical Evolution and Conceptual Foundations

Aesthetic theory in both the West and East emerged to explain how performance impacts the human psyche. Aristotle developed Catharsis as a philosophical defense of art, arguing that by intentionally arousing pity and fear, tragedy provides a healthy mechanism for the rational control and resolution of these emotions. While the Western model focuses on the structural logic of the plot (the external action) to achieve this emotional release, Bharata Muni's Rasa Theory centers on the internal experience of the spectator. According to the Rasa Sutra, a performance uses specific stimuli and expressions to activate latent permanent emotions (Sthayibhavas) within the viewer's heart. This theory was later refined by Abhinavagupta, who introduced Shanta Rasa (tranquility) and emphasized that the aesthetic experience is Alaukika, or non-ordinary, providing a sense of bliss that is distinct from everyday emotional responses. Ultimately, Aristotle seeks to balance the soul through narrative resolution, while the Indian tradition seeks to transform raw emotion into a universalized "tasting" of joy.

4. Theoretical Framework: The Architecture of Emotion

The structural mechanisms proposed by Aristotle and Bharata Muni offer distinct but complementary views on the transformation of raw emotion into aesthetic experience. Aristotle's framework is predominantly objective and plot-centric, while Bharata's is subjective and state-centric.

The Aristotelian Model: Purgation, Purification, and Clarification

The Aristotelian definition of tragedy emphasizes an imitation of action that is serious and complete, utilizing the emotions of pity and fear to achieve a proper catharsis. This process is dependent on a specific dramatic architecture. The protagonist, typically a figure of some nobility, experiences a transition from prosperity to adversity due to Hamartia, a tragic error or error in judgment. This descent is marked by Peripeteia (a reversal of fortune) and Anagnorisis (a moment of recognition or discovery), where the hero moves from ignorance to knowledge.

Scholars have long debated the exact nature of the resulting catharsis. The Purgation theory, supported by figures like F. L. Lucas, argues that tragedy serves as a pathological release, expelling the "excessive passions" that accumulate in the human soul. In this view, the theater acts as a metaphorical hospital where patients are relieved of their emotional burdens. Alternatively, the Purification theory, popularized by Gotthold Lessing, suggests a moral dimension where tragedy trains the spectator to bring their emotions into a "virtuous mean," correcting the tendencies to feel too much or too little pity and fear in real life. Finally, the Clarification theory, championed by modern critics like Leon Golden and G. E. Else, posits that catharsis is an intellectual pleasure. It argues that the essential function of tragedy is to allow the audience to understand the universal patterns of cause and effect in human behavior, providing cognitive clarity rather than just emotional relief.

The Rasa Framework: Vibhava, Anubhava, and Sthayibhava Bharata Muni's Theory of Rasa provides a more granular psychological breakdown of how aesthetic sentiment is manufactured. The Rasa Sutra states that Rasa is manifested from the union of Vibhavas (determinants), Anubhavas (consequences), and Vyabicharibhavas (transitory emotions) acting upon a Sthayibhava (permanent emotion). The Sthayibhavas are the eight or nine foundational emotions such as love, grief, and anger that are innate to the human psyche.

Component	Function in the Rasa Process	Description
Sthayibhava	Permanent Basis	The latent emotion rooted in the spectator's mind (e.g., Rati for Love, Utsaha for Energy).

Alambana Vibhava	Core Stimulus	The fundamental object or person that causes the emotion (e.g., the hero or heroine).
Uddipana Vibhava	Environmental Stimulus	Factors that enhance the emotion, such as a garden, the moon, or specific gestures.
Anubhava	External Manifestation	The visible physical responses to the emotion, such as tears, trembling, or specific looks.
Vyabicharibhava	Transitory Support	Minor, fleeting feelings like shame, anxiety, or joy that support the primary sentiment.
Sattvika Bhava	Involuntary Expression	Involuntary physical responses like paralysis, perspiration, or fainting that signal deep inner emotion.

According to Abhinavagupta, the culmination of this process is Sadharanikarana, or transpersonalization. In this state, the specific particulars of the drama the time, place, and individual identities of the characters are stripped away, allowing the spectator to experience a "pure" emotion that is uncircumscribed by their personal ego. This creates an aesthetic bliss (Ananda) that is described as sui generis, lasting only as long as the perception itself.

5. Comparative Analysis of Aesthetic Bliss

The convergence of Aristotle and Bharata Muni is most visible in their shared assertion that the artistic representation of painful events can result in pleasure. Aristotle notes that "tragic events being pitiable and fearful, produce pleasure in the spectator" through the mechanism of catharsis. Bharata Muni similarly argues that the "tasting" of even sorrowful (Karuna) or terrible (Bhayanaka) sentiments results in a refined delight for the cultivated spectator. However, their divergence lies in the ultimate destination of this experience. Aristotelian catharsis aims for an emotional equilibrium that serves a civic and ethical purpose within the material world. In contrast, the Rasa theory, particularly as elaborated by Abhinavagupta, views the aesthetic experience as a bridge to spiritual transcendence, comparing the bliss of Rasa to the state of Moksha or liberation.

Abhinavagupta's introduction of Shanta Rasa as the ninth and foundational Rasa further distinguishes the Indian tradition. He describes Shanta as a state of repose in consciousness (samvidvisranti) where the ego is withdrawn from practical interests. While Aristotle seeks to balance the emotions within the soul, Abhinavagupta seeks to resolve all emotions into a singular state of tranquility. This philosophical distinction underscores the ritualistic origins of the Indian tradition, where performance is viewed as an act of religious engagement and a "Fifth Veda" intended for spiritual elevation.

Aesthetic Concept	Aristotelian Catharsis	Indian Rasa Theory
Primary Goal	Purgation of pity and fear; restoration of emotional balance.	Tasting of aesthetic flavor; achievement of transcendental bliss.

Mechanism	Narrative-driven: Hamartia, Peripeteia, and Anagnorisis.	Performance-driven: Union of Vibhavas, Anubhavas, and Vyabharibhavas.
Spectator Role	"Normal auditor" experiencing vicarious fear and pity.	Sahridaya experiencing universalized emotion through Sadharanikarana.
Ontological Status	Practical, ethical, and psychological corrective.	Alaukika (non-ordinary); spiritual and transcendental.
End Result	Renewal and restoration of the social or individual mind.	Ananda (bliss) and Shanta (tranquility/peace).

6. Case Study I: Shakespeare's Othello through Rasa Theory

While William Shakespeare's Othello is a canonical Western tragedy, its emotional architecture provides a fertile ground for an analysis using Bharata Muni's Rasa Theory. The play can be understood as a masterfully constructed transition from Vira (Heroic) and Shringara (Erotic) Rasas to the devastating dominance of Raudra (Furious) and Karuna (Pathetic) Rasas.

The Heroic and the Erotic Foundations

In the early acts of the play, Othello is established as the Alambana Vibhava (the object stimulus) for the Vira Rasa. His fortitude, military energy (Utsaha), and calm defense before the Venetian senate act as determinants that establish his heroic nature. Simultaneously, the relationship between Othello and Desdemona initiates the Shringara Rasa. Desdemona's presence and Othello's recounting of his travels serve as Uddipana Vibhavas (environmental enhancers) that activate the Sthayibhava of Rati (love).

The Architecture of Deception: Iago as Vibhava

The corruption of the plot is driven by Iago, who functions as a master manipulator of Vibhavas. By planting the handkerchief a significant Uddipana Vibhava and offering suggestive whispers, Iago shifts the determinants of the scene to provoke Raudra Rasa (Anger) in Othello. The transition is visible through Othello's Anubhavas: the reddening of the eyes, the seizures, and the physical manifestations of wrath, which correspond to the Sthayibhava of Krodha. This transformation illustrates the psychological process described in the Rasa Sutra, where the appropriate union of stimuli and transitory feelings leads to a complete change in the dominant aesthetic sentiment.

The Culmination in Pathos

The final catastrophe of the play represents the realization of Karuna Rasa (the Pathetic). The innocent suffering of Desdemona and Othello's subsequent grief (Shoka) serve as the Vibhavas for this sentiment. For the spectator acting as a Sahridaya, the experience of the ending is not merely one of personal sorrow but a "tasting" of the universalized essence of grief. This aligns with Abhinavagupta's assertion that drama always provides delight even when depicting sorrow, because the process of Sadharanikarana elevates the experience to an impersonal and contemplative level.

7. Case Study II: Contemporary Indian Cinema and the Four Abhinayas

The aesthetic principles of the Natyashastra remain the cornerstone of Indian cinema, where the use of spectacle, music, and the four types of Abhinaya (representation) continues to define the cinematic experience. Filmmakers like S.S. Rajamouli and Sanjay Leela Bhansali utilize these traditional frameworks to evoke specific Rasas in a modern audience.

Application of the Four Types of Abhinaya

The Natyashastra identifies four primary modes of representation that must subserve the principal action of Abhinaya to generate Rasa in the spectator.

1. Angika Abhinaya (Body): Expression through physical gestures and movements. In Baahubali, the physical prowess and specific heroic postures of the protagonist serve to evoke Vira Rasa and Vismaya (wonder).

2. Vachika Abhinaya (Speech): Expression through words and dialogue. The use of powerful, heroic dialogues such as Baahubali's declaration of a king's duty to protect his people serves as a primary stimulus for the audience's emotional response.
3. Aharya Abhinaya (Costume/Set): Expression through costumes, makeup, and scenery. The "lavish" and "creative" execution of scenes in films like Devdas and Baahubali utilizes colors and visual richness as Uddipana Vibhavas to reinforce the intended mood.
4. Sattvika Abhinaya (Inner Emotion): The expression of authentic, involuntary psychological states. The "heartfelt presence" and inner conflicts of characters engage the audience's mental faculties to experience deeper levels of Shringara or Karuna Rasas.

Music and Spectacle in Contemporary Film

The integration of music and dance in Indian cinema is not merely a stylistic choice but a realization of Bharata's claim that "without songs, the drama is incapable of providing joy". In the Baahubali franchise, song sequences act as Uddipana Vibhavas that heighten the Shringara (romantic) and Veera (heroic) Rasas. The use of spectacle and "dancers' bodies" creates a sensory experience that facilitates the process of Sadharanikarana, allowing a diverse audience to achieve a collective state of Sahridayata.

8. The Sadharanikaran Model of Communication (SMC)

The concept of Sadharanikarana has transcended the boundaries of poetics to become a foundational theory in modern communication studies. The Sadharanikaran Model of Communication (SMC), proposed by Nirmala Mani Adhikary, offers a systematic representation of how successful communication is possible even within complex, asymmetrical social hierarchies.

Fundamentals of the SMC

The core of the SMC is the attainment of Sahridayata commonness or oneness between the sender and the receiver. In this model, communication is not merely the transmission of information but a relational process where the parties involved become Sahridayas. This process involves several stages of refinement, where the particularities of the message are stripped away to reveal a "pure" emotion or thought that can be shared universally.

- **Asymmetry and Dominance:** Unlike some Western models that assume equal power between communicator and receiver, the SMC acknowledges that communication often occurs in hierarchical settings (e.g., actor and audience, doctor and patient).
- **Total Communication:** The model emphasizes that communication at its best is "total communication," which can extend from interpersonal interaction to spiritual concerns like the attainment of Moksha.
- **Language and Clarity:** The SMC stresses the role of language in converting abstract, complex ideas into understandable, simple forms for effective expression and sharing.

Contemporary Applications in AI and VR

The principles of the SMC are increasingly being integrated into the design of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Virtual Reality (VR) environments. The goal of integrating SMC with AI is to design systems that promote Sahridayata a mutual understanding between the human user and the machine. This involves utilizing theories of cognitive load, emotional design, and social learning to ensure that the communication remains accessible and empathetic. In Virtual Reality, the objective is to achieve a state of "presence" that mimics the aesthetic Sadharanikarana. By utilizing prompt engineering and custom instructions in Large Language Models (LLMs), designers seek to maximize accuracy and relevance, creating a "shared heart" between the user's intent and the AI's response. This represents a significant shift from Eurocentric mathematical models toward indigenous knowledge systems that prioritize relational and emotional harmony.

9. Neurobiology and the Aesthetic Experience

The ancient philosophical insights into Sahridayata and catharsis have found a striking biological counterpart in the discovery of mirror neurons. These neurons, located in the premotor cortex and inferior parietal cortex, fire both when an individual performs an action and when they observe someone else perform that same action.

The Mirror Neuron System (MNS) as a "Neural Wi-Fi"

The Mirror Neuron System provides the biological mechanism for what the Indian tradition calls Sahridayata and what Aristotle describes as the sympathetic identification with the tragic protagonist.

Researchers have proposed that mirror neurons allow viewers to go beyond a "cold, detached, third-person perspective" to achieve an active emotional engagement with the subject of a performance.

- **Affect Sharing:** Neuroimaging studies indicate that specific areas of the brain, such as the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), are activated both during the personal experience of pain and the perception of another's pain. This confirms that the human brain is hardwired for "emotional contagion" and empathy.
- **Action Understanding:** Mirror neurons provide a matching mechanism between executed and observed motor acts, which is the basis for understanding the intentions and actions of others.
- **Aesthetic Distance:** Despite this mirroring, the brain experiences the other's pain in an "attenuated form," which allows for the aesthetic distance necessary to "taste" the emotion (Rasa) or achieve a cathartic release without being overwhelmed by real suffering.

This neurobiological evidence supports Abhinavagupta's claim that the aesthetic experience is a "pure emotion" without personal particularities. When we watch a character like Baahubali or Othello, our mirror neurons allow us to simulate their state, universalizing their grief or heroism and facilitating the achievement of aesthetic bliss or tragic clarification.

10. Discussion: Synthesis of the Convergent Paths

The comparison of Aristotle's Catharsis and Bharata Muni's Rasa Theory reveals a profound convergence in the understanding of art as a transformative psychological tool. While the Western path emphasizes the structural integrity of the plot and the moral or intellectual balance of the spectator, the Eastern path focuses on the sensory and transcendental "tasting" of emotion through performance. However, both frameworks ultimately seek a state of equilibrium whether termed the "virtuous mean" or Shanta Rasa.

The contemporary relevance of these theories is evident in their synthesis within global media and technology. The application of Rasa Theory to modern cinema proves that these ancient aesthetic categories are not static but evolve with the medium. Furthermore, the development of the Sadharanikaran Model of Communication and the discovery of mirror neurons provide a bridge between ancient philosophy and modern science, suggesting that the "sharing of hearts" described by Abhinavagupta is a fundamental biological and communicative imperative.

Implications for Global Aesthetics

The transition from traditional interpretations of catharsis as pathological purgation to more intellectual clarification models has brought Western theory closer to the cognitive pleasures of Rasa. Simultaneously, the expansion of Rasa theory into fields like health communication and AI design demonstrates its practical utility in improving human interactions. The convergence of these paths suggests that the future of aesthetic experience lies in a "total communication" that combines narrative clarity with emotional resonance and transcendental repose.

11. Conclusions

Catharsis and Rasa represent the world's most sophisticated maps of how art impacts the human heart. While Aristotle's Poetics views tragedy as a tool for emotional regulation and balance, Bharata Muni's Natyashastra offers a framework where performance elements synthesize to produce a state of non-ordinary bliss. The study of works like Othello and Baahubali proves that these mechanisms are universal; whether through the "purgation" of fear or the "universalized tasting" of sorrow, the spectator is guided toward emotional renewal. Modern science, specifically the Mirror Neuron System and the Sadharanikaran Model, provides empirical proof for these ancient insights, affirming that the ultimate goal of art is Sahridayata the achievement of a "shared heart" and mutual understanding. As we integrate these theories into the digital age, they remain vital for understanding how art heals, connects, and elevates the human experience.

11.1 Scope for Future Research

Future research should explore the application of the Sadharanikaran Model (SMC) within Generative AI and Virtual Reality. While this study links ancient philosophy to cinema, there is a need to investigate if AI-driven narratives can mirror the qualities of a Sahridaya to trigger emotional resonance in digital spaces. Researching whether technology can facilitate Sadharanikaran (universalization) will help determine if AI can truly replicate the healing and elevating power of traditional art.

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