

Reading Goya's Painting *Saturn Devouring his Son* and Dalí's Painting *The Face of War* through *Rasa* Theory

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Abstract: This paper utilises the classical Indian aesthetic theory of *Rasa* grounded in Bharatamuni's (1st millennium BCE) *Nāṭyaśāstra* to make sense of two canonical modern Spanish paintings: Francisco Goya's *Saturn Devouring his Son* (c. 1820–1823) and Salvador Dalí's *The Face of War* (1940). Both the paintings were painted during wars and have traditionally been viewed under Western aesthetic frameworks. In a break with this orientation, the current study takes an Orientalist turn where it adopts the classical Indian aesthetic framework to examine works set in a modern European cultural setting rather than apply Western literary theories to discuss Indian texts. The paper puts the viewer's response ahead of the artist's intentions, placing it within hermeneutics of art. Utilizing the perspective of *Rasa* theory, the research exposes which *Sthayibhavas* (mental states) are aroused in the viewer: *Bībhatsam* (odious/disgust) and *Bhayānakam* (terrible/fear) are present in Goya's painting, while both *Bhayānakam* and *Kāruṇyam* (compassion/empathy) arise collectively within Dalí's. The analysis proves that *Rasa* theory operates as a formidable cross-cultural interpretive methodology that not only travels across spatial-temporal frameworks but also describes emotional complexities beyond dueling narratives of the art's power from the simply terrifying to the transcendent, and horror to empathy. According to the paper, the *Sthayibhavas* 'distributed in both paintings' allows the viewer to pass beyond stable cultural and historical meaning into fixed reading which affirms *Rasa* (an aesthetic flavor) theory as an appropriate and fruitful methodology for cross-cultural deploy of Western fine art.

Keywords: *Rasa* theory, *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Goya, Dalí, modern Spanish painting, cross-cultural aesthetics, *Sthayibhava*, comparative philosophy, hermeneutics.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

A distinguished Indian Literary Critic Suresh Joshi in an essay "on Interpretation" published in his work *Chintayami Manasa* in 1983 discusses the idea of interpretation. He suggests, "In our terminology *artha* is not meaning, but *rasa*. Thus interpretation means an analysis of the aesthetic process and the obstacles in its realisation" [1]. Acknowledging it as a point of departure that sets out the parameters for the present research work, this paper is an attempt to delve into depiction of mental conditions such as sorrow, anger, energy, disgust, fear and astonishment that would be discussed through the *Rasa* theory from ancient India propounded in *Nāṭyaśāstra* by Bharatamuni in two paintings i.e. *Saturn devouring his son* (c.1820-1823) and *The Face of War* (1940) by the modern Spanish painters, Goya and Dalí respectively. For this purpose, the paper intends to locate this exercise within the framework of the hermeneutics of the art where the connection between a text and a reader has gradually evolved to be direct and personal. It would take into

¹G. N. Devy (ed.), *Indian Literary Criticism*, Second Edition, Suresh Joshi, "On Interpretation", Orient BlackSwan, New Delhi, p. 185.

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consideration the viewer's response rather than the artist's intention. The focus period is modern Spain i.e. 19th and 20th century as this is the period when the identity of Spain as a modern nation is determined owing to a myriad of changes in epistemological beliefs that it witnesses. The research work aims to analyze a seminal painting of the two great painters Goya and Dalí from modern Spain to understand the emotions depicted through it by reading them through *Rasa* theory and moving the spectator/viewer beyond any specific spatial-temporal definitions.

The two paintings selected for the study have been created against war in the backdrop. Another great Spanish master who has painted against war as the theme of his work is Pablo Picasso and his painting is *Guernica* (1937) that is in the Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid, Spain.

The present study appears reverse in relation to what has been done thus far in this field, especially in relation to the works done by the Orientalists. The primary concern of the Orientalists has been to look at Indian texts through Western Literary theories. Nevertheless, the argument of this study is that how a Classical Indian theory of aesthetic experience may very well explain the etchings set in a modern European culture i.e. Spanish in this case and that it is worthy to deconstruct the complex semiotic milieu of these paintings along with acknowledging the already established interpretations of these exemplary pieces of art in a specific space and time. The paper intends to delimit by not entering into the realm of cultural relativism in this work.

Some of the works that exist on interpretation of the two selected paintings are primarily studied through the western aesthetics' framework. The major works are *Goya* (2003) by Robert Hughes, *Goya in Perspective* (1973) by Fred Licht. Both the works describe his paintings invoking fear and disgust, however, the readings are based on western theories.

Dalí's paintings have been studied by various critics such as Dawn Ades who in his work on *Dalí World of Art* (1982) deeply studies his paintings by locating them in their socio-political contexts. The work studies Dalí as an avant-garde, surrealist painter, however, it also reads his paintings through psycho-analysis, the possible influence of Freud and Lacan on him.

The present research work aims to read the two selected paintings from modern Spain through the ancient Indian *Rasa* theory by taking at the viewer's gaze into consideration as a primary focus.

Within this framework, the aim of the paper is to address the following questions:

- How can Indian aesthetic theory of *Rasa* be applied to interpret modern Spanish paintings?
- Can it unravel a new angle of interpretation of a piece of art i.e. *Saturn devouring his Son* and *The Face of War* by recognizing that no final interpretation of a work exists as its significance lies beyond the artist's intention?
- Can *Rasa* provide a cross-cultural methodology for analysing visual art beyond its original cultural context?

The first question enables to analyze the transcendental value of aesthetic theory or philosophy drawing from the ideas expressed by Arindam Chakrabarti and Ralph Weber in their book *Comparative Philosophy without Borders* (2016). Further reading the mental conditions in the select modern Spanish paintings through *Rasa* to find out the new possible interpretations that these paintings contain within them.

Painting, that is attributed as one of the major fine arts, is both a process and a product, and it provides a wide scope to its observers to read the aesthetic processes involved in its composition as well as find out a new meaning each time one looks at it. As a corollary to the complexity of its fabric, it enables its observers to find out the "transcendental signified" (Derrida 1967) that it encompasses. Painting transcends the mimetic function that it is initially attributed for. Its interpretation cannot be confined to any spatial-temporal limits as its power lies in the fact that it surpasses the acuties to reveal emotional, psychological, and even spiritual levels of human conditions.

The authorship of *Nāṭyaśāstra* is attributed to Bharatamuni that dates back to 1st millennium BCE. It is regarded as the oldest surviving work on the theory of Sanskrit Poetics and it contains the first exposition of the *Rasa* theory but not just limited to it since it is a corpus that is also considered as an additional Veda. *Nāṭyaśāstra* that is considered to be a compendium of performed arts and rules for drama and poetry includes a section, chapter 6 to be precise, on *Rasa*. In "On *Natya* and *Rasa*: Aesthetics of Dramatic Experience" from *Bharata Natya Manjiri* by G. K. Bhatt in 1975 the following sums up for us the scope of the *rasa*.

The term *rasa* has a twofold significance: It means the 'aesthetic content' of literary art and also 'aesthetic relish' which the reader-spectator enjoys [2].

²G. N. Devy (ed.), *Indian Literary Criticism*, Second Edition, "On *Natya* and *Rasa*: Aesthetics of Dramatic Experience", Orient BlackSwan, New Delhi, p. 6.

There are primarily eight Rasas or rhetorical sentiments recognized in *Nāṭyaśāstra* that are namely *Śṛṅgārah* (erotic), *Hāsyam* (comic), *Raudram* (furious), *Kāruṇyam* (pathetic), *Bībhatsam* (odious), *Bhayānakam* (terrible), *Veeram* (heroic) and *Adbhutam* (marvellous). *Santarasa* (peace) was added later to the eight rasas, attributed to Abhinavagupta in 10th century, an erudite scholar of his times, and thus evolved the concept of *nava rasas*. The mental conditions or *Sthayibhava* related to each of the rasas listed earlier are respectively love, laughter, anger, sorrow, disgust, fear, energy and astonishment; for *Santarasa* it is deliverance.

In Indian aesthetics a *rasa* is referred to nectar, juice, sap or essence. It is a value that attributes to the experience of a *rasa* in any literary, visual or musical piece of art that is represented as *rasa-anubhava*. According to the *Rasa* theory an observer seeks entertainment in a piece of an art, however it cannot only limit itself to that. The primary goal of it is take the observer away from his/her time and space into a reality that is made up of his/her own consciousness. There is a presiding deity and a colour associated with each of the rasas that we intend to take into account while studying the paintings in the section of this work that follows next.

Understanding selected Modern Spanish Paintings: *Saturn devouring his son* by Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes



Source: <https://www.franciscogoya.com/saturn-devouring-his-son.jsp>

When we study 18th and 19th century Spain's celebrated artist Francisco Goya's painting *Saturn devouring his son*, *Saturno devorando a su hijo* in Spanish, that is one of the fourteen Black Paintings that he had etched on the walls of his house somewhere between 1819 and 1823. This painting depicts the Greek myth of Titan Cronus, who is Saturn when romanized, eating his own child fearing a curse that he would be dethroned by one of his own children. It was transferred to canvas after Goya's death in 1828 and has since been on display in Museo del Prado, the Prado Museum, in Madrid, Spain. The painting was not made for public. Goya probably didn't intend to convey its significance. Although he could have been inspired of the Baroque style painting from 1636 on same theme with the same name by a Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens. Goya's painting *Saturn devouring his Son* is considered as one of the scariest paintings of all times that can be seen as an allegory to the situation of destruction in Spain in those times created due to endless wars. Goya also painted a series of 82 prints on war that are titled collectively as *Disasters of War* (1810-1820), and his other two very important works on war titled *The Second of May 1808* and *The Third of May 1808* in 1814 against the backdrop of Napoleon led French Army into Spain resulting in the Peninsular War where Spain and Portugal fought along with the United Kingdom against the French occupancy of the Iberian Peninsula.

Upon looking at this painting in the realm of *Rasa* theory, it evokes the *Sthayibhava* or the mental conditions of disgust and fear in the spectator, thus producing the rasas *Bībhatsam* (odious) and *Bhayānakam* (terrible) respectively. The presiding deity of *Bībhatsam* is *Shiva* and the colour associated with it is blue. The presiding deity of *Bhayānakam* is *Yama*

and the colour associated with it is black. In the painting, it is noticed that the backdrop is painted in black, probably owing it to the sense of disgust caused by the destruction lead by the endless wars in 18th and 19th century, a theme which is recurring in many other paintings by Goya. The colour blue cannot be seen, however, the disfigured body of the child evokes fear in the spectator/viewer/onlooker. This fear can also be seen in the eyes of Saturn who eventually is dethroned by one of his own children. Unlike the rendering of the same myth by Paul Peter Rubens, the face of the child being eaten cannot be seen. The dissolving body of the child is placed in the centre and also that of Saturn's. Saturn's face is seen that is full of desperation and fear. One can trace all of physicality, violence and grotesqueness merely by looking at Saturn in this painting.

Passing through personal trauma Goya in this painting has depicted horror, terror, disgust, aversion, anger. It resembles with the idea of devastation and destruction, maybe a face of *raudra* (rage). The viewer is filled with fear and disgust as well as with awe, thus, moving beyond the binaries of the interpretation of a piece of art.

***The Face of War* by Salvador Dalí:**



Source: <https://www.dalipaintings.com/the-face-of-war.jsp>

The oil painting titled *La Cara de la Guerra* in Spanish was painted by the famous Spanish surrealist painter, Salvador Dalí in 1940 during his brief stint in California, United States of America. The painting, at present, is in the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam, Netherlands. Dalí, through this painting, has depicted very ugly face of war. He has imagined it between Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and World War II (1939-1945). It could be translated into trauma, fear, horror and terror. Dalí, as an avant-garde artist in the first few decades of the 20th Century Spain, when Spain was suffering from dictatorship, took war as an inspiration for many of his paintings. His paintings are also often considered as premonitions to wars.

The present oil on canvas that is painted as the cusp of the two wars has a deserted land as a backdrop and almost a skull-like face taking the centre-stage. The face is bloodied yet dried up, withered. The one face carries multiple identical withered faces in the mouth and the eyes, and then there are more similar skull-like faces within these faces. It evokes a feeling of faces within faces that continue until infinity. The face is covered with tiny snakes that seem to be biting it with their mouth open. On the bottom right corner, a hand print can be seen that adds to the spectrality of the painting. It is believed that the painter added his own handprint to it. The colours used in the painting are red, yellow, black, brown and some hints of light blue for the sky.

The *Sthayibhava* that is evoked in the spectator is *Bhayānakam* (terrible) but not disgust, in fact, *Karuna* (pity/empathy). The presiding deity of *Bhayānakam* and *Karuna* being *Yama* (god of death) evokes a strong sense of destruction within destruction and infinite destruction caused by wars. The *Sthayibhava* of *Karuna* enables the spectators to understand how wars engulf us all and do not leave any one victorious. The two seemingly distinct mental conditions evoked by *Bhayānakam* and *Karuna* once again take the interpretation of the painting beyond the binaries.

CONCLUSION

The two select paintings when studied through the *Rasa* theory suggests that the the terrible/horror are not merely shocking but also can fill the spectator with awe as it does in the painting by Goya. It moves from being merely scary to

sublime. In case of Dalí's painting, within the aesthetic framework of *rasa* the terrible can also evoke compassion and empathy.

It further suggests that the *Rasa* theory offers a powerful cross-cultural interpretive tool that deepens the understanding of emotional complexity of grotesque realism in Goya's *Saturn devouring his Son* and psychological terror in Dalí's *The Face of War*.

The present work answers to the three research questions mentioned earlier as given below:

1. The Indian aesthetic theory of *Rasa* can be applied to interpret modern Spanish paintings like the ones selected for the study by taking it as a major cross-cultural tool of interpretation. It enables the spectator to move beyond any fixed spatial-temporal definitions.
2. The approach unravels various new angles of interpretation of a piece of art i.e. *Saturn devouring his Son* and *The Face of War* by recognizing that no final interpretation of a work exists as its significance lies beyond the artist's intention. One could observe awe with disgust and empathy with fear and moves beyond the binary depiction of the art.
3. The *Sthayibhavas* evoked when interpreted through *Rasa* theory provide a cross-cultural methodology for analysing visual art beyond its original cultural context by bridging the Indian aesthetics and Western Art History, thus, turning the mere spectator into an art critic. It reframes the mental conditions, such as the horror does not only remain terrible but also evokes awe and makes it move closer to the sublime, thus, deconstructing the piece of art and producing a transcendental signified.

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