

DANAM CONFERENCE 2007

SESSION RT3

Theme: Theorizing Rasa: Culture and Gender

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ABSTRACTS

Susan Schwartz, Muhlenberg College

Rasa/Rakta: Transformations in Red

This paper introduces current research connecting Rasa theory to color symbolism, specifically the woman in red in India as well as cross-culturally. India's traditions help elucidate the many deeply meaningful and often provocative ways women wear red in many societies. Blood red, rakta, may be understood as related to both rasa and rāga. It is the quintessential ingredient in Indian aesthetics and the embodied stuff of life. A woman in red is potentially a transformative hierophany. Wearing red transforms a woman into her ultimate self, and that ultimate self, according to so many Indian traditions, is a sexual self. Sexuality is powerful and dangerous in equal measure, auspicious and threatening. At the root of the etymology that links rasa with both rakta and rāga lie rituals, performances, adornments, and the embodied and sacred reality of the divine feminine.

Alfred Collins, Anchorage, Alaska

The Savor of What Is: Rasa as Culture Theory

Rasa theory finds pathways to transcendence through the intensification and purification of ordinary emotions in art. Typically a deepening process takes place, as in the elaboration of a musical or dance performance that evokes over time a gradually sharper and purer strain of the effect involved. The rasa aimed at by a work or performance is not arbitrary; it must be one appropriate to the moment, place, audience, etc. The particular emotions identified as potentially able to produce rasa and the stories, rites, and human relationships manifesting these emotions make up culture. Rasa theory implies culture and culture leads via rasa to transcendence. In this way rasa balances generative and teleological understandings of culture. In terms of the theory of culture implicit in the basic texts of Samkhya and Yoga, rasa falls within the aklsta bhava, the turn of affect back toward its true source in consciousness (purusa). When successfully evoked, rasa inhabits a moment on the edge of transcendence, the moment when the syllable om dissolves into silence and when dancing Prakrti sings to Purusa her song of being/non-being, "nasmi na me naham."

Neela Bhattacharya-Saxena, Nassau Community College

Dance of the Dual Self in Artistic Creations: A Shakta Reading of Rasa Theory

The theory of rasa as expounded by Abhinavagupta is the most cogent integration of tantric thought into the realm of aesthetics which explores the drama of life played out on

the stage as the unconcealment of the nonduality of sacred and profane realities. Using selected texts, this paper will look at the theory from a Shakta perspective to argue that awakening of rasa is deeply rooted in a metaphysics that radically brings the feminine principle on the forefront of consciousness.

Madhu Khanna, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi, India
Rasa and Bhava in the Nityapuja of Goddess Tripurasundari

The study of the semantics of religious texts, with overbearing emphasis on rhetoric of description has obscured a very significant feature of active religiosity that draws its inspiration from the evocatory force of language and its influence to invoke certain aesthetic flavours (rasa). This paper explores the evocations of rasa and bhava in the exoteric worship of goddess Tripurasundari. It attempts to demonstrate that the evocative passages in ritual texts form the bedrock of the ultimate goal of worship.

The cult of the goddess Tripurasundari occupies a very significant place in Kashmir as well as South Indian Tantrism. Widely known as Lalita, Kamesvari, Shodasi, Rajarajesvari, Shrividya (after her esoteric fifteen syllables mantra) or Tripurasundari, the goddess is, one of the most sublime personifications of the divine feminine. The philosophical tradition of Tripurasundari is traced to the Pratyabhijna-based Trika school of the Kashmirian Agamas. The sophisticated ontology of the Saivadaita-vada of Kashmir, is absorbed in the feminine theology of the Tripura cult.

Tripurasundari, is hailed as one whose unsurpassable beauty, is equal to none. The praise hymns and supersensible visualizations of the goddess spell out sensuous descriptions of her abode midst the island of jewels and describe her from head to toe.

George Pati, Valparaiso University
Mohiniyattam: The Rasa and Bhava of Devotionalism

Abstract: Mohiniyattam, the dance of the enchantress, is one of the magnificent dance forms of Kerala, South India. Mohiniyattam's elegant repertoires enact the rich religious textual tradition of Hinduism intertwined with folklore elements of Kerala. The various constructs of mudras (the hand gestures) and body narrate stories of devotional love that exemplifies the rasa theory of Indian aesthetics.

The rasa expressed through the various constructs of the body demonstrate the ancient devotional tradition of south India. Theologically, bhava and rasa is considered as the human relationships that include respectful subordination and passionate love between the beloved and the lover. This is also the case for the relation between God and devotee as a result of self-abnegation and self-surrendering. Bhakti is a religion of emotionally charged contact between the devotee and god as well as among devotees; also, a typical bhakti bhava functions as both a description of and a medium for such contact. This concept of bhava and rasa is emphasized through Mohiniyattam.

This paper, divided into two sections, first discusses the bodily movements that exemplify bhakti and examines the theological and devotional significance within this dance tradition of Kerala by taking into consideration the rasa theory; second, draws parallels from similar enactments of rasa through symbolic constructions of the body in the broader performative traditions of Kerala.

Purushottama Bilimoria, Deakin University (Melbourne, Australia)

Grief and Mourning: Theorizing on the Troubled Bhava-s Cross-Culturally

Abstract: I engage with some currents from western philosophical thinking on the more troubling or ‘heavy’ passions and feelings. Here I draw on a personal encounter with the death of a dear one that Nussbaum narrates, and my own, that has led me to question, set aside, and even overturn the neat theorizing and methodology afforded in Western studies on the emotions that are unleashed in such an experience. I turn instead to cross-cultural studies where ‘reciprocity’ has a stronger presence than anything like a Kantian sense of duty, ‘virtue ethics’, neo-Stoic propositional judgment, or the natural law imperative of reconciling with forces higher or now-other than the mortals, and so on. While Nussbaum calls for rethinking the analytic binaries of ‘rational’/‘irrational’, ‘propositional’/‘pre-linguistic’, ‘primitive’/ ‘cultured’, ‘human’/ ‘beast’, etc., I find a more perspicuous direction in psychoanalysis tempered with Indian phenomenology on the work of grief and mourning.