

## THE TWO SIDES OF A SINGLE COIN: KARUN RASA AND TRAGIC FEELING

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The *tragic feeling* (stress mine) is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing — his sense of personal dignity

Arthur Miller, "Tragedy and the Common Man",  
*New York Times*, 27 February 1949

In Sanskrit Poetics (SP) there is a discernible absence of tragedy perhaps on account of its idealistic character. Though conflict is present it is not the type of conflict as perceived between individuals. It is based, rather, on inclination and idealism in which idealism ultimately triumphs. In Indian thought Death is a fantasized happening; the body is prone to decay, while the soul is eternal. The issue then is how do we address Death, even when the manure of rotten leaves gives birth to new shrubs? Death possibly is not the denouement of life. On the contrary Life and Death are corollaries of each other. The second possible reason for SP being idealistic in nature is that here time does not follow a *chronological* sequence —it is *circular* in movement (*chakravat parivartante*). Therefore tragedy along western lines becomes impossible on account of philosophical compulsions. A man here after casting off his body assumes a new form and then takes another when the present body decomposes. This intermittent process goes on and on till he accomplishes total deliverance. And salvation can only be realized after having attained the first three goals of righteousness (*dharma*), prosperity (*artha*) and pleasure (*kama*). Here it seems that there is a more complete

picture of life in which both suffering and happiness are present. Take for instance the very popular example of a Lotus flower that bears pearls of moisture on itself. Although the very experience is ephemeral yet it is so beautiful. Perhaps to capture the eternal in the evanescent is a part of Indian and Western aesthetics. Sorrow is perpetually beautiful. And beauty is happiness. Keats's *Ode on Melancholy* is a fine record of this idea. To him true melancholy should mean the supraliminal delectation of a sorrowful feeling inevitably associated with everything that is beautiful and joyful. Authentic beauty invokes melancholy deliberations at her transience, but thrives on her very fleeting character as the instant captures for us the perpetuity of joy. Whenever sorrow alights on us like a cloud that brings a gladdening downpour for the drooping flowers and shuts out from the panorama the green hill with a cerecloth of April rain, one should drink deep at the spring of unaffected beauty of the rose that blooms in the morning, or of the kaleidoscopic colours of the rainbow shot by the sunlight on sand, made wet by the withdrawing wave or of the glove-shaped flowers. We should firmly clutch at these pleasures of beauty that will wither away and leave an anguish in the soul making her no less capable of an intense or deep enjoyment on that score. In other words, "tragic feeling" is not a problematic here. It is traditionally referred to as one of the many *rasas*, which in itself implies that it is to be experienced happily. However in Western literature the end of a tragedy is commonly one of total waste and loss. It is essentially melancholic in character. While in Indian literature sorrow and suffering might be presented in a very gruesome style but still the work would have a happy ending. In fact a blissful finale (*madhurai samapayet* or *sukha Paryanavasai*) was the motive. The *Mahabharata* for instance carries the central theme of the contest between two noble families, the Pandavas and their blood relatives, the Kauravas, for the possession of a kingdom in northern India. What follows is an elaborate offensive exercise in scheming and plotting primarily to eliminate the Pandavas. However with the intervention of Krishna events turn in favour of the Pandavas. The dialogue between Lord Krishna (Supreme Yogi) and Arjuna (pure self) is a focal point in the text, which categorically states that the good (Pandavas) is ultimately victorious, provided we dedicate ourselves with zeal to the fulfilment of the task at hand, without being influenced by its rewards or benefits and that the destruction of evil (Kauravas) is a preordained certainty and this should lead us to strive to stick to the path of goodness and godliness. There might be occasional periods of undeserved suffering and pain, but ultimately it is the truth, the absolute good that alone triumphs. Thus there are tragic elements to be observed but none that make a full-fledged tragedy.

In the Western canon, generally speaking, a tragedy should indispensably end in death. However, this tenet is juxtaposed with the understanding of one of the serious truths of life that Man with his seriousness of intent and confident deeds should only desire to search for the Truth. And that the understanding of the

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world, which appears on occasions to be tolerant with surprises or full with the desire of reconciliation, is essentially a challenge, which in turn becomes the norm for attaining happiness. Thus an attempt is made in this article to examine in the first part the idea of those scholars who treat *Karun rasa* as an experience of happiness. And then in the second part all those critics are taken into account who look upon “tragic feeling” as an experience of sadness but also as a realization of one of the solemn truths of life. Finally an assessment is made of those opinions that hold together in the present context.

### I

In Sanskrit poetics almost everybody has looked upon *Karun rasa* (tragic feeling) as an experience of joy or beatitude. Abhinavgupta (author of *Abhinavbharati*: eleventh century A.D.) looks upon *rasa* (the essence of anything) as a form of happiness. He believes that in essence all states of being (*rasas*) are happiness oriented. The *rasa* is a feeling dominated by an overwhelming and unadulterated sense of silence and vacuum. There is more unequivocally an experience of the expansion of the heart. It is the unalloyed realisation of equilibrium —the quintessence of joy (Kapoor, 1998: 114). Antithetically the Sankhya philosophers postulate that sorrow as such corresponds to the righteousness (*dharmā*) of the *raajasik* (exemplified by the mind’s unstable and roaming nature). But in the conscious experience of unalloyed joy there is a sense of entirety, of wholeness and more importantly a balance of the mind. Pleasure thus is commensurate with the essential (*saatvik*), Pain with the source of energy in creation (*raajasik*) and Inertia with darkness (*tamasik*). Dr. Nagendra on the other hand believes that Abhinavgupta’s unalloyed realization of equilibrium is fundamentally an echo of Aristotle’s “catharsis” (in Butcher, 1995: 242) or Richards’ “Systematization of emotions” (in Wimsatt and Brooks, 1957: 610 and Seturaman, 1992: 328-29). However, Abhinavgupta’s approach to life was that of an optimist and this assumed crucial importance in a sad world (where equanimity was all the more necessary). It is interesting that on the one hand Aristotle the biologist spoke about the difference between a man and an animal, and on the other Bharata (author of *Natyashastra*: second century B. C.) synthesized the human and the divine. Vishvanath (author of *Sabityadarpana*: fourteenth century A.D.) similarly thought of *rasa* as being out of the ordinary. He states:

Hetutvam sokaharsaadergatebhyo loksamsrayat  
Sokaharsaadayo loke jaayantaam naama laukikaah  
Aalokikvibhaavatvam praaptebhyaha kaavyasanshruyaat  
Sukham sanjaayate tebhya sarvebhyospeeti kashatili

(*Sabityadarpana*, III, unnumbered pages)

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In the worldly life, well-known causes of pleasure and pain might lead to a painful experience, but in poetry they assume a supernatural character. And hence, what is the harm in believing that in Poetry they cause pleasure invariably?

However there are emotions that originate in the mind (in this world) and take the form of *rasa*. But mere emotion (*bhava*) is neither *rasa* nor poetry. Sorrow is a psychological state dependent on external causes. It is only the poet<sup>1</sup> who exercises his superior ability and translates and re-clothes this completely conditional corporeal emotion into an extraordinary and independent feeling, which kindles a *rasa* and gives way to *Karun rasa*. *Karun rasa* again is not an emotion of sadness alone. It is not a psychiatric disorder in which the predominant symptom is a disturbance in mood. Neither is it an irritable depression marked by sadness, guilt, and feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. Rather, it supplants untold and unbounded happiness in spite of tears. And only those who have had such an experience can appreciate this experience. If it ever had the object of evoking sadness then perhaps the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata* would never have been read. As Shelley says in his well-known poem *Ode to the West Wind*, our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thoughts. It should not be forgotten that sadness becomes more and more concentrated and becomes a substitute for reality, which is neither sweet nor meant to be sung. It is the saddest of thoughts that gives rise to the sweetest of songs. On the contrary, Bhattayak (eight-ninth century A.D.) talks about the experiencing of *rasa* only by those who have risen above prejudiced measures of happiness and sorrow. And this precisely is the cause of its state of absolute happiness. To talk in Kantian terms the happiness originating out of beauty is considerably different from the happiness arising out of the customary assignments of the world. And since there is an absence of any utilitarian dimension to *rasa*, it is therefore pure, refined and extraordinary. There is here transcendence from the personal to the impersonal, from the subjective self to the objective self and from the particular to the general.

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The necessity of experiencing the extraordinariness of *Karun rasa* despite its melancholy temper is the position taken by many Indian and Western scholars. On the native front Guncandra and Ramcandra (authors of *Natyadarpana*, twelfth century A.D.) profess that *rasa* is both a happy and a sad amalgam of experience. They state that the poet who is both accomplished in the manifestation of reality and imaginative experience arouses exceptional emotions in the reader. For instance, let us attend to the type of emotion which is aroused when a foe is dumbfounded at the sight of a more puissant adversary confronting him in battle or when an admirer is struck dumb by the graceful movements of a dancer. Both carry the elemental emotion of surprise but are evidently different in nature and context. So too the poet composes poetry that carries similar and diverging

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emotions. The taste of a sweet dish following a bitter one makes the former doubly sweet. However Guncandra and Ramcandra caution that the experience of *Karun rasa* is dependent on both form and content (in Kulkarni, 1986: 52). On parallel lines Bhojaraja (author of *Sringaaraprakaasha*, eleventh century A.D.) declares the birth of bliss is on account of sorrow, *Dukhadamapi sukham janyati* (in Kulkarni, 1986: 50).

## II

To return to the West, Hume speaks about the miraculous nature of eloquence that leads to the transformation of a tragedy into a comedy. He writes that the soul when roused by passion and charmed by eloquence feels on the whole a strong movement which is altogether delightful (in Seturaman, 1992: 269 and *Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia* 2000). Passion not only brings the conflict of the hero to a close but also arouses the consciousness to an experience of happiness. Antithetically though in Hume's miraculous nature of eloquence emotion does not play a role even when in the artifice of poetic expression emotion does declare itself in a finer but sublime fashion. As is well known, F.R. Leavis stated in this connection that "by tragedy we mean something fundamentally true to life so the pleasure comes in seeing the life both serious and true" (in Chaudhuri, 1983: 24). Both blissful and saddening experiences of life are an actuality. Therefore if poetics is employed as a tool for giving utterance to certain truths of life then a tragedy could be in the making. And such a tragedy would give birth to "tragic feeling" i.e., happiness of a refined nature. Thus, Hume's miraculous nature of eloquence and Leavis' experiences of life (see Chaudhuri: 1983: 24) are two dimensions of looking at a tragedy. Further one should not forget that experience becomes a prerequisite along with expression for rousing romantic or pathetic emotions. Guncandra and Ramcandra too stress the necessity of both eloquence and experience in poetry. Both are miraculous in their own right. Leavis however thinks that "tragic feeling" is of greater importance in the making of either a comedy or tragedy for both are an articulation of life.

In the context of grief, Schopenhauer in his criticism of tragedy has assigned a dignified status to sorrow ("tragic feeling"). He holds (in Seturaman, 1992: 268) that tragedy arouses in our consciousness a "spirit of asceticism" or "resignation" or "self-surrender". Happiness is consequently hallowed in this experience. "tragic feeling" also invigorates the mind to free itself of baser emotions (lust) in order to give room for happiness. Schopenhauer states that when we are brought face to face with great suffering and the storm and stress of existence, and the outcome of it is to show the vanity of all human effort, then, deeply moved, we

are either directly prompted to disengage our will from the struggle of life, or else a chord is struck in us which echoes a similar feeling (in Seturaman, 1992: 268). This idea is not very different from the Buddhistic viewpoint of looking on *Karun Rasa* as the source of life's nourishment. In fact, as happiness is inherent in the attainment of truth, so too, the same happiness is an inseparable part of an individual's existence that gives birth to poetry. Hegel in a like manner believes that the enjoyment of tragedy is on account of a feeling of reconciliation and this feeling arises by reason of the sense of eternal justice. Justice as such is dependent on the fundamental desire of man to exist and thus reconciliation with sorrow ("tragic feeling") is possible at the end of a tragedy (in Chaudhuri, 1983: 25). Hegel refers to the happiness arising out of a tragedy as that which exists by virtue of the soul's ethical equipoise. Tragedy then acquires an extraordinary nature, for both the soul's reconciliation and its ethical equipoise are complementary to each other. Hegel continues his explanation by referring to the soul's reconciliation as the great absolute, for that is verily the Truth. Awareness and harmony are thus the crowning features of all-chaotic impressions and emotive conflicts. The happiness arising out of harmony is again uncommon in nature. Though conflict is essentially a part of both life and the world, the denouement lies in the realization of the Truth. A "tragic feeling" therefore incorporates in it conflict and resolution, the former arousing sorrow and the latter happiness (Abercrombie, 1967: 115).

As is well known, in the first chapter of his work *The Birth of Tragedy*, Friedrich Nietzsche similarly states that a tragedy assimilates both *dionysian* and *appolonian* powers. The former generate sorrow ("tragic feeling") and the latter rouse the emotion of expectation and triumphs over sorrow. It is the art of metaphysical comfort, a metaphysical supplement to the reality of nature. Further, Nietzsche also talks about the secret instinct for annihilation. The tendency to annihilate the individual self generalizes, which induces in the spectators a uniformity of experience and happiness. The death of an individual here is verily the death of mankind itself. Nietzsche states that in spite of fear and pity we are happy living beings, not as individuals, but as the one living being, with whose procreative joy we are blended. And this is the joy of tragedy. Schelegel (in Seturaman, 1992: 268) in this connection refers to a belief in *destiny* (whose contemplation is definitely pleasant) that destroys the ego and in turn builds fortitude in the individual. On very similar lines Emile Faguet (in Chaudhuri, 1983: 26) believes that there are omnipresent worms of violence present in man, and on seeing a fellow human being suffering, the individual immediately experiences happiness. This is the malevolence theory. Man as such carries in his subconscious a sense of undressed injury, which awakens the feeling of hatred.

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Aristotle however, in his *Poetics* finds in “catharsis” the enjoyment of a tragedy. He writes, “no less universal is the pleasure felt in things imitated” (in Seturaman, 1992: 268). And to learn or experience gives the loveliest pleasure. However, the pleasure will be due not to the imitation as such but to the execution, the colouring or some such other cause. Butcher (in Seturaman, 1992: 268) inversely speaks of three features with regard to the enjoyment of a tragedy, (a) Purgation, (b) Purification and (c) The Miraculous Nature of Art. Apart from imitation it is also the enjoyment of the miraculous nature of poetic creation (on account of the existence of both form and content) which is of great significance. Catharsis is attained only after the mind is calm and all passions are spent. The nobility of the hero and his tragic flaw are responsible for the arousal of fear and pity and this in turn fills the vacuum in the human heart. The individual then feels that he is not the other (non-participator) in the play. Susanne K. Langer (in Seturaman, 1992: 325) calls this the homeopathic treatment where pity with pity and fear with fear is erased and this in turn brings about a balance in emotions and mental equipoise.<sup>2</sup>

Accordingly, Dickson, Thorndike and Gilbert Murry (in Chaudhuri, 1983: 27-8) have also on occasions spoken about the necessity of “tragic feeling” in life. Dickson states that with tragedy there is an expansion of the soul, the mind and the intelligence. He writes, “It may very well be that beyond its broad and common ways, in the gloomier defiles of life, amid the grief worn faces and under the clouded skies of tragedy, we may seek knowledge, wisdom, an enlargement of the spirit, the meaning of things or some other ends”. While according to Thorndike, tragedy begets (i) catharsis, (ii) the sanctimonious display of sympathy, (iii) aesthetic delight and (iv) the exaltation due to the vision of the eternal. And Murry believes that tragedy is enjoyable for it carries in it a profounder scheme of values. He states, “It must show beauty out-shining horror, it must show human character somehow triumphing over death and it can create and maintain only by high and continuous and severe beauty of form”.

Conventionally speaking, Western, European or Shakespearean tragedy is the tragedy of fate where the hero fights against his destiny. Life to him is a challenge and death though pre-destined is a grand achievement. The conflict here is essentially one of Truth. Therefore when one, after witnessing the presentation of a tragedy, strolls out into the dark night and stares at the stars he blurts out in the words of Webster, “Look, look the stars are shining in the sky” (in Chaudhuri, 1983: 28). However contemporary tragedy (CT) is the tragedy of the average man who is a prey to confusion. Inhuman, unconcerned behaviour marks his absurd state. In fact CT does not find a semblance with Greek tragedy where man does not fail to fight a resolute battle against his destiny. It is thus a substitute for the arousal of tragic elements where chaos, depression, loneliness, and absurdity

dominate. But what is conspicuously absent is the suffering of a great soul. Of one who can suffer intensely and yet face the challenges with a sense of grandeur.

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Consequently *Karun rasa* or “tragic feeling” is either an ecstatic state or is dependent on an extraordinary situation whose resultant effect is one of *happiness*. Abhinavagupta calls this bliss or happiness an experience of a state of consciousness –*rasaba cha baudhrupeva* (in Kulkarni, 1986: 28-42). In all the ideologies mentioned above one can note that the element of truth is omnipresent, though in certain philosophies a few errors might be observed. For instance, when Vishvanath refers to the enjoyment of poetry as of an extraordinary nature, what he exactly means by the term extraordinary is not explained in detail. However, Abhinavagupta thought that the problem does not arise for in this world there is no exactitude as regards the idea that sorrow should necessarily follow a painful experience. We might temporarily experience sadness on account of our friend’s grief and happiness on account of our enemy’s grief. In short, if the experience of poetry is not extraordinary, neither is it ordinary then. The effacement of the self does not lead us to an understanding of sadness, for human life is profound and the only truth again is not one of sorrow. Sorrow could be an aspect of life but not life itself. Schelegel’s thesis of destiny (in Seturaman, 1992: 268) is an emotive doctrine for the helpless. In psychoanalytical criticism poetry is the resultant of the various tragic elements working in the human mind. However the cause of happiness arising out of *Karun rasa* or “tragic feeling” lies in the thought-content or the idea itself. And it is this thematic idea that can be paralleled with a sculptor carving a literary work, the very experience of which is extraordinary in nature. However self-effacement or self-annihilation then becomes a pre-requisite for its total enjoyment. This implies that violence in the human mind, pain and suffering has directly no connection with the enjoyment of *Karun rasa* or “tragic feeling”. Furthermore those scholars who have propounded the reasons behind/for a tragedy and its ultimate enjoyment have made a grievous error in equating it with the Buddhistic state. The enjoyment of poetry is not only independent of specific causes, reasons or purposes but the very poetic experience leads to a state of bliss. And therefore *Karun rasa* or “tragic feeling” is important for its experience leads one to a divine state of supreme happiness. Dhananjaya (author of *Dasharupaka*: tenth century A.D.) has gone to the extent of pointing out that only men with limited intelligence (*Alpabuddhi sadhu log*) desire to employ the utilitarian ideal in poetry (in Chaudhuri, 1983: 27).

Truly, of the varieties of interpretations available on the idea of *Karun rasa* or “tragic feeling” only three appear to hold good, namely Bhattnayak’s total objectivity, Abhinavagupta’s unalloyed realization of equilibrium and Leavis’



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doctrine of a detached attitude towards life. Of these the first idea of objectivity annihilates personal sorrow, lifts the curtain from the soul of the low grade (*tamasic*) and the pleasure-seeking (*rajasik*) and ultimately leads to the real (*saatvik*) state of peace or equipoise and then to happiness. This variety of happiness widens the individual vision and implants a belief in life. This detached state brings about the element of sincerity in the individual's exposition of the subject. The honest expression of the theme whether idealistic or realistic, whether happy or sad, provides us with happiness for it is an addition to the sum total of the experiences in life. Furthermore a happy life is also the expression of the all-pervasive nature of Truth. It is here that *Karun rasa* in Indian writings leads us to an essential (*saatvik*) state while in western thought the arousal of "tragic feeling" leads us to a recognition of a fact in life. The all-pervasive anguish of the Indian poet is a mean between his pain and his disillusionment. In it, there are streaks of peaceful feeling (*shanta rasa*), of divine bliss (*divyanumaad*), and of a real (*saatvik*) state of communion. Valmiki states:

*Tishtha tishtha varorobe na testi karuna mayee  
Naatyartha haasyasheelasi kimarth manupaekhshe.*

(in Chaudhuri, 1983: 29)

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This is the nature of *Karun rasa*. Ethical instruction is not the objective here. It is rather a spontaneous expression of the soul's experience. The poet's soul here carries a typical aptitude and nature, which is very natural to him. And this nature is the divine nature, which leads one to the real (*saatvik*) state of everyday existence. It provides equanimity of the mind and constant happiness. And thus "Tragic Feeling" lies enshrined in our encounter with happiness. The image of Buddha is a supreme instance in point. Even the image of Nataraja (God Shiva) though bearing a look of calm on its face, is suggestive of an active process by the movements of the feet, a movement that includes both creation and destruction. The European poet perhaps lies embedded in the source of energy in the creative (*raajasik*) play of things. He does not long for a total merger. He is happy with his state of equilibrium. He does not long for *nirvana* or calm or peace of mind. He is satisfied in absenting himself from felicity for a while and therefore continues in this harsh world to draw his breath in pain.

Both Indian and European literature do emphasize an acceptance of the wide frontiers of knowledge and a belief in action that is impulsive and grave. However, the Indian poet is a sad poet who sees the world through the glasses of an ascetic (*yogi*). His philosophy of calm and its awareness in the midst of the world and harmony coalesce. The European poet on the other hand (in a world dominated by action) sees the world through the glasses of a doer. His philosophy of conflict and of destruction continues to be an ideal for him. However this does not imply that on account of the dominating essential quality (*saatvik guna*), Indian

Literature holds an edge over European literature which is known for its creative (*raajasik*) qualities. Irrespective of the dominating quality (*guna*) we are to be on the lookout for an experience that leads us to an understanding of truth. The truth of a *saatvik* life or the truth of pain or suffering both carry an element of impartiality and objectivity and both add to our experiences and ultimately leads us to happiness. This happiness is on account of the truth based on life's experiences. Thus the difference between *Karun rasa* and "Tragic Feeling", or in the variety of happiness derived from a tragedy or the difference in the sources/states of consciousness or conscious experiences is essentially a difference of the reader's response and thought or perception. There is no qualitative difference in terms of experience, which in itself is complete and whole. This experience in the words of Abhinavgupta (in Seturaman, 1992: 341) is like a remarkable flower that ever attracts us and makes *Karun rasa* or "tragic feeling" an extraordinary experience.

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<sup>1</sup>. As is well known, in Coleridge's theory of poetry, *Biographia Literaria*, it is the poet who with his *esemplastic imagination* dissolves, diffuses, dissipates in order to re-create. The poet's secondary imagination is able to create rather than merely reassemble by dissolving the *fixities* and *definitives* and

unifying them into a new whole (see Wimsatt and Brooks, 1957: 385-86).

<sup>2</sup>. This essentially is a Platonic idea where *like cures like* (in Abercrombie, 1967: 107).

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