

8. The Psychology of Rasa: Understanding Emotional Responses to Art and Performance

Author- Davasam Sanjana, PG Scholar

Abstract

The Rasa of the antique Indian perception of the concept of emotions is aroused by the art and the performance. The Rasa theory started with Natyashastra of Bharata Muni, and it is founded on the transformation of expressed emotions, or bhavas, into aesthetic experiences, or rasas, in the mind of an audience. The article is the exploration of psychological grounds of Rasa in a modern context that entails the role of cognitive and emotional processes in achieving a response to theatrical, dance, and musical performances. An interview was set up with performing artists, psychology students and art lovers to learn their perceptions in emotional experience in art. The fact that Rasa is closely related to contemporary ideas of emotion management, empathy, and aesthetic experience has been found. The research illustrates that Rasa system has provided an eternal connection between ancient aesthetics and modern psychology theory in the explanation of how human affairs respond to art by their emotions.

Keywords

Rasa theory; feeling; aesthetics; Bharata Muni; performance; empathy; cognition; Indian art; psychology of emotion; experience of aesthetic experience.

Introduction

One of the most significant work in the Indian aesthetics was the Rasa theory which was initially proposed by Bharata Muni in the Natyashastra between 200 BCE and 200 CE. It sees art as the means of expressing feelings that eventually evoke a feeling of aesthetic essence or Rasa on the viewer. Bharata says that when emotions or bhavas are represented in visual form they create Rasa which is a refined interviewed emotional savor that surpasses personal sentiment to become a common human sentiment. Bharata wrote about eight major rasas Shringara (love), Hasya (humor), Karuna (compassion), Raudra (anger), Veera (heroism), Bhayanaka (fear), Bibhatsa (disgust), and Adbhuta (wonder). The ninth rasa appearing afterwards was Shanta (tranquility) which was proposed by the 11th and 12th century Kashmiri philosopher Abhinavagupta.

Psychologically, Rasa is the dynamic exposure of emotion, cognition and empathy. Modern psychology describes emotion as a complex condition comprising of subjective experience, physical change and expression behavior. This complex conception was expected in the Rasa theory which demonstrated how emotions when artistically displayed are converted to aesthetic pleasure instead of personal grief.

Abhinavagupta created a continuation of the model by introducing Sahridaya, the idea of the empathetic spectator to whom the expression of the performer appeals, his or her feelings. The concept is similar to the current psychological concepts of empathy and the activation of a mirror neuron, in which the viewer internally recreates the emotional state of the performer.

These relationships are endorsed by recent studies. Other scholars find that Rasa-based emotional pleasure is gained with the help of controlled interaction, which is similar to modern frameworks of emotion regulation in affective neuroscience. Some consider Rasa as culturally based model of interpretation on catharsis and common empathy on art.

Rasa, therefore, may be seen as one of the early theories of affective cognition which explains the process through which art evokes affective, cognitive and empathetic processes that guide the internal experiences of the beauty and meaning.

Methodology

The study was conducted on how Rasa is perceived and experienced nowadays as a descriptive survey design with emphasis on the understanding, interpretation, and emotional responses that the study participants have toward art.

Period of study- June 2025- August 2025.

Sample size-180 participants

Participants:

60 performing artists in theatre, dance, and music

60 psychology students or professionals

60 art enthusiasts and cultural scholars

Survey tool- A 20-item questionnaire

Survey Questions:

No.	Question
1	How familiar are you with Rasa theory?
2	Where did you first learn about Rasa?
3	How often do you observe or apply Rasa concepts in performances or study?
4	How would you rate your understanding of the classical eight or nine rasas?
5	During performances, how intense are the emotions you experience as a spectator or performer?
6	How often do you experience multiple rasas simultaneously in a single performance?
7	Do you feel that art transforms ordinary emotions into a distinctive aesthetic experience?
8	To what extent do you empathize with performers during a performance?
9	How important are body language and facial expression for transmitting bhava to an audience?
10	How strongly do music and rhythm influence your emotional engagement with a performance?

No.	Question
11	How much does prior knowledge or contextual information change your emotional response to a performance?
12	Have you used performances deliberately to regulate your emotions (for example, to calm down or energize)?
13	Do you perceive Rasa-based performances as having therapeutic or healing value?
14	Do you think Rasa concepts are compatible with Western theories of emotion and aesthetics?
15	How important is Rasa to the cultural understanding of Indian performance arts?
16	Describe a specific performance when you experienced a clear Rasa. What happened, and which rasa(s) did you feel?
17	Describe a moment when you felt a strong resonance between the performer and audience, and how the performer contributed to it.
18	Share an example of how attending or performing an art form helped you regulate an emotion and what elements were involved.
19	In your view, how does the Rasa framework map onto contemporary psychological concepts such as empathy, catharsis, or emotion regulation?
20	What research questions or practical interventions would you recommend to better understand or apply Rasa in artistic, educational, or therapeutic contexts?

Discussion

The questionnaire made valuable conclusions regarding the ways people correspond and perceive emotions in art. It is estimated that 72% of the participants were conversant with the Rasa theory though not all 41% had a comprehensive grasp of the classical foundation of the theory. Almost three-quarters surveyed (n=88 percent) said that they experienced strong emotional responses upon viewing performances, which aligns with the definition of Sahridaya, referring to common emotional engagement. Eighty-one percent (n=81 percent) believed that art changed ordinary emotions into sublime aesthetic experiences. Three-quarters (n=76 percent) of psychologists who took part in the survey used to the idea of Sahridaya, which means shared emotional experience. Open-ended questions made it clear that the spectators tend to feel many rasas at the same time based on the episode and the tone of the performances. Artists stressed that bhava or emotional meaning is greatly contributed through body language, facial expression and rhythm. Music and meditation and storytelling, were also named by many as having an effect of enhancing the emotional engagement of the participants. In general, the data indicates that Rasa is a mechanism, which is inherently psychological and cultural that diffuses crude emotions into a collective human experience. This observation is similar to the idea of Western theories like the one introduced by Arnold Aristotle, catharsis, and Freud, sublimation, in that art allows releasing emotional feelings and reflection safely and meaningfully.

Suggestions

Encourage the interdisciplinary cooperation of psychologists, artists and neuroscientists in the investigation of biological and emotional processes of Rasa. Incorporate Rasa psychology into the arts and psychology curriculum so as to promote an integrated education. Carry out empirical studies where neuroscience and behavioral methods are used in study and analysis of emotional receptions in Rasa based artworks. Carry out cross-cultural research on Rasa aesthetics versus Western models of emotions to create a world view of emotion in art. Make therapeutic interventions by applying Rasa based theories to art therapy to aid in the regulation of emotions and empathy in psychiatry.

Conclusion

The Rasa paradigm provides one of the most perennial and extensive descriptions of responsiveness to emotion in the art history. The results of the surveys show that Rasa is profoundly related affectively to performances and both the artists and the audience have a profound relationship that proves its relevance in being both an aesthetic and psychological idea. Rasa can be identified with empathy, emotion management and aesthetic value as it is viewed through the prism of modern cognitive and emotional responses. This integration between the Indian Art Classical and the contemporary psychology highlights the special ability of art to make emotion into a universal human emotion..

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