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DHARMA AND GRIEF
Secularisation of a Sacred Emotion

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Abstract: The presentation begins with the moving scene of Vālmīki's grief over the bereavement of the survivor of the two birds in amorous union as one of them is pierced by a hunter's arrow. After considering Abhinavagupta's doubt about the genuineness of Vālmīki's grief, the paper moves to *Mahābhārata* as the women from the warring clans bear witness to the horrendous carnage ensuing from the battle, and the constant rebuke that Yudhiṣṭhira, head of the Pāṇḍava clan, faces from Draupadī for wandering the earth without finding a stable foundation for *Dharma* or grounding it in firm absolutes. We liken Yudhiṣṭhira to Mahatma Gandhi facing the near-collapse of the Indian sub-continent as it was being rent apart with communal violence on the eve of its Independence. But we also compare Yudhiṣṭhira with Hamlet, the tragic grief-ridden character, who is equally bewildered and confused by the array of emotions and sensations that overwhelm his lingering body upon news of the death of and ghostly encounter with his murdered father. With this as the context, we take the occasion to explore recent thinking on the 'hard emotions', in particular, grief, sorrow and mourning, and link the challenging inner and social condition to the calling of *Dharma* (righteous law, normatively worthy action). Drawing from some comparative work (academic and personal) in the study of grief, mourning and empathy, we shall discuss the treatment of this tragic pathos in classical Indic literature and

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modern-day psychotherapy. We shall demonstrate, despite being secularised, these emotions continue to serve as the sites of imagination at a much more personal and inter-personal level that are not antithetical to a *Dharmic* (sacred) quest despite their haunting presence even when 'the four walls collapse around one in the intensity of *duḥkha* (suffering, sorrow)' (Tagore).

Keywords: Dharma, Emotions, Epics, Grief, Hamlet, Suffering

1. Introduction

Vālmīki's empathy for the sorrow (*śoka*) he felt in the mournful shriek of the female krauñca bird (egret) upon the sudden egregious death, from a grievous hunter's arrow, of its male partner-in-the-embrace-of-love. This emotional intensity which transforms Vālmīki, a mere by-stander at that point, evokes pathos in the melting mind of the 'first poet' (*ādikavi*), who then writes the 'first poem' (*ādikāvya'),* which ensues in the epic *Rāmāyaṇa*; from *śoka* to *śloka* (verse form of Sanskrit literature).[1]

Abhinavagupta reverses the gender status of the birds from Vālmīki's narrative, with a streak of candid scepticism of the inherent symbolism at stake – wasn't it Sītā the *satī* who really is pushed to her death; while Rāma, the supposed sternly un-feeling paragon of epic morality, is immortalised in the text? Besides, the grief reported on happens to be Vālmīki's, but can he really speak for another's immense and irreparable *duḥkha*? Abhinava contends that even if a by-stander is able to feel via the 'melting of the mind' another's grief, a certain distance is necessary for the artist to be able to produce a literary work on that traumatising experience.[2]

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[1]Edwin Gerow, "Sanskrit Dramatic Theories and Kālidāsa's Plays," in *Theater of Memory: the plays of Kalidāsa*, Barbara Stoler Stoler, ed., trans., Edwin Gerow, David Gitomer, Barbara Stoler Miller, New York: Columbia University Press, 56.

[2]*Locana* 1.5 L, in Gerow, "Sanskrit Dramatic Theories and Kālidāsa's Plays" and "Abhinavagupta's Aesthetics as a Speculative *Paradigm," Journal of the American Oriental Society* 114(2) Jan-March 1994, 186-208.

There are further suggestive material in literary and aesthetic works, such as Kālidāsa's *Raghuvaṃśa,* that open up certain vistas and hermeneutical possibilities at least, but only just, as I will argue for a sustained and convincing treatment of emotions, analogues to which one finds in the discourse of the *bhāvas,* 'states of being'. These, and especially the corresponding sentiments – *rasa,* aesthetic relish, (metaphor for the literal sense of 'flavour') in the audience – are triggered by *vibhāvas,* causes or stimulants and their consequent inner experience (*anubhāvas)*, e.g., the actual shedding of tears, pallor, facial grimace, drooping limps, sighing, absentmindedness; accompanied by the *vyabhicārībhāvas* in the form of disgust, exhaustion, anxiety, impatience, delusion, confusion, fear, regret, helplessness, forgetfulness, languor, stunned, breaking down, collapse, etc.[3] This aesthetic view is originally articulated in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (NS), where the term *rasa* is first used in a properly theoretical sense.[4] This is an affect conveyed through language, and use of kinaesthetic (performatives) to enact empathetic modes of responses to the dramatic events witnessed on the stage (theatre), as if in real life. Drama is a metaphor for creation of diversity from an unstable base of unity; and lyrical poetry a metaphor for the cosmos striving for unity that would survive ruptures in the currents of life. As we noted earlier, Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* is said to have been born in such a moment of emotional transference triggered by the moral improbity being witnessed, and "the manifest form of language is here an inspiration that is emotional yet already reflective, to which it uniquely gives voice."[5] It is, as Edwin Gerow continues, "no accident that in later *rasa* theory, *śoka* is counted as the emotional ground of one of the eight *rasas,* the pathetic (*karuṇa),* now understood as the message of Vālmīki's grief."[6]

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[3]*The Nāṭyaśāstra* (NS) [ascribed to Bharatmuṇi] English translation with critical notes by Adya Rangacharya, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1996, 59.

[4]Gerow, "Sanskrit Dramatic Theories and Kālidāsa's Plays," 36.

[5]Gerow, "Sanskrit Dramatic Theories and Kālidāsa's Plays," 57.

[6]Gerow, "Sanskrit Dramatic Theories and Kālidāsa's Plays," 57.

Aesthetic theories set up the 'inner states' in terms of *sthāyībhāvas* or 'basic durable emotions', some people call 'permanent' or 'dominant emotions'; the *Naṭyaśāstra* lists eight *bhāvas* with eight corresponding *rasas,* given below (a ninth is added by Abhinava, to be explained shortly):[7]

Śṛṅgāra (erotic or spiritual love) → *rati* (love)
hāsya (laughter, comedy) → *hāsya* (laughter)
Kāruṇa (sadness, compassion) → *śoka* (grief)
raudra (anger) → *krodha* (anger)
vīra (heroism) → *utsāha* (energy or vigour)
bībhatsa (disgust) → *jugupsā* (disgust)
bhayānaka (fear) → *bhaya* (fear)
adbhuta (wonder, surprise) → *vismaya* (amazement)
śānta (peacefulness) → *śama* (tranquillity)

And these may be accentuated by accessory elements, sensibilities, *vyabhicārībhāvas*, or *sañcārībhāvas* such as anxiety, affliction, delusion *(moha), viṣāda* (dejection), *amarṣa* (the insufferable), even *unmāda* (insanity). These are further accompanied by changes in physical (read also, physiological, physiogenic) symptoms, *anubhāvas,* feelings, such as *aśru*, shrieking with tears, confusion, trembling, hair-standing on its ends, weakness of the knees, other gestures such as loosing grip on things in one's hands, collapsing, and so on – verily these are Arjuna's symptoms in the beginning chapter of the *Bhagavad Gītā* (*BhG*). And very little, I might add, one gets out of theorising on *rasa,* except in a counterfactual way of what aesthetic sense one might have after melting deeply into the state that would be the other's *antarbhāva* (internal to the feeler; subjectively experienced)*;* thus, *karuṇarasa* (compassion or empathy) corresponding to the *bāhirabhāva* (external, transference) in all its visceral modality of *śoka* (sorrow), *vilāpa;* the former is in the *rasika*, aesthete or spectator, the latter is not. In fact, *antarbhāvas* cannot be re-enacted as such, but for certain constitutive elements expressed in *bāhirabhāva*.

[7]*The Nāṭyaśāstra*, Manomohan Ghosh, trans., Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1951.

I want to make the argument that we should not, at the risk of oversimplification, conflate or identify *rasa*, much less *bhāvas*, as emotions in the 'thick' sense. And I will demonstrate this by an insistent – though I hope persuasively coherent – illustration (*udaharaṇa*) – based on the 'heavy' or 'darker', some say 'negative' emotions, in particular grief and melancholy (with attendant public sentiment of mourning).

Classical Indian aestheticians, like Ānandavardhana, Abhinavagupta and Paṇḍitarāja Jagannāth, have been of the opinion that the power of *rasa* inheres most expressively in dance, drama and poetics. V. K. Chari has averred that *rasa*-theory is exclusive to the literary arts or 'poetry in general', but not so much in non-representational media of music or painting where emotions are vague and abstract.[8] This really is a worrying assertion, and is an uncritical adoption of classicism that fails to countenance the enormous amount of work that has gone into not just music (which also accompanies dance as Bharata in *Nāṭyaśāstra* had stipulated) but in painting, in the work of art. And to suggest that painting falls short of capturing the emotions because its non-representation is rather preposterous. So my argument is that the classical theories of aesthetics, because they based themselves on the model of the theatre, the dramatizing stage, and which are supposed to provide stylized templates and theories for the applications and grasping of the emotions actually only selectively 'play' (pun intended) with the emotions and leave out a good part of it or fall short of bringing out the full force of their character and vibrant impact on the individual who experiences these emotions in real-life space and time.

Consider for a moment how the *rasa*-theory is set up. As I have already outlined, the suggestion is that there are certain basic *bhāvas* (49 in all, when the major, ancillary, accidental and supportive *bhāvas* are all counted, and compacted into 8 basic ones), that give rise to corresponding *rasas*; the *bhāvas* are

[8]V. K. Chari, *Sanskrit Criticism,* Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1990**,** *passim.*

deemed necessary for the *rasa* to be effected; but not the converse (you may have *rasas* from other sources or causes as well). In *Nāṭyaśāstra* it is clear that the specificity of *bhāvas* is not in the emotion but in the theatrical presentation – the *abhinayas* of bodily gesture, grimaces of the face, kinaesthetics, contortions of the torso and belly, motion of the legs, feet, etc. And then there are the 'inner *bhāvas*', *nṛtyas*, actual tears welling up, horripilation, sweat and the like; these inner states are embedded in *vibhāvas* and caused by them; their character and particular situations is what determines their being made known, and expressed through the *anubhava*, existential disposition or experience of the individual performing on the stage (thus pathos and other generalised sentiments, anger, fear, and so on). But some of these *vibhāvas* can be contrived, cultivated in specific communities, and may even be culturally relative (such that a member of another caste, class or region may fail to comprehend or 'feel' the same sentiments) (e.g. sitting through Japanese Noh, subtle expressions in Kathakali performance, etc.; and it is not just a matter of scholastic 'learning'). Yet Bharata is aware of the spectacle aspect of drama, as was Aristotle in his poetics later. What is clear in Bharata is that the *bhāvas* are indeed human states of 'innerness', but "Bharata did not articulate them in order to specify emotions as such"[9] (as in real real-life experiences); for these are only remotely psychological functions or states or *cittavrttis*, as Chari wants to call them. So whoever said Bharata specifies 49 emotional states?; nothing of the sort; the magic number 49 (with variations from 41 to 48) is so often touted around in aesthetics that they have failed to check these with psychologists or against actual psychological states in the inner experience of individuals not on the stage but in the throes of life's pleasures and pains, erotic joys to seeing another's or feeling one's own death about to whisk them away to the denizens of the nether worlds. Perhaps the *bhāvas* are related more to actions than to emotions; that is how one feels when presented with *dharma-saṇkata* – moral calamity – in the

[9]Personal conversation with Mukund Lath.

Rāmāyaṇa and to an extent in the *Mahābhārata* (*MBh*). However, I will return to the *MBh* shortly because the epic is not just an exemplary form of narrative action but it also – precisely because it does not wallow in *rasa*-theory – is rich with feelings and charged with emotions at every turn; emotions that find their involvement in ethics and hence are embedded in ethical and not aesthetic judgments as such (though one might dramatise and re-enact these on the stage, as with Peter Brooke's transcreation and the many serialised film/TV versions of the *MBh* we know of, but here I use text qua scripture). The intent is to explore the ethical discourse undergirding the narrative epic in the background of the general points considered under the insights outlined above.

Moments before the assault is launched, the warrior Arjuna shows signs of fatigue and loss of strength, letting the powerful Gāṇḍīva bow slip from his hands. His half-muted request to brake on the wheels takes Krishna, his charioteer-friend, by surprise. Arjuna is palpably troubled by something and his judgment appears to be hazing over: there are more components to it than his regular cognitive percept would indicate. It is a matter of (his) *mood*. His 'inner sense' is thrown into a state of confusion, panic and deep pity (*kṛpā*), his limbs have become weak, mouth dry, body trembling, hair standing on end, and skin erupting in burning-sensation. He confesses that the once-cherished desire (*kaṅkṣe*) for conquest and aligned convictions appear shaky; he wonders aloud whether there is any joy at the end of this bloody journey – or even in living? (I.32) Expressing a deeper fear for the death of his kinsfolk at his own hands, he says to Krishna: "Therefore there is no justification in killing our own kinsfolk" (I.37).

Arjuna continues his disquisition, underscoring utilitarian appeals to the evils of warfare and a plea toward altruistic compassion: "…the rescinding of family laws, ancestral rites, and timeless traditions, with the ultimate consequence of the collapse of society and descend into hellish chaos" (I.40-44). He finds it difficult to fight now that the 'moral emotion' that he is

struggling to articulate appears to be inconsistent with the 'moral duty' he was brought up to believe in.

Fallen into self-pity, the despondent warrior pleads to Krishna to make sense of his woeful plight. Is Arjuna appealing to the pristine virtue of reason over emotions, or is he instead asking Krishna to tell him if his emotions are serving him well? Can emotions prefigure morally appropriate, 'objective', and reasonable responses, even if they appear to elude his cognitive or rational discernment? He has not yet discerned clearly whether he feels shamed, guilty, regretful, remorseful, or a combination of these; or none of these but something else. Krishna, for his part, proceeds cautiously in helping Arjuna unearth his deep perturbation.

Arjuna's objections to engaging in war appear to be based on well-thought out and firm ethical grounds, but when he sets out to articulate the 'inspired thought' intelligently his arguments emerge as being scarcely coherent, and the appeal to his own conscience is minimally illuminating. But he is concerned that he is not able to see justice in this situation. In other words, he gives vent to a moral sentiment that he has arrived at as though intuitively (as Hume might also put it); his arguments, it will be noticed, are tangled up in his intense emotional reaction, the source of which he is not able to discern clearly. We can wonder why Arjuna remains perturbed by his emotional condition despite Krishna's irenic response. Why would Krishna want to seemingly dismiss his friend's condition? Is it a socially improper or morally unworthy state to be in? Perhaps it is psychologically, or psychosomatically painful and therefore bereft of utility? Or is such an emotional state simply irrational because it fogs well-intended judgment and vitiates the Rawlsian equation of 'rational frustration' and 'appropriate moral response' that Matilal sanguinely argued for elsewhere?[10]

Arjuna has consulted his emotions, evaluated the situation according to his physiological affects and found the answer to

[10]B. K. Matilal, "Dharma and Rationality," in P. Bilimoria, J Prabhu, R. Sharma, eds., *Indian Ethics Traditional and Modern: A* Companion, Aldershot: Ashgate Publishers, 2007, 97-98.

his moral dilemma in these telling judgement: "there is *no good* [to be had] in this battle: I shall not fight" (*BhG* 2.9). Furthermore, he asks how he can ever be happy if he kills his own cousins and kins for "honour forbids it" (1.37). He is so overwhelmed by the powerful emotional state that he begins to weep (2.1). Arjuna has evaluated his situation according to his physiological affects and made his moral decision. But that is also the rhetorical move on which the text tricks the reader: if only Arjuna could be distracted from and be disabused of the instructive power of his own physiological response, his *in situ* subjective moral intuition – what I call 'situational imagination' –, if he could imagine victory ahead, he could be persuaded towards seeing the virtue of a normatively-informed transcendental argument. Hence Krishna responds with a smirk, a biting smile. That politics and polemical diatribe on dharma, yoga, freedom, death, and the transcendental discourse that follow in the dialogue is not my concern here .[11] What I wish to get a handle on is how do we understand Arjuna's over-wrought melancholy? Or for that matter in the broader canvas of *The Mahābhārata,* to which I now turn.

Grief had struck the Pāṇḍavas whence – tricked into the game of dice by the arch-rival Duryodhana, which they lost by a certain sleight-of-hand – they were robbed of their share of the kingdom, their possessions, and technically even the wife of the five heir-brothers – Draupudī.[12] The entire kingdom (City of

[11]I develop these themes in the following papers: "Perturbations of Desire: Emotions Disarming Morality in the 'Great Song' of the *Mahābhārata*," in *Thinking about Feeling: Contemporary Philosophers on Emotions,* Robert C. Solomon, ed., New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, 214–232; Bilimoria, "Of Grief and Mourning"; Thinking a Feeling Back to Robert Solomon,"; Preface to 2nd Edition, Renuka Sharma, *Empathy Theory and Application in Psychotherapy*, New Delhi: DK Print World, 2014.

[12]*MBh,* "The Forest Teachings," Book III (29) 1.15-18: 221. "The Book of the Beginning," J. A. B. van Buitenen, trans., Vol. II, Books 2 and 3, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1972-78 (1981 Phoenix Edition).

Elephants) is said to have been smitten by inconsolable grief. A wise Brahmin, Śaunaka, steeped in the ontology of Sāṃkhya-Yoga, wishing to help Yudhiṣṭhira understand this moment of grief in the post-partum, self-exile, condition, spoke thus, with a tinge of object-relation psychotherapy thrown in as well:

> Thousands of occasions of sorrow and hundreds of occasions of fear beset day after day the foolish, but not the wise… (Book III 2.15). This world is tyrannized by two kinds of sorrows that arise either in the body or in the mind. Disease, labour, meeting with the unloved, and parting with the loved – these are four causes from which bodily grief arises. The pain of the body and the pain of the mind, is relieved by rapid countermeasures and by steadily ignoring it: these are two courses of action. For sensible physicians first relieve a man's mental anguish by pleasing talk and delightful presents; *for mental ills affect the body,* as a hot iron ball affects the water in a pitcher. Thus one should appease the ailment of the mind with insight, as one appeases fire with water; when the mental ailment is achieved the body calms down. Love, it is known, is the root of mental pain, for love makes a man attached, and thus he comes to grief. Grief roots in love and fear springs from love. From love is born the motivating passion that seeks out its object. Both passion and its object run counter to well-being, but the former is held to be the graver wrong. Just as fire in the hollow of a tree will burn down the tree to its roots, so even a small fault of passion destroys a man who wishes for Law [Dharma] (2.20-34).

Śaunaka then links passion with desire, the longing from which springs thirst, which "deranges man, fearsome, pregnant of Unlaw [anti-dharma], and giving rise to evil" (2.35).

It is interesting to note that bodily (read, physiological) perturbations are linked directly to mental anguish as the basis of grief, and that relief from grief involves calming the body through 'talk' therapy in tandem with healing of the body, care of self. It is for this reason that some mental health and neurosciences institutions in India have begun to (re-) introduce Ayurveda treatment and a regime of yoga, meditation with

regular chanting (at an adjacent shrine to Gaṅeśa), *in situ*. However illuminating as this brief discourse on grief is, there is still no follow-up or attempt at a more rigorous treatment of the malaise in the passages and Books that follow, until we get some moving episodic snippets towards the end of epic – to which I now turn.

The suggestive passages I choose are from the Strīparvan: 'The Book of Women' (after the carnage in the 'Dead of Night'), at the start of the eleventh canto of the *Mahābhārata*. There is definitely here an account of a deeply moving mood of grief, the grief of failure, of lost status and of the dire loss of loved ones. The grief that the women have been overcome with is so palpable that it is difficult to express except through imagining the grief of others and grieving on another's account. The moving instance of this is Gāndharī's expression of grief to Krishna, in which she surveys the blighted battlefield with divinely given-sight or extra-ordinary intuition (*divyenacakṣuṣā).* "The description she paints of the innocent wives of the deceased warriors confronted by the mangled corpses of their men is a masterpiece of horror and pathos."[13]*Amor fati!* The warrior's former invincibility is juxtaposed with the women, Pañchala and Kuru alike, reminiscing the virtues (*smarantyobhartṛjānguṇān*), and the joys they had with their now lifeless husbands, being mauled by the hungry vultures, hyenas, dogs and goblins in an act of total annihilation of the hitherto virility, macho-manliness, and identity:

> That was my *man!'* Grief robbed them of their demeanour (*śokakarśitadṛṣṭvā*) at the sight of the draped corpses of Karṇa, Abhimanyu, Droṇa, Drupada, Jayadaratha, Duhshāsana, Bāhlīka, Duryodhana, among others; tigers of men snuffed out like fading flames, most by Bhīma's missiles, lie with

[13]*Mahābhārata, Books X & II. Dead of Night/Women*, trans. Kate Cosby, Clay Sanskrit Edition, New York: New York University Press, 2009, 281.

maces still in their hands, as if raised boastfully toward their beloved women (16.38).[14]

Gāndhārī bewails, beginning with a much-telling directive:

kṛpaṇaṃetiśokārtāvilalāp |
ākulendriyā, sugūḍhajatruvipulum, siñcantīśokatapitā (17.4). Look at the array of widows, bewildered daughters-in-law, newly-betrothed brides running hither and thither, with their braided hair down, soaking in the blood of their loved ones, some also looking for the heads severed from their now wooded bodies of their fallen husbands. The jackals are out in daylight indifferent to this human noise, gnawing at every limb which only a few moon-nights before in deep conjugal embrace triggered many a pleasurable sensation to their beloved now distraught wives, screeching to the winds: How could this be – this pitiful slaughter? *Whose dharma, whose justice*? (18.5-9)[15]

So there are, as Solomon rightly observed, deeply reflective and dedicatory qualities of grief, meaning that the surge of feelings (sensations, emoting) is marked by a deep sense of care, gratitude, reverence, honouring, dedicating, commemorating, reciprocating, celebrating; but there still remains an unrequited longing, a resilient desire for it to be otherwise than the loss so deeply felt.[16]

It is true that the news about the death of a beloved person that evokes grief (*śoka*), like the great joy of an aesthetic experience, may give access to a wondrous, at least momentarily, contact with the divinely sublime consciousness underlying these experiences. This is, of course, Abhinavagupta's thinking as well, that all the *sthāyībhāvas* (basic durable emotions) and their corresponding *rasas* (aesthetic relishes) ultimately can lead to or culminate in *śāntarasa,* literally, 'peace-mood', 'the imaginative experience of tranquillity', that one experiences

[14]cf. Alf Hiltebeitel, *Dharma: Its Early History in Law, Religion, and Narrative*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

[15]I am citing from the Clay Sanskrit Edition, Strīparvan: 281.

[16]Solomon, *True To Our Feelings; What Emotions Are Really Telling Us*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

when the realisation dawns about the futility (*nirveda*) of contingent existence, which then arouses the full-blown consciousness of *ātman* in the achme of liberation (*mokṣa*). Whether this occurs with each *sthāyībhāva* in turn, or via a convergence of all the *sthāyībhāva* into one dominant *bhāva*, or in differential relations, or in sublation *or* cancellation of each in an ascending leap, etc., has been a matter of much scholastic dispute since Abhinavagupta elevated *śāntarasa* as the crowing aesthetic sentiment – something we cannot go into here.

But I must confess that this *ānanda* or ultimate bliss-state fully escaped me in my own moment of extreme *viṣāda*; it seems, I missed that boat somewhere. Only in the deeper metaphysical intuition of the possibility of the ultimate state being none other than *Nothing-ness*, as when one looks over at the never-ending expanse of the Venus Bay ocean receding into the borderless horizon, have I found myself overwhelmed with a sense of joy.[17] But Abhinavagupta may want to retort that there is indeed a formal isomorphism between the aesthetic and the philosophical, even as "he proceeds to treat dramatic aesthetics as a prolegomenon to the true conquest of the nature of things (*saṃsāra)*"[18] The only difference from philosophy is that the universality is still emotional – grounded in the diversity of the human realm rather than in the unity (or emptiness) of the cosmic. "[I]t is the capacity to feel that distinguishes us from the universe and gives us hope of salvation."[19]

Abhinava's metaphysical commitment was to *advaita* (non-dualist ontology) of Brahmanism, so the preeminent *rasa* tied to the realisation of its truth would understandably be *ānanda*; but if counterfactually the best metaphysical explanation turns out to be its rival, equally non-dualist but empty of all ontology, or to use Heidegger's term, *onto-theo-logos*, i.e. Nothingness, barring traces of suffering as specks scattered over the Void, then the

[17]Purushottama Bilimoria, "Why is there Nothing rather than Something?" 50th Anniversary Issue Tribute to Max Charlesworth, *Sophia* (Philosophy &Traditions), 51(4), December 2012, 509-30.

[18]Gerow, "Sanskrit Dramatic Theories," 57.

[19]Gerow, "Sanskrit Dramatic Theories," 57.

universality of *śāntarasa* is not at all compelling. Rather, one could argue, it might just be the case (as indeed Buddhist aestheticians like Bhāmaha, Digṅāna elsewhere, have maintained) the affect-filled sublime of *karuṇa,* pathos, empathy, or the universality of compassion, is the proper candidate for the climax of all aesthetic experiences.

In the *Naṭyaśāstra* too *karuṇa* is said to be the *sthāyībhāva* properly of grief, brought about by the loss of a dear one, or by calamity, killing, misery, pain and tragic frustration; the shock ensues in tears, dejection, or a 'total' (collapse) and so on. *Karuṇarasa* as compassion or empathy is evoked when one experiences someone dear to them dies (or is killed) and by hearing unpleasant things. There may indeed be a tinge of 'delight' (*rasoi*) in this introjective transference, for after all this is not a *bhāva* as such, may be a *bhāvana* (sentiment), but clearly a *rasa*, with the same measured distance that Abhivanagupta noted between the bereft, wailing lovebird and the poet Vālmīki. Philosophers are after all transcendental or metaphysical poets, and that is why they are drawn to prosaic poets (Yudhiṣṭhira to Krishna; Heidegger to Hölderlin, Rielke; Gandhi to Tagore.)

3. Tagore's Grief and Depictions Thereof in Text and Paintings

Now fast-forwarding to some contemporary representations, Gajendranath Tagore, a nephew of Rabindranath Tagore, and a poet and critic in his own right, interpreted many of the heart-wrenching poems and later experimental (quasi-impressionist) paintings of the Noble Laureate precisely in this light: that through his suffering, as the four walls collapsed around him, there was still a *rasa* or delight or *jouissance* being enjoyed by someone in the transcendental planes, namely, an otherwise benevolent God.

I am not so sure; one so afflicted may have to stretch their credulity to a limit to invite the possibly non-existent supernatural – at a moment when oneself along with the one lost is in the jaws of Yāma, and doubt and disbelief overpowers his/her intellectual faculty – to indeed think of partaking of any joy, even the curious compounding in the aesthetic of *karuṇa*,

compassion, empathy, (even in self-pity) and *rasa*, that might be believed by everyone but the sufferer to present itself. Rabindranath dives deeply into his own subjectivity to experience this plenum of quietitude.

There are some vignettes to this effect that I wish to present in part drawn from a stage-performance marking the 150th anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore's birth in what was then East Bengal, which has held in Los Angeles, in 2013 and which I attended.[20]

> April 1884 – 125 years ago. At that time, Jora Sanko, the ancestral home of the Tagores, was enveloped by a thick shadow of death which was to cast its gloom for a long time to come. A 25 year old daughter-in-law of the family had ended her life for reasons not clearly established even today. For the past 16 years she had been a friend, a mother figure and a Muse of Rabindranath Tagore, the most famous of all the illustrious Tagores. Her name was Kadambari Devi. She was natunbauthan or bauthakrun to Rabindranath.

Coming from a humble social background, the nine-year old Kadambari Devi had entered the house of the Tagores which was blessed with much wealth and immense wisdom, and had become a centre for cultural activities, bringing together enlightened minds that exchanged, entertained and embraced fresh ideas from all spheres of life. Rabindranath was Kadambari's 'polestar,' mutually inspiring each other to excel in the arts and other joys of living. Her own husband, Jyotirindranath, was preoccupied with his enterprise of ship-building; there was thus an understandable streak of loneliness in Kadambari's own life. However, four months after Rabindranath married Mrinalini Devi, in April of 1884, for reasons never clearly ascertained,

[20]The text is taken from *Portrait of a Poet Within,* conceptualised by Shailesh Parekh, and the choreography is described as 'A Ravindra Bhavan, Ahmedabad Presentation in Three Voices,' published by Paritosh, Krishna Society, Ahmedabad, 2012. Courtesy of Dr Debashish Banerjee of Nalanda Institute, Los Angeles.

Kadambari Devi is said to have committed suicide.[21] Soon after her demise, *Prakritir Prtishodh*, *Shaishab Sangit* and *Bhanu Singher Padabali* were published and Rabindranath dedicated all the three works to the memory of Kadambari Devi, without explicitly naming her.[22] The dedication in of them read:

> Series of these poems are given to you. For a long time, I used to sit next to you and write; I used to recite to you only. Memories of all that love presides over these. Hence, I feel, whether you are here or not, these writings will catch your eyes.

It said that the emptiness forged by the untimely demise of Kadambari Devi in the life of Rabindranath was nevertheless to trigger many memorable poems that he penned since. His memories are inspired in the novella Nashtanid (literally 'The Broken Nest'), which was the basis for the film by Satyajit Ray, *Charulata*. In this work, Tagore skillfully suggests how the erotic tension between Charu and Amal is sublimated in a common literary passion, as she finds in print the voice she lacks in life.

Rabindranath took up the brush and started to paint after the age of 60. In these haunting portraits of women it is often believed that the eyes of Kadambari Devi, re-appear as if in apparition. And then some thirty years after her death, there came this most moving poem and a magnificent tribute to his long lost beloved *de facto* companion:[23]

> What a marvel!
> I thought – only a few days ago one who was so real,
> One who was so much to us – Where is that person today?
> Standing aside from our life – how far away!
> Our life is running onward – but she has stopped over there!
> How little is she remembered! Yet, … did I forget you?
> Yes, I did … what is that oblivion? Because you exist deeply in me, I don't have to remember you outwardly. … because

[21]Prasanta Kumar Paul, *Rabijibani*, vol. 1 and vol. 2, 2002, Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 1993, 184, 268 103.

[22]Paul, *Rabijibani*, vol. 2, 208-210.

[23]Paul, *Rabijibani*, vol. 2, 211.

> you are at the root of my life, because you came once to my life, my world is so full of joy, my life is filled with nectar.

It goes without saying that this first brush with death in his life, shook and traumatised the bouncing-about, youthful Tagore in a way that never returned to him the simple innocence of seeing life as a passing stream filled laughter and mirth and the art of mischievous creativity. He explains this *angst*-ridden experience better in his autobiographical *My Reminiscences*:[24]

> The acquaintance I made with death at the age of twenty-four was a permanent one, and its blow has continued to add itself to each succeeding bereavement in an ever-lengthening chain of tears. …
>
> I was unaware then of the slightest lack anywhere in my life; there seemed no loophole in its tightly woven fabric of laughter and tears. Nothing was visible beyond it, hence I had accepted it as the ultimate truth. And then death suddenly arrived from somewhere. In a single instant, it tore away one end of this very visible fabric of life. How bewildered I felt now!
>
> And what other sorrow is comparable to the state wherein darkness prevents the finding of a way out of the darkness?

Still, there is a momentary pause in which Tagore seems to confirm the insights of Abhinavagupta : that even within the whirlpool of the darkest tornado to hit one's inner life as it were, there is nonetheless a *badaam,* a kernel a joy and excelsus that fills in the emptiness to the brim. It is as if *śāntarasa* bided its time until the furry of the waves settled down and a peaceful calmness descended upon the surface of the ocean, lending (back) its own blueness that had all but been soiled. Hence this telling passages:

> And yet in the midst of this unbearable grief, flashes of joy seemed to sparkle in my mind, now and again, in a way which quite surprised me. That life was not a stable permanent

[24]Tagore, *My Reminiscences*, New York: The MacMillan Company, 1917, re-issued New Delhi: Rupa & Co, 2008, 260-261. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/22217/22217-h/22217-h.htm>

> fixture was itself the sorrowful tidings which helped to lighten my mind. That we were not prisoners for ever within a solid stone wall of life was the thought which unconsciously kept coming uppermost in rushes of gladness.
>
> That which I had held I was made to let go —this was the sense of loss which distressed me, but when at the same moment I viewed it from the standpoint of freedom gained, a great peace fell upon me. The all-pervading pressure of worldly existence compensates itself by balancing life against death, and thus it does not crush us.[25]

Now, at journey's end, we find rather that it is life that becomes the source of confinement – viz, in the ego-chain of subjectivity– while death is the *badō* to liberation – into the free play of being.

4. Concluding Remarks

From the reading I have presented here of the epics, one could argue that the *MBh* seeks to understand the phenomenological intricacies of emotion, its entanglement with propositional attitudes or judgments of the intellect, and its impact upon the person's action *or* inaction. The texts exhort that moral judgments be appropriately grounded in the visceral aspect of emotions.

But there is a certain degree of universalism and essentialism presupposed in much of the discussion about emotions, particularly in the aesthetic context; and if I am seen to be questioning this in the context of Western theorising I cannot by the same token afford to be mute or aridly complacent in the context of Indic theorising. What seems missing is a proper attention to the *sui generis* substantive nature, *apekṣatva,* of the affective state, the unconscious processes, and the bodily impact before and without predicating the feelings to rid oneself of desire and thirst, or even embrace a certain peculiar sense of joy (*rasa,* as in *karunarasa,* let alone a trace of divine bliss *śāntarasa, ātmāsneha*). Are Arjuna and Yudhiṣṭhira really asking 'What should I do?' 'How should I think?' – or is it more of, 'How should I be *feeling* if this is what I am feeling, indeed?' This is a common error in all theories that tie emotions too closely to the

[25]Tagore, *My Reminiscences*, 262.

cognitive or intellectual, albeit pre-linguistic, phenomenological structure which in turn is spelt out in meta-ethical analysis as a response treating of an inherent moral dilemma or a challenge to the normative given in the situation, i.e., to the norms the individual and the larger social group are privileged to: thus, anger is seen as a response to the sense of my being morally slighted by another or treated unjustly in respect of my dues, or lament is said to arise owing to the petrification of desire, and separation from an object one is attached to, etc. These are articulations of value-judgments, even *sthayi-bhāvas*, not of the emotions themselves.

Thus some have tended to analyse emotion as an "evaluative (or normative) judgment, a judgment about my situation and/or about all other people."[26] If one interprets cognitive content of emotion as being evaluative, as Robert Solomon did in his early views, and Martha Nussbaum continues this trend, then this is what marks the emotion of grief as well (my prime *udahrana*). The intense evaluative judgment or 'appraisal' element here would include increasing references to an agent's desires and goals—or rather their frustration, petrification. Other researchers have insisted on the bodily disturbances—'unthinking energies'—and perturbations of non-intellectual mentation processes in the agent so that experiences such as trembling, blushing, perspiring and other neurological symptoms are significant constituents; indeed, these would be fundamental structural registers of emotional response. And this is evidenced not just in human beings with their quaint sentimentality, but also in animals. This gives warrant to the idea that 'hard' emotions such as grief involve a much larger metaphysical tapestry than say, the more short-fused emotions such as anger or even moral indignation do.

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[26]Robert Solomon, *The Passions*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976, 186; Martha Nussbaum, "Emotions as Judgments of Value and Importance," in *Relativism, Suffering, and Beyond: Essays in Memory of Bimal K. Matilal,* P. Bilimoria and J. N. Mohanty, eds., New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997, 231-251.

I liken Gandhi, especially as he faces the near-collapse of the Indian subcontinent as it is being rent apart with communal violence on the eve of its Independence, to the doyen of morality of in the *Mahābhārata* – Yudhiṣṭhira – particularly the disenchantments of the entire clan that he bore witness to along with the carnage of the war as it drew to an unending end, and the constant rebuke he faced from Draupadī for wandering the earth with his dog without finding a stable foundation for *Dharma* or grounding it in firm absolutes.

This is also illustrated with an ecological canvas portraying nature's grief on the faces of the six species of animals surviving the ruthless, irrational act of burning down the Khāṇḍava forest by Krishna and Arjuna while frolicking the outskirts of the forest in what seemed like a pass-time.[27] Perhaps this cavalier act is indicative of the non-absoluteness of nonviolence vis-à-vis Jain and Buddhist ethics by the time of the epics; *ahiṃsā* or non-injury as a virtue is catalogued but only as a prudential imperative, i.e. if it serves a purpose. Sacrifice is condemned where animals are used, but animals are used as vehicles and killed by the thousands, close to a million, in the battlefield; the *aśvamedha* (horse-sacrifice) is performed when installing Yudhiṣṭhira to the royal crown, and as just mentioned the Khāṇḍava forest with all its inhabiting animals are smitten. It wasn't until Gandhi, and to an extent Tagore, that *ahiṃsā* as noninjury is transformed into the positive virtue of nonviolence and put back on the ethical high-ground, i.e. given a moral ontological prerogative all its own, as a virtue; and it has a very strong positive emotion, action-tending emotion, embedded in it: and that he called *ātmastuti*, conscience.[28]

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[27]"The Burning of the Khāṇḍava Forest," in *The Book of the Beginning*, Book I, 216, 25-30.

[28]A different version of this paper is published as "Suffering, Empathy and Moral Imaginative Intuition" in *Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences*, (ed. Rahul Govind), vol xx, no. 1, 2013, pp. 33-54. I wish to thank Colette Walker for enlightening discussions on this topic as I worked on final edits to the paper.