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Horace and Indian Aesthetics: A Comparative Study

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Abstract:

It does not take an Aesthete to make out wherever there is literature, there are thoughts on the same, hence evaluation of literature is just the other face of the coin of literature. The purpose of this paper is to confer different aspects of poetry, the pros and cons of it which has been portrayed by a famous western aesthetic, Horace in his writings. There are instances when the difference between ancient Indian and classical western theories strike irreconcilable but that does not make them poles apart. This paper exposes a comparative study hinged on propriety, causes, purposes and limitations of poetry of ancient Indian aesthetics with the ideas conveyed by Horace.

Keywords: Horace, Ars Poetica, poetry, aesthetic, style, art, propriety, cause, purpose, diction, fault, view

1. Introduction

Literature and Literary Criticism came into existence at the same time. As and when literatures were created, they were analysed, and the analyses further became part of mainstream literature. The most literary work on western theories on criticism after the great Aristotle came from Horace in Latin, a few centuries after the former.

Unlike with the rhetoricians of ancient India, most western thinkers came before us with a great deal of their lives. Horace is one of them. He was born at Venusia in 65 B.C. His full name was Quintus Horatius Flaccus.

2. Works

He wrote ---

- a) Epodes
- b) Satires 1st and 2nd part
- c) Odes 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th part
- d) Epistles 1st and 2nd part
- e) Carman Saeculare

Particularly the end of 'Epistles' is known as 'Ars Poetica'.

In 29 B.C. he published the 'Epodes', in 23 B.C. the first three books of 'Odes', and in 20 B.C. his first book of 'Epistles'. Augustus asked Horace in 17 B.C. to write a ceremonial poem celebrating his reign to be read at the Saecular Games. In 14 B.C. he published the second book of 'Epistles', which he followed a year later with his fourth book of 'Odes'. In the final years of his life, he wrote his 'Ars Poetica'.

Horace is best known for his 'Odes', which often celebrate common events such as proposing a drink or wishing a friend a safe journey. Although he wrote in many different meters and of different themes, the 'Odes' often express ordinary thoughts and sentiments with a deceptive finality and simplicity. Alexander Pope wrote of them saying, 'what oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed.'¹ His 'Ars Poetica', which was written in the form of a letter to the Pisones, has also had a profound influence on later poetry and criticism available. Along with Virgil, Horace is the most celebrated of the Augustan poets. His work would deeply influence later writers including Ben Jonson, Alexander Pope, W. H. Auden, Robert Frost, and many others.

Horace works very hard. He was very enthusiastic. He was a professional writer. Horace's writings provide good material for today's critics. Not only does he record the guidelines for a poet, he outlines the ideas on poetry held by the critics. A man has learnt his duty towards his country, friends and society. Like Indian rhetorician and dramatists, Horace gives some of the do's and don'ts of guidelines. An episode is either acted on stage or reported. It falls a tremendous impact on the minds of the audiences. Some episodes should not be seen on stage. A play should contain no more nor less than five acts. A 'deus ex machina'² is to be introduced when it is absolutely necessary. There should not be more than three speaking characters on stage at the same time. In writing poetry, Horace used both well-known words and newly coined words in juxtaposition.

¹ 'An Essay on Criticism' by Alexander Pope

² 'Classical Literary Criticism', p. 85

In sketching out the guidelines of poetry Horace says, ---

- “It is not enough that poems should have beauty; if they are to carry the audience with them, they must have charm as well.”³

The poet must feel the emotions and wants to convey. He says, ---

- “If the speaker’s words are out of key with his fortunes, a Roman audience will cackle and jeer to a man.”⁴

The poet should realise that the behaviours of a child, a youth, a grown man and an old man are difficult. In choosing a plot the poet can either follow the beaten track or invent something which is consistent within itself.

He declares that both are essential. One cannot write poetry without a strong natural aptitude.

3. Ars Poetica

At the end of his writings he wrote ‘*Ars Poetica*’. With the hand of this book he reached at the top of success. The end of this book is full of poet’s strange behaviour. Horace mainly criticized of those persons who thought that they were poets themselves though there was the lack of poetic quality in them.

3.1. Horatian Manner

In the ‘*Ars Poetica*’, lucid and logical thought structure is a constant characteristic of the Horatian manner. Horace is a writer of one idiom only. His method in all his works is an essentially ‘lyrical’ method, whether he is working on lyrical material proper or on satire, epistle, or didactic verse. The interpretation of a lyrical treatment will be revealed if we put in parallel columns these lyrical terms together with the corresponding logical-didactic terms:

Lyrical	Logical-didactic
A. Concrete	A. Abstract
B. Action and feeling	B. Theoretical argument
C. Illustration, anecdote, symbol, allegory, partially relevant imagery	C. Cumulative presentation and confirmation of data
D. Abrupt presentation	D. Careful preparation
E. Polarity, extreme contrasts	E. Comprehensive balancing of evidence
F. Tenuous transitions, link-words	F. Explicit connection

Table 1

3.2. Method

The lyrical method resembles an artist’s rapid sketch of salient features in his subject. The didactic method resembles the engineer’s blueprint. The contrasts, by the way, between the methods of Horace and Lucretius are instructive. The contrast between the two poets is not in the quality or texture of their thought but in the technique of exposition. Horace uses a lyrical method everywhere in his work. Lucid and logical structure is characteristic of all his writings. The combination of these two propositions will be the central theme of this paper. There will no doubt be general agreement with the suggested definition of a lyrical method.

4. Literary Style

Like the most of early Latin poets, Horace’s works were written in Greek meters. Some of these were written in hexameters which were relatively easy to adapt into Latin whereas in some works like ‘Odes’ he used more complex forms such as Alcaics and Sapphics. Even though ‘Odes’ were written in different meters and themes, they had expressed ordinary thoughts and sentiments with a deceptive finality and simplicity. The most recurrent themes in Horace’s works are love, pleasures of friendship and simple life and art of poetry. His works were autobiographical and dealt with moral and political issues.

Just to be witty is not enough, insists Horace. A poet’s thoughts should run smoothly and at the right pace. There should be good variety in tone; and the poet should assume different roles suited to the matter at hand. The language itself should be plain and pure Latin, with no Greek neologisms mixed in. The poem defends the poet’s talent as well as his choice of genre.

5. Art of Poetry

a) People refer ‘*Ars Poetica*’ as leaf poetry. The poetry is in the form of a leaf. The poet wrote it in poetic rhythm. There are 467 lines. It was composed in 12 B.C. Horace did not give the name ‘*Ars Poetica*’. The original name was ‘*Epostula ad Pisones*’. There is a rumour that he advised to Piso’s two sons about the theory of poetry in rhythmic language. Another name was ‘*Liber de arte Poetica*’. There are various names but it is popularly known as ‘*Ars Poetica*’. There is a similarity to the poetic theory of Aristotle. He wrote this book to advice the learners. His process is originated from Greek. This work is a sort of manual for young poets, somewhat in the nature of the Indian *Kaviśikṣhā* or *Kavirahasya*. He thought that there is no importance of only merit. The devotion of art is also necessary with it. He said to write m any times what he decided to write. At first, critics should observe it and then it should be raised before the eyes of common people.

- ❖ Analysing the book there are seven important points ---
 - i. Unity of poetry
 - ii. Subject matter

³ Ibid., p. 82

⁴ Ibid., p. 83

- iii. Writing skill and appropriate words
- iv. Purpose of poetry
- v. Poet's wisdom and practice
- vi. Criticism
- vii. Power of creation

❖ Horace repeated the phrase 'unity of plot'. He always highlights the actual incident. There is unity between truth and imagination. He relates poetry with real life. He brings the reference of social duty. While he tried to sketch the characters, he emphasizes on these characters who are very much dutiful to his country, people, relatives etc. He dislikes the appearance of outside. Instead of that he emphasizes self-evolution and general knowledge. He comments about this subject--

➤ "Choose a subject that is suited to your abilities, you who aspire to be writers; give long thought to what you are capable of undertaking, and what is beyond you."⁵

b) The main theme of poetry is expression. Horace is known as expressionist. The poet reveals joy, sorrow, anger. The work of language is to create impression in the mind of readers. The poet uses so many appropriate words to attract audience's eyes easily. The poet analyses the theory of poetry. The aim and purpose of poetry is creativity. The main characteristic aspects of poetry are reality, clearness, generalness. There is the reality of subject matter and briefness of speech. He protested against briefness and largeness of the subject. In case of poetry it is important to select proper subject as well as constant practice. Only intelligent person cannot create the greatest poetry. For this creator must be studious and laborious to give a position of his writings in the world.

6. Comparison with Indian Aesthetics

6.1. Propriety or Aucitya in Poetry

In his works Horace utters a few sayings stressing on how one must write poetry practically. Many of his ideas echo familiarly to us being very akin to the ideas held by our ancient writers. He says that if an artist were to paint a horse with a human head or a beautiful woman with a hideous fish-tail, this would not find favour with the viewers. Even while allowing poetic licence, it is not possible to condone this kind of impropriety. One may recall in this context the injunction of *Ānandavardhana* that only *anauchitya* or impropriety leads to hiatus in *rasa*, while propriety or *aucitya* is its life.

*"Anaucityād ṛte nānyad rasabhaṅgasya kāraṇam/
Prasiddhaucityabandhas tu rasayopaniṣat parā!"*⁶

In order to achieve propriety, one must make sure that the character being depicted is presented as he or she needs to be. An old man should not speak like a youngster and vice versa. The concept of *aucitya* or propriety, one may recall, has an equal place of prominence in Sanskrit literary criticism.

6.2. Causes of Poetry

This automatically brings us to the question whether natural genius produces poetry or training and practice have a role to play too. We know that Daṇḍin speaks of all three:

*"Naisargikī ca pratibhā śrutañ ca bahu nirmalam/
Amadaś cābhiyogo 'syāḥ kāraṇaṃ kāvyasampadaḥ!"*⁷

However, he qualifies his statement by adding that lack of genius may be compensated by training and practice so that a person may be able to at least appreciate poetry. *Rājaśekhara* speaks of the two types of genius or *pratibhā* --- *kārayitṛī* or creative and *bhāvayitṛī* or appreciative. *Mammaṭa* however decrees that all the three are essential for poet:

*"Śaktir nipuṇatā lokaśastrakāvyaḍyavekṣanāt/
Kāvyañāśikṣayābhyāsa iti hetus tadudbhava!"*⁸

Again *Jaḡannātha* says: '*tasya ca kāraṇaṃ kavigatā kevalā pratibhā*'⁹, but adds that this *pratibhā* may be of two categories, one produced by the blessings of gods (i.e., natural genius) or the other produced by training and practice. In this context Horace says: "The question has been asked whether a fine poem is the product of nature or of art. I myself cannot see the value of application without a strong natural aptitude, or, on the other hand, of native genius unless it is cultivated --- so true is it that each requires the help of the other, and that they enter into a friendly compact with each other."¹⁰

⁵ 'Classical Literary Criticism', p. 80

⁶ 'Dhwanyālokaḥ', Uddyotaḥ - III

⁷ 'Kāvyaḍarśaḥ', Paricchedaḥ - 1, Kārikā No. - 103

⁸ 'Kāvyaḍarśaḥ', 1.3.

⁹ 'Rasagaṅgādharaḥ', Ānanam - 1

¹⁰ 'Classical Literary Criticism', p. 93

6.3. Purposes of Poetry

We know that most Indian works on poetics devote much thought to the purpose of the poetry. Plato has denounced it as harmful for the reader and listener, while Aristotle has given it a much more exalted status. Indian writers assign to it many purposes e.g., fame, financial benefits, to know the ways of the world, destruction of evil, for attaining supra-mundane bliss and gaining good advice in a pleasant manner. *Mammaṭa* says:

“*Kāvyaṃ yaśase ’rthakṛte vyavahāraṁ śivetarakṣataye/
Sadyaḥ paranirvṛtaye kāntāsammitatayopadeśayuje//*”¹¹

Horace says likewise: “Poets aim at giving either profit or delight, or at combining the giving of pleasure with some useful precepts for life.”¹²

6.4. Subject and Diction of Poetry

Besides these major points on poetry, Horace also presents some rules like the Indian rhetoricians. He says to would-be poets that they should select a subject that is suited to their abilities and in this way they will never be at a loss for words and their thoughts will be clear and orderly.

Diction is very important to the poet. He must use the right words in the right setting if he wants to make an impression.

6.5. Faults of poetry

Another point that Horace deals with is the question of faults in poetry. He says:

‘... there are faults that we should be ready to forgive.’¹³

This statement may sometimes give out a false note. Actually he wants to say that if there are many fine passages in a poem, occasionally faults of carelessness may be overlooked. However, it does not mean that faults in poetry may be condoned. It is best that excellent poetry avoids faults, and it is shocking that a great poet such as Homer makes errors. In this context the Indian rhetoricians tell us that:

- “They are seldom willing to forgive faults on the part of a poet. Daṇḍin says that a single fault is enough to condemn the whole poem just as a single white spot on a beautiful lady makes it ugly.

“*Tadalpamapi nopekṣyaṃ kāvye duṣṭaṃ kathaṃcana/
Syadvapuḥ sundaramapi śvitreṇaikena durbhagam//*”

- *Mammaṭa* in his *Kāvyaṅkaśaḥ* specifies that a poem must be faultless (*Tadadoṣau śabdārthau saṅgāvanalamkṛitī punaḥ kvāpi*). But all rhetoricians do not agree with this view. *Viśvanātha* says no poem can be entirely faultless. In that case, he asks, should the faultless part be poetry and the rest non-poetry --- which is absurd.”¹⁴

6.6. Other Views on Poetry

To all these essential aspects on poetry Horace adds that a poet may follow the beaten track or be original. If he writes on a subject known to his readers, he has to follow the generally accepted ideas about his characters. It is more difficult to write on an original theme and if adopted he must do justice to it.

Horrific or gruesome events must not be shown on stage. There must be more than three speaking characters on stage at the same time. A play should neither be shorter or longer than five acts.

7. Death

Horace died in 8 B.C., a few weeks after the death of his friend, *Maecenas*. Since Horace had no heirs, he left his estate to Augustus and was buried near the tomb of *Maecenas*.

8. Conclusion

Horace’s success as a poet can be measured partly by how difficult he is to imitate and translate and by how many admirers have sought to do both. Horace transformed many of the varieties of human experience and sensibility into unforgettable, immortal poetry. The poet’s delight in shifting perspectives also serves as a reminder that the poetic gives voice to a persona and moon only of the moment. Perhaps the greatest irony of the poet who so relished is that by constantly talking about himself.

Horace lays a great deal of emphasis on the poetic art and how it must be nurtured and cultivated like any other art. His works are more a set of do’s and don’ts rather than a proper criticism, but it does lend us an insight into the contemporary ideas on literature.

¹¹ ‘*Kāvyaṅkaśaḥ*’, 1.2.

¹² ‘*Classical Literary Criticism*’, p. 90

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 91

¹⁴ Horace and Concepts of Sanskrit Poetics, *Anvīkṣā* (Research Journal of the Dept. of Sanskrit, Jadavpur University), Vol. X, p. 33

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