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# Theorising the Idea of *Aesthetic Self* in Abhinavagupta

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**ABSTRACT**

**The paper examines Abhinavagupta's concept of rasa, or aesthetic experience, and attempts to theorise the idea of an aesthetic self. According to him, while experiencing a drama (*nāṭya*), spectators attain a collective state of consciousness when they resonate with the underlying poetic intention and experience generalised emotions (through *sādhāraṇīkaraṇa*), creating a uniformity (*ekaghanatā*) among them, de-contextualising them from their personal-causal relations. Subsequently, their consciousness merges into a collective whole, becoming a universal subject that experiences generalised emotions during an aesthetic experience. However, this subject does not attain the status of the universal self because, according to Abhinavagupta, while aesthetic experience (*rasāsvāda*) resembles spiritual experience (*brahmāsvāda*) and leads to self-dissolution, it is not a complete dissolution as it remains influenced by the phenomenological realities of life. However, when spectators reach the highest level of aesthetic experience, they relish *śānta rasa*, where they experience an undifferentiated bliss (*ānandaikaghana*). This bliss is the natural state of mind, where the enjoyment leads to the sinking of mental activities (*cittavṛttis*) into the subconscious, resulting in the experience of one's consciousness or self. Nonetheless, since aesthetic experience does not result in total self-dissolution, the paper argues that although collective consciousness forms a universal subject, an 'Impersonalised' dimension of the self remains. This dimension is neither fully detached from the world nor entirely dissolved into the self. The paper concludes that this Impersonalised self, which bears the collective experience of generalised emotions in an aesthetic experience, can be referred to as the 'aesthetic self.'**

***Keywords-*** Abhinavagupta, Aesthetic experience, Aesthetic self, Impersonalised self, Nātya, Rasa.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Abhinavagupta's idea of the self is deeply rooted in the philosophical tradition of Monistic Śaivism, set in Kashmir. This tradition identifies the existence of a singular, universal self, known as *Śiva*, manifesting itself in various distinct entities, including us, individual beings. However, it is due to the presence of impurities (*malas*) and a lack of knowledge ("*avidyā*") that we, as individual selves, are unable to recognise our intrinsic unity with Śiva. For this reason, Śaivism and Abhinavagupta aim to guide individuals toward self-realisation by encouraging them to recognise their unity with the divine, or Śiva. However, in doing so, Kashmir Śaivism and following it, Abhinavagupta embraces the pursuit of both worldly pleasures and spiritual liberation, advocating for a balanced path that emphasises the significance of appreciating beauty while seeking both enjoyment (*bhukti*) and liberation (*mukti*) concurrently.[1]

Existing literature shows that scholars have explored Abhinavagupta's idea of the self from various perspectives. Some argue that the self is rooted in the physical body or the senses, while others believe it is located in one's ego (*aham*). Furthermore, some perspectives suggest that the self is experienced aesthetically, while others maintain the traditional view that self-realisation occurs through spiritual experiences. Kerry M. Skora (2007) emphasises Abhinavagupta's idea that the self, intimately linked with the body and sensations, is essential for attaining liberation. He highlights Abhinavagupta's use of the metaphor of the "pulsating heart" to highlight how physical sensations

[1] B. N. Pandit, p.5 (1990)

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merge with ultimate consciousness (*vimarśa*), framing self-realisation (liberation) as a bodily experience intertwined with the senses. In a 2018 follow-up, Skora revisits this theme and discusses the interplay between consciousness and the environment through the lens of *Bhairavīmudrā*, illustrating Abhinava's perspective that self represents a harmonic convergence of consciousness and sensory experiences, embracing the world's splendour while acknowledging the divine essence, especially *Bhairava*. This concept is captured in the practice of *pratimīlana samādhi*, which reflects the dual focus of the self on both internal and external realms. Later, Sthaneshwar Timalsina (2020a) examines Abhinavagupta's view of the self, centred around the concept of *aham* (I or I-am). Timalsina breaks down *aham* into three aspects: the empirical ego, the experiencing subject, and the encompassing whole, challenging traditional dualistic views by presenting a unified self that merges the immanent and transcendent. This self is symbolically represented through phonemes /a/-/h/-/m/ and the deities *parā*, *parāparā* and *aparā*, encapsulating all possibilities and exhibiting both subjectivity and objectivity via *prakāśa* (illumination) and *vimarśa* (reflexivity). Timalsina concludes that Abhinava's notion of *aham* unifies individual and collective identities, offering a deep understanding of self-awareness and consciousness. In a 2020(b) follow-up, Timalsina explores Abhinava's aesthetics, especially emphasising the concept of *śānta rasa* and its relationship with the self. He explains that Abhinavagupta sees the self as naturally aware and joyful, arguing that the calm derived from śānta rasa is rooted in self-knowledge (*ātmajñāna*) rather than the absence of feelings. This is considered a type of reflexive consciousness (*vimarśa*), which is inward-looking and places the self at the heart of all emotional experiences. Hence, experiencing śānta rasa is experiencing the self. Despite this, the existing literature highlights a notable lack of clarity in defining the self as it engages and emerges in the aesthetic experience of *rasa*. Although Skora and Timalsina have explored Abhinavagupta's arguments on aesthetics and its connection to the self, a clear understanding of the nature of this self remains elusive.

Considering this, the paper aims to theorise the concept of the self in Abhinavagupta's aesthetics. It begins by exploring the theory of *rasa* and aesthetic experience, according to Abhinavagupta, highlighting universal aspects that distinguish this experience from the ordinary. Key aspects include the idea of a sympathetic response towards the poet (*hṛdayasaṁvāda*), the generalisation of emotions (*sādhāraṇīkaraṇa*), and identification with the character (*tanmayībhāvana*) which enable the aesthetic experience to liberate spectators from the constraints of time, space, and personalised dimensions of reality, dissolving individual boundaries and forming a uniformity (*ekaghanatā*). This uniformity hints at the formation of collective consciousness, where individuals, through experiencing the permanent emotions (*sthāyibhāvas*) inherent from birth, become united and transform into a universal subject when these emotions are generalised. However, despite the emergence of such collective consciousness, the spectators' self remains lower than the spiritual self until they reach the highest level of aesthetic experience, characterised by *śānta* (tranquillity), where they experience consciousness, or the self, in its pure and unadulterated form. Abhinavagupta, here, considers aesthetic experience (*rasāsvāda*) as a sibling (*sahodara*) of Brahma experience (*brahmāsvāda*) but not equivalent to it because, in the former, there is no complete self-dissolution, indicating a state of consciousness detached from worldly affairs but still susceptible to them due to the phenomenological reality in which the spectator's self resides. Such a state is the 'impersonalised' dimension of the self, clearly detached from everyday experience and engaged in aesthetic contemplation but not entirely dissolved as in the yogic experience of *mokṣa*. The paper, therefore, demonstrates that this impersonalised dimension of the self, which bears the universal experience of generalised emotions, can be termed the 'aesthetic self.'

## II. THE CONCEPT OF RASA ACCORDING TO ABHINAVAGUPTA

One of the oldest literary theories found in the Indian aesthetic tradition was the theory of *rasa*, which Bharatamuni first expounded in his seminal treatise on dramaturgy, known as the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. The word 'rasa' literally signifies two main meanings—it represents the essence and what is tasted or felt.[2] This is evident in the *Chāndogyopaniṣad*, where rasa is defined as a "taste" or the "essence" (Chān., 1/1/2-3, p.33). However, over a period of time, rasa came to be understood in the aesthetic sense, described as the essence of aesthetic pleasure derived from the appreciation of art, particularly the experience of *kāvya* (poetry) or *nāṭya* (drama). Abhinavagupta provides a detailed analysis of Bharata's rasa-theory in his commentary on *Nāṭyaśāstra*, known as *Abhinavabhāratī (Abh.)*, in which he claims that "*Nāṭyameva Rasāḥ*," i.e., "drama is rasa" because it is "different from worldly objects [and] it is a thing which is of the nature of rasa and can be known by direct experience in the form of aesthetic enjoyment" (Mishra, 2006, p.62).[3] Not only this, but because in drama, "both site and hearing collaborate in arousing in the spectator, more easily and forcibly than by any other form of heart, a state of consciousness *sui generis*, conceived intuitively and concretely as a juice or flavour, called rasa […] The aesthetic experience is, therefore, the act of

[2] K.C. Bhattacharya, p.195 (2011)
[3] Abhinavagupta, p.3 (2010) (Original Text in Sanskrit)

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tasting this rasa, of immersing oneself in it to the exclusion of all else" (Gnoli, 2015, XIV-XV).

In the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Bharatamuni identifies eight fundamental emotions or mental states known as *bhāva*, or *sthāyibhāva*, which can be distinguished in the human soul.[4] These emotions permanently reside in our mind as latent impressions (*vāsanā*) and memories (*saṃskāra*), formed from personal experiences or inherited traits, and can readily emerge in our consciousness when triggered by various situations (when represented in a drama). Though Bharata did not explicitly discuss the sthāyibhāva, at the end of the seventh chapter of *N.S.*, known as *Bhāvavyañjaka*, he briefly refers to the sthāyibhāva by claiming that: "*Bahūnāṁ samavetānāṁ rūpaṁ yasya bhaved bahu. Sa mantavyo rasaḥ sthāyin śeṣaḥ sanchārino matāḥ*." In his *Locana*, Abhinavagupta argues that, here, the use of the phrase "*bahūnāṁ samavetānāṁ*" was authentic. He writes:

"at the end of Bharata's chapter on the bhāvas is this verse:

> *Of many [rasas] which are used in the same work, the one whose form is [of] large [compass] should be considered the 'abiding' (sthāyin) rasa; the others, the 'transient' (saṅcārī) rasas.*
>
> According to what is stated in this verse, a state of mind [cittavṛttis] that extends over the basic plot must necessarily appear as "abiding," whereas that which accompanies only an incident in the plot will appear as "transient." Thus, there is no contradiction in an abider–transient [=principal–subordinate] relation between them at the time when they are relished in the form of rasas."
>
> (Abhinavagupta, 1990 § 3.24 a *L*, p.513-14; Kulkarni, 1998, p.22)

In the sixth chapter, Bharata uses an illustration to emphasise the importance of sthāyibhāva: "Just as only a king surrounded by numerous attendants receives this epithet [of King] and not any other men, be he ever so great, so the Dominant States (*sthāyibhāvas*) only followed by Determinants, Consequents and Transitory States receive the name of Sentiment" (Bharatamuni, 1950, p.120).

In his analysis of rasa theory, Abhinavagupta not only explores Bharata's perspective but also analyses his predecessors like Lollaṭa, Śaṅkuka, and Nāyaka, further developing his interpretation of rasa based on their ideas. Lollaṭa contends that the rasa "is simply a permanent state, intensified by the determinants, the consequents, etc.; but, had it not been intensified, it is only a permanent state. This state is present both in the person reproduced and in the reproducing actor, by virtue of the power of realisation (*anusaṃdhāna*)" (Gnoli, 2015, p.26).[5] Śrīśaṅkuka refutes the position of Lollaṭa and contends that "rasa is the reproduction of the permanent state of mind proper to the person reproduced, like Rama, etc." (Gnoli, 2015, p.29). In other words, for Śaṅkuka, rasa is an imitated mental state, i.e., "the successful imitation by the actor of the characters and their experiences is no doubt, artificial and unreal, but is not realised to be so by the spectators who forget the difference between the actors and the characters and inferentially experience the mental state of the characters themselves" (Gnoli, 2015, XIX). Abhinavagupta, however, discards this position because, according to him, "the effect of imitation (As when a clown imitates the son of a king) is, in fact, laughter and mockery and has no connection with the aesthetic experience" (Gnoli, 2015, XX). He also discards the Lollaṭa's idea that rasa is present in the character and the actor because rasa transcends spatial, temporal, and subjective boundaries.[6] Abhinavagupta claims that "rasa is not an objective thing in the real world as it is coterminous with the process of aesthetic relish and ceases to exist the moment the process of its relish is over" (Kulkarni, 1998, pp.56-57).[7]

Abhinavagupta shares a close affinity with Bhaṭṭanāyaka, according to whom "rasa is neither perceived (*pratī*), nor produced (*utpad*), nor manifested (*abhivyaj*)." Rather, Nāyaka believes that "rasa is revealed (*bhāvyamāna*) by a special power assumed by words in poetry and drama, the power of revelation (*bhāvanā*)—to be distinguished from the power of denomination (*abhidhā*)—consisting of the action of generalising the determinants, etc. This power has the faculty of suppressing the thick layer of mental stupor (*moha*) occupying our own consciousness" (Gnoli, 2015, p.45)[8] and generalising the things which are presented in poetry or drama. In this way when rasa is revealed, it "is then enjoyed (*bhuj*) with a kind of enjoyment (*bhoga*), different from direct experience, memory, etc." (Gnoli, 2015, p.46). For Bhaṭṭanāyaka, if rasa were "perceived by the spectator as really present in himself, in the pathetic (*karuṇa*) rasa he would necessarily experience pain" and "thus, no one would go to see plays on pathetic, etc., subjects anymore" (Gnoli, 2015, p.43). He further suggests that when rasa is perceived in someone else, such as *Sītā*, she cannot serve as the stimulant for rasa because spectators are unlikely to find their real-life beloveds stimulating in a theatrical context. Moreover, the concept of generalising emotions like love does not apply at the divine level with characters like *Sītā*, *Rāma*, etc. Additionally, rasa cannot be experienced through the memory of a character like *Rāma* feeling love, as memory relies on an original reference point, which is not present. Furthermore, if the perception of rasa were

[4] Delight (*rati*), Laughter (*hāsa*), Sorrow (*śoka*), Anger (*krodha*), Heroism (*utsāha*), Fear (*bhaya*), Disgust (*jugupsā*), and Wonder (*vismaya*).

[5] Abhinavagupta, p.291 (2010)
[6] Raniero Gnoli, XXXVI (2015)
[7] Abhinavagupta, p.298 (2010)
[8] *Ibid*., p.294

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based on evidence like perception, verbal testimony, or inference, it would lack appeal to human emotions. Thus, rasa, according to Bhaṭṭanāyaka, is then enjoyed in the form of fruition "consisting of the states of fluidity (*druti*), enlargement (*vistāra*) and expansion (*vikāsa*), is characterised by a resting (*viśrānti*) in one's own consciousness, which due to the emergent state of *sattva*, is pervaded by beatitude (*ānanda*) and light (*prakāśa*), and is similar to the tasting (*āsvāda*) of the Supreme Brahma" (Gnoli, 2015, pp.43-48).

Abhinavagupta embraces the idea of generalisation but disagrees with Bhaṭṭanāyaka's opinion that rasa is neither apprehended, nor produced, nor revealed (or suggested), and it can only be enjoyed (*bhuj*) and not perceived as a form of knowledge. Abhinavagupta argues that without apprehension, there can be no enjoyment of rasa in the world. He suggests that the experience of rasa, if equated to its relish, is merely another form of apprehension, differentiated only by its means—such as perception, inference, verbal testimony, intuition, etc. Thus, without the ability to apprehend, rasa cannot be experienced. If we dismiss the possibilities of rasa being produced or revealed, we are left with only two options: rasa is either eternal or non-existent.[9] Abhinavagupta, following the thoughts of Ānandavardhana, proposes that rasa is suggested: "Aesthetical experience takes place, as everyone can notice, by virtue as well of the squeezing out of the poetical word. Persons aesthetically sensitive, indeed, read and taste many times over the same poem. In contradiction to practical means of perception, that their task being accomplished is no more of any use and must then be abandoned, a poem, indeed, does not close its value after it has been comprehended. The words, in poetry, must, therefore, have an additional power, that of suggestion [*dhvani*], and for this very reason, the transition from the conventional meaning to the poetic one is unnoticeable" (Gnoli, 2015, XXXII). Rasa, thus, belongs to the poet; It is nothing but his generalised consciousness. Abhinavagupta asserts that rasa "is just that reality (*artha*) by which the determinants, the consequents and the transitory feelings, after having reached a perfect combination (*saṃyoga*), a relation (*saṃbandha*), conspiration (*aikāgrya*)—where they will be in turn in a leading or subordinate position—in the mind of the spectator, make the matter of a gustation consisting of a form of consciousness free of obstacles and differing from the ordinary ones" (Gnoli, 2015, p.78).[10] Here, when Abhinavagupta talks about rasa being a form of gustation, different from other ordinary forms, he points towards the *alaukikatva* or non-worldliness of rasa. He writes: "Rasa is not an objective thing (*siddha*) which could serve the function of a knowable object. The determinants, etc., do not designate any ordinary thing, but they do what serves to realise the gustation (*carvaṇopayogī*). It is not found elsewhere in the world; it is found only in poetry" (Mishra, 2006, p.115).[11] Additionally, when referring to Bharata's use of the word *rasa-niṣpattiḥ* (the production of rasa), Abhinavagupta explains that the *rasa-niṣpattiḥ*, here, "must be understood in the sense of a production not of the rasa, but of the tasting which refers to the rasa (*tadviṣayarasanā*) […] This tasting, moreover, is, no doubt, solely a form of cognition but a form of cognition differing from any other ordinary perception. This difference is due to the fact that the means of it, that is, the determinants, etc., are of a non-ordinary character" (Gnoli, 2015, p.86).

## III. AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE OF THE SELF: THE IMPACT OF *ŚĀNTA RASA*

In elucidating the whole process of being deeply involved in an aesthetic experience, Abhinavagupta, at the very first, emphasises the importance of having creative genius (*pratibhā*) for both the poet and the spectator. In the context of a poet or a literary artist, creative genius is considered an ability to craft verses (in poetry) in which rasa becomes the predominant and defining factor. The spectator possessing such genius is called a *sahṛdaya*, meaning they share a similar heart or sensibility with the poet's work. This connection enables them to immerse themselves in the artistic world (of the poem) envisioned by the poet and understand the deep aesthetic emotion (*bhāva*) that is central to experiencing and appreciating such poetry or drama. For instance, when a poet is inspired by the emotion of *rati* (delight), he composes a poem that naturally includes determinants (*vibhāvas*), etc., that bring out this joy. This emotion (*rati*), then, becomes the fundamental emotion of the poem, and it connects with the audience, especially when expressed through *abhinaya*, *song* and *ātodya* (music) in a nātya. When spectators rightly comprehend the emotion of love (*rati*) as intended by the poet, through the effective use of determinants, etc., and elements such as abhinaya, the permanent emotion (*sthāyibhāva*) of rati, which is inherent in spectators' consciousness, gets stimulated and, as a result, they experience the erotic (*śṛṅgāra*) rasa. This happens due to the mutual resonance between the poet's expressive intentions and the spectators' understanding, leading to a collective emotional engagement with the poet's emotion. This is known as a sympathetic response (*hṛdayasaṁvāda*), which is essential for the spectator to share the emotional resonance with that of the poet.

For Abhinavagupta, being a sahṛdaya and sharing a sympathetic response with the poet is the precursor to what he calls the state of *tanmayībhāvana* or identification, in which the spectators identify themselves (emotionally) with the characters and situations depicted in the poetry or drama. Masson and

[9] Y.S. Walimbe, p.40 (1980)
[10] Abhinavagupta, p. 298 (2010)
[11] *Ibid*., p.299

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Patwardhan (1985) argue that when such identification (*tanmayībhāvana*) takes place, "the ego is transcended, and for the duration of the aesthetic experience, the normal waking "I" is suspended. Once this actually happens, we suddenly find that our responses are not like anything we have hitherto experienced, for now, that all normal emotions are gone, now that the hard knot of "selfness" has been untied, we find ourselves in an unprecedented state of mental and emotional calm" (Masson & Patwardhan, 1985, VII). It is important to note that the process of identification is crucial for Abhinavagupta because, without it, the spectators cannot fully immerse themselves in the aesthetic experience. Even in *Tantrāloka*, Abhinavagupta argues that the people "who do not attain that oneness with the content of the recitation or performance, resulting in the loss of the sense of body due to having been immersed in the bliss of consciousness, they have no sensitivity of the heart" (Abhinavagupta, 2015, Vol I: 3/240, p.129).

However, in both the *hṛdayasaṁvāda* and *tanmayībhāvana*, whether found in poetry or nātya, there exists a common thread of generalisation of emotions (*sādhāraṇīkaraṇa*), which serves to render the narrative events depicted in poetry or a drama as impersonal and universal. Abhinavagupta refers to Bhaṭṭanāyaka when discussing *sādhāraṇīkaraṇa*, suggesting that the generalisation removes any constraints of time and space and even transcends the limitation of a specific observer. According to Abhinavagupta, in an aesthetic experience, the spectators who, as "singular knowing subjects—that is, of the "practical" personalities of the spectators, different each from the other," get eliminated and "is succeeded by a state of consciousness, a "knowing subject" which is unique, "generalised," not circumscribed by any recognition of space, time etc." (Gnoli, 2015, XXXVII).

Thus, in *sādhāraṇīkaraṇa*, "the real limiting causes, which work according to the rule of causation, time, space and the particularity of the subject, are eliminated, and the limiting causes narrated in the poetry are also eliminated. This state nourishes the generality and form a uniformity (*ekaghanatā*) among the perceptions of all the spectators" (Mishra, 2006, p.109).[12] The emergence of such psychological unity among the spectators is attributable to their collective sympathetic engagement with the poet, culminating in a unanimous identification with the depicted emotions. This process ultimately culminates in the dissolution of their individual identities where "the usual medley of desires and anxieties dissolve [...] the ego is transcended and for the duration of the aesthetic experience normal waking "I" is suspended" (Kulkarni, 1998 p.14).

A question then emerges: What occurs when the "I" is suspended during an aesthetic experience? For Abhinavagupta, aesthetic experience at its highest level[13] is characterised by the absence of individuality because of the dissolution of the subject-object dichotomy, and the self, which is experienced, becomes devoid of obstacles (*vighnas*), resting in itself. K. C. Pandey (1959) asserts that the "aesthetic experience at its highest level," according to Abhinavagupta, "is the experience of the self itself, pure and unmixed bliss" (Pandey, 1959 pp.140-141).

In other words, at this level, "the self becomes one with the ultimate bliss called ānanda. First, the object is relished, and later, the enjoyer himself becomes relish" (Mahulikar, 2018, p.73). This stage ultimately culminates in the dissolution of ordinary perception and distinct individual identities, allowing the subject to rest in its own bliss, that is, experiencing one's natural state (*prakṛti*) of mind, known as *śānta*.[14] Abhinavagupta considers śānta not only as the natural state of mind but also as the ninth rasa, correlating it with *mokṣa*—one of the four *Purushārthas* that are traditionally imparted in nātya—because "śānta rasa is to be known as that which arises from a desire to secure the liberation of the Self [*mokṣa*], which leads to a knowledge of the Truth, and is connected with the property of highest happiness" (Masson & Patwardhan, 1985, p.139).[15]

K. P. Mishra asserts that the knowledge of the truth (*Tattvajñāna*), that is, the highest reality, "is another name for the knowledge of the self (*Ātmajñāna*). The knowledge of the self is different from the knowledge attained by the senses. The knowledge attained by senses is the knowledge of worldly objects, whereas the knowledge of the self is non-sensuous, non-worldly, and super-sensuous" (Mishra, 2006, p.183). Abhinavagupta contends that the aesthetic experience becomes nothing but an experience of one's consciousness, and thus, this relish is universal in nature. So, the various rasas, such as *śṛṅgāra*, *vīra*, and others, which are identified as distinct types of rasas, are fundamentally just variations of a single rasa, that is, the śānta rasa. Abhinavagupta says, "*Ityasa sarvaprakṛtitvābhdhānāya pūrvamabhidhānaṃ*," which means, "śānta is the prakṛti of which rati, hāsya etc. are the vikṛtis (modifications)" (Abhinavagupta, 2010, p.343; Mishra, 2006, p.145). In this way, the experience of every rasa is very much like that of śānta just because śānta is involved in all rasas.[16] K. C. Pandey (1959), in analysing the nature of the aesthetic experience of śānta rasa, illustrates the position of Abhinavagupta:

> Just as the white string, whereon gems of different kinds are loosely and thinly strung, shines in and through them, so does the pure self through the basic mental states such as

[12] *Ibid*., p.295

[13] Abhinavagupta prescribes five levels of an aesthetic experience, namely *sensory*, *imaginative*, *emotive*, *cathartic* and, finally, *transcendental* (K.C. Pandey, pp.135-141, 1959)

[14] J. L. Masson and M. V. Patwardhan, p.93 (1985),

[15] Abhinavagupta, p.343 (2010)

[16] Manjul Gupta, p.272 (1987)

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> Rati and Utsaha, which affect it. The aesthetic experience of Śānta consists of the experience of the self as free from the entire set of painful experiences due to the external expectations, and, therefore, is a blissful state of identity with the Universal. It is the experience of self in one of the stages on the way to perfect Self-realisation.
>
> (Pandey, 1959, pp.249-50)

Therefore, the relishing of the śānta rasa is relishing one's natural state of mind, devoid of obstacles and where the subject-object dichotomy gets dissolved and, ultimately, the spectators form a uniformity among themselves and become a singular, universal experiencing subject, who experience the bliss (*ānanda*) found in their own self. The self is, thus, the *sthāyibhāva* of śānta, suggesting that experiencing tranquillity is essentially finding rest in the self. This thought can be found in *Taittirīyopaniṣad*, where the concept of rasa is equated with the *ānanda* or *ātman*, which refers to the ultimate reality or the self: "Having attained the joy (*rasa*, literally taste), man becomes blessed. This [attaining rasa] verily is that [which] bestows bliss (Ānanda). He rejoices when he finds in [such a state] that invisible, unembodied, unpredicted, abodeless (Ātman), the basis (of life) free from fear, then verily he transcends (all) fear."[17]

A similar thought can be found in *Abh.*, where Abhinavagupta claims that in an aesthetic experience, "the spectator (sahṛdaya) rises above the duality of pain and pleasure, love and hatred, and through disinterested contemplation enjoys absolutely pure joy or delight. With the outer vesture of all practical interests and infatuation removed, he experiences pure delight, *ānanda*, bliss of his self" (Kulkarni, 1998, p.65).[18] Kathleen Higgins (2007) argues that according to Abhinavagupta, the stable basis for śānta rasa would be the state of mind conducive to mokṣa, which is recognising the self: "This state of mind would be recognition of the Self, and the *rasa* associated with it involves the blissful taste of the knowledge of the Self" (Higgins, 2007, p.50).

According to Abhinavagupta, in a state where the self becomes the stable basis of the experience of śānta, it gets "united with *cittavṛtti* (state of mind), which is called by the synonymous words like *camatkāra*,[19] *carvaṇā*, *nirveśa*, *bhoga*, etc." (Mishra, 2006, p.69).[20] In the context of aesthetic experience, *camatkāra* is contemplated by Abhinavagupta "as an immersion in an enjoyment (*bhogāveśaḥ*) which can never satiate and is thus uninterrupted (*tṛptivyatirekeṇācchinnaḥ*). The word *camatkāra*, indeed, properly means the action being done by a tasting subject (*camataḥ karaṇam*), in other words, by the enjoying subject, he who is emerged in the vibration (*spanda*) of a marvellous enjoyment (*adbhutabhoga*) […] In any case, however, it is a form of perception—a perception in which what appears (is just a feeling, for instance) delight consisting of a tasting (In other words, a perception characterised by the presence of a generalised feeling, such as delight, anger, etc.)." (Gnoli, 2015, pp.60-61).[21] Once the spectators experience the feeling of *camatkāra* in an aesthetic experience of nāṭya, there arises a purity of emotion in them, taking them to a higher level of pleasure which cannot be experienced in the ordinary course of life. Such an experience of sheer, undifferentiated bliss is known as *ānandaikaghana*,[22] similar to the bliss one experiences in *brahmāsvāda*. Higgins argues that, for Abhinavagupta, the aesthetic experience or rasa "involves an inherent tendency toward tranquillity, a condition that he sees as resembling that of ultimate spiritual liberation." It is because, Higgins further asserts, "the detachment and profound pleasure involved in rasa produce a sense of tranquillity, or equanimity, in the person who experiences it" (Higgins, 2007, p.49).

Also, in *Locana*, Abhinavagupta suggests that "once a rasa has been thus realised, its enjoyment (*bhoga*) [is possible], an enjoyment which is different torn the apprehensions derived from memory or direct experience and which takes the form of melting, expansion, and radiance. This enjoyment is like the bliss that comes from realising [one's identity] with the highest Brahman, for it consists of repose in the bliss, which is the true nature of one's own self" (Abhinavagupta, 1990, 2.4 *L*, p.222). Thus, Abhinavagupta considers *rasāsvāda* a *sahodara* (sibling) of *brahmāsvāda* because both are "characterised by a state of consciousness self-centred, implying the suppression of any practical desire and hence the merging of the subject into the object, to the exclusion of everything else" (Gnoli, 2015, XLI).

## IV. THE 'AESTHETIC SELF'

Though the aesthetic experience facilitates uniformity of spectators' consciousness and enables them to experience the rasa through the medium of generalisation collectively, it cannot be ignored that there is not a complete dissolution of the self. Abhinavagupta also provides a distinction between the *rasāsvāda* and the *brahmāsvāda* because the experience of rasa (*rasāsvāda*), while seen as a *sahodara* to the

[17] *Yadvai tat sukṛtam | raso vai saḥ | rasaṃ hyevayaṃ labdhvā"nandi bhavati ko hyevānyātkaḥ prāṇyāt | yadeṣa ākāśa ānando na syāt | eṣa hyevā'nandayaṭi* || - (Taittirīya/ II/7 § pp.82/83-84; Sharma, 1933)
[18] Abhinavagupta, p.304 (2010)
[19] When Abhinavagupta uses the term *camatkāra*, he seems to correlate his aesthetics and metaphysics. He uses terminology such as *saṃvitti*, *camatkāra*, *nirveśa*, *rasanā*, *āsvādana*, *bhoga*, *samāpatti*, *laya*, *viśrānti*, etc. to explain the nature of consciousness in the tradition of Kashmir Śaivism.
[20] Abhinavagupta, p.38 (2010)
[21] *Ibid*., p.296
[22] J. L. Masson and M. V. Patwardhan, VII (1985)

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experience of Brahma (*brahmāsvāda*), is not entirely equivalent to it, due to the fact that "the drama is not expected (at least Abhinava never says anything about this) to change one's life radically. To have a profound aesthetic experience is simply satisfying and does not imply that one will be, in any sense, profoundly altered. One cannot say the same for mystic experiences. Quite apart from the concept of *sadyomukti*, any deep religious experience is very likely to make a manifest, sometimes drastic, change in a person's outward life" (Masson & Patwardhan, 1985, p.163). Additionally, the spiritual experience, according to Abhinavagupta, "marks the complete disappearance of all polarity, the lysis of all dialexis in the dissolving fire of God […] The knots of "I" and "mine" are, in it, completely undone. The yogin [practitioner] remains, as it were, isolated in the compact solitude of his consciousness, far beyond any form of discursive thought." However, in an aesthetic experience, "the feelings and the facts of everyday life, even if they are transfigured, are always present" (Gnoli, 2015, XXXIX-XLI). This is why immersion into the collective experience of the self within an aesthetic experience, while similar, differs from the universal experience of the self during a spiritual experience.

Despite the differentiation between the two experiences, the fact cannot be ignored that the aesthetic experience of rasa, since it is *alaukika* in nature, facilitates an experience of universalised consciousness to its spectators through the medium of generalisation. This takes place when the permanent emotion, that is, the emotions which are present in the spectators' minds in the form of *vāsana* and *saṃskāra*, and which are the object of such an experience, are portrayed through a specific character, its situations in the play, its reaction to the situations and its emotions, let it be of delight or pain, fear or heroism. These permanent emotions are then generalised through the process of *sādhāraṇīkaraṇa*; that is, they become impersonal and universal in nature that no other ordinary emotion is relished when the spectators experience these generalised emotions. This results in the formation of an emotional coalition between the spectators due to their hearts responding to the portrayed emotion in the same way. Not only this, these also form a psychological coalition among them because, when they react to the depicted situations in a performance in, more or less, a similar manner, their mental activities (*cittavṛttis*) take a break from the ordinary 'individuated' experiences of everyday life. As a result, the spectators become a part of a single, shared, and unified consciousness that is de-contextualised from time, space, and personal dimensions, and thus, they relish the rasa collectively. Pravas Jivan Chaudhury (1965) argues that rasa is relished "when the self loses its egoistic, pragmatic aspect and assumes an impersonal contemplative attitude, which is said to be one of its higher modes of being […] As the contemplative self is free from all craving, striving and external necessity, it is blissful. This bliss is of a different quality from the pleasure we derive in life from satisfaction of some need or passion" (Chaudhury, 1965, p.146).

It is important to acknowledge that in an aesthetic or rasa experience, the generalised emotions become the objective dimension of the universalised consciousness; that is, they become the object which is, thus, experienced by the subject. This subject is not an individual spectator, but rather, is the collective consciousness (*ekaghanatā*) in which the individual loses their personal self, and his ordinary consciousness immerses in the collective whole. This collective consciousness is the subjective dimension of the universalised consciousness. Thus, in the aesthetic experience or the realisation of rasa, the generalised emotions, as objects of such experience, are then consumed and experienced by a collective consciousness, which is the subject of such experience. And since this subject of experience is detached from its personal and causal relationships, it would not be wrong to term it as an 'impersonal' subject or the self. Bijoy H. Boruah (2016) confirms this thought by taking himself as the spectator and contends that the impersonalised aspect of subjectivity, or the self, "is not in my first-personal subjectivity that my experience of the aesthetic object occurs. Rather, it is only as an unindividuated, de-centred self, an impersonal someone, that I can be the subject of an aesthetic experience" (Boruah, 2016, p.136). The seed of such a thought is found in K. C. Bhattacharya's (2011) idea of aesthetic experience, where he suggests that spectators must first transform into a universal person, de-contextualised from time and space and possess a detached consciousness liberated from the first-person perspective through generalisation. This transformation allows the self to evolve from a particular "first-person" viewpoint to an impersonal consciousness, making the spectator an ideal subject for aesthetic experience. Only through this transformation can the spectator truly engage with and emotionally respond to the life portrayed in the dramatic narrative, imagining the characters as living beings within the story. Bhattacharyya makes the point in clear terms: "Artistic enjoyment is not a feeling of the enjoyer on his own account; it involves a dropping of self-consciousness, while the feeling that is enjoyed […] is freed from its reference to an individual subject" (Bhattacharya, 2011, p.199).

Moreover, Arindam Chakrabarti (2009), while following Bhattacharya's thoughts, claims that during the aesthetic experience, "the feeler loses herself in an ownerless emotion and then marvels at this impersonal subjectivity: 'How could I consciously, from inside, get outside of individuality, time and space and get inside the world of function or play or painting?' This self-marvelling is the thrill of *rasa*" (Chakrabarti, 2009, p.198). Similarly, Priyadarshi Patnaik reaffirms Chakrabarti's views and claims that whenever we experience generalised emotions, our "aesthetic

enjoyment becomes ownerless—involving dissolving of self-consciousness, freedom from individual subjectivity and marvelling at "this impersonal subjectivity." It is without space, time, and a sense of "I"—and to this, all of us agree. At the moment of deep aesthetic enjoyment, we are not ourselves, nor located in any specific time or space. For if there isn't something common or shared, then rasa experience would be radically different for different perceivers. Here is our commonality—for heightened aesthetic experience, irrespective of what elicits it, is universal" (Patnaik, 2016, p.54). In this context, Boruah takes this thought one step forward when he argues that the impersonal subject, or the self, which he considers as the "secondary self," is nothing but "the aesthetic self, the subject of aesthetic experience" (Boruah, 2016, p.135) because it is "a source of subjectivity free from first-personal salience" and is rooted in the aesthetic contemplation (Boruah, 2016, p.137). Here, the "freedom from first-personal salience" refers to our capacity to set aside our personal biases and practical concerns, enabling us to emotionally connect with characters and events in drama without our self-focused thoughts getting in the way. This detachment from our everyday, pragmatic selves allows us to overcome the initial barrier of feeling separate from a piece of art. Instead, we form an immersive, emotionally charged connection with the artwork, becoming participants who are impersonal in nature rather than mere spectators. Therefore, when the spectators' consciousness unites and becomes a collective whole, transforming into a universal subject and experiencing generalised emotions, this subject, or self, is considered impersonalised in nature. This impersonalised self is the bearer or possessor of the generalised emotions occurring within an aesthetic experience. Since it is the aesthetic mediation that transforms the personal self into an impersonalised one, it would be appropriate to consider such an impersonal self as the 'aesthetic self' —a self that represents a universal subject, encompassing the collective experience of generalised emotions transcended from individual specificity.

## V. CONCLUSION

The impersonalised dimension of the spectator's self detaches itself from ordinary life experiences when indulged in an aesthetic experience. This implies that in such an experience, for a brief moment, the subject-object duality vanishes, and individuality is liberated from personal determinants. However, in Abhinavagupta's view, there is a distinction between the aesthetic experience and the experience of Brahma, which is conditioned by the view that the self is not completely dissolved in the aesthetic experience but is circumscribed by the ordinary facts of life, such as the temporary nature of drama, the limitation of aesthetic consciousness which stick only to the performance, etc., which can be removed only for a while. In this way, the self, when in a detached state of conciseness, becomes impersonalised in nature. Thus, the paper has argued that this impersonalised self, which is the universal subject and experiences the generalised emotions in an aesthetic experience, is the bearer of the universal consciousness and can be referred to as an aesthetic self which represents a universal subject, encompassing the collective experience of generalised emotions transcended from individual specificity. Thus, this paper argues that the impersonalised self, which serves as the universal subject and experiences generalised emotions in an aesthetic context, is the bearer of universal consciousness. This self can be termed the 'aesthetic self,' representing a universal subject that includes the collective experience of generalised emotions.

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