



FROM DRAMATIC REPRESENTATION TO AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE: REFRAMING ARISTOTLE'S POETICS AND BHARATA MUNI'S NĀṬYASAŚTRA

Dr. Pradip Kolhe

*Associate Professor, Department of English, Vasundhara Kala Mahavidyalaya, Jule Solapur, MS,
India*

Abstract

Aristotle's Poetics and Bharata Muni's Nāṭyaśāstra have generated an extensive body of comparative scholarship, particularly concerning mimesis, anukarāṇa, plot, character, catharsis, rasa, acting, music, and spectatorship. While such studies have established important conceptual parallels and differences, a recurring methodological tendency has been to compare individual concepts across the two traditions. This article proposes a different approach: a process-oriented comparison of the architecture of dramatic experience. The study examines how Aristotle and Bharata conceptualize the movement from human reality to artistic representation, from representation to performance, and from performance to spectator experience. Aristotle's system is reconstructed as an action-centred sequence in which mimesis organizes human action into plot, dramatic structure produces pity and fear, and tragedy culminates in catharsis. Bharata's system is reconstructed as an experience-centred sequence in which emotional situations are structured through vibhava, bhava, anubhava, vyabhicari-bhava, and abhinaya, culminating in rasa. The comparison demonstrates that mimesis and rasa, as well as catharsis and rasa, do not operate at identical theoretical levels. The article argues that Aristotle primarily theorizes the architecture of dramatic action, whereas Bharata theorizes the architecture of aesthetic transformation. This distinction provides a more precise basis for comparative dramaturgy and avoids reducing Indian aesthetics to an analogue of Western categories. The study further proposes that the two systems can be read as complementary rather than competing models, offering a combined framework for understanding contemporary narrative and performance.

Keywords

Aristotle; Bharata Muni; Poetics; Nāṭyaśāstra; Mimesis; Catharsis; Rasa; Bhava; Abhinaya; Comparative Dramaturgy; Aesthetic Experience, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

Aristotle's Poetics and Bharata Muni's Nāṭyaśāstra occupy foundational positions in the history of dramatic theory. Although separated by cultural, linguistic, philosophical, and historical contexts, both texts investigate the fundamental problems of dramatic representation: what drama represents, how dramatic material should be organized, how emotion is communicated, and how spectators experience performance.

The comparison of these texts, however, is not a new scholarly enterprise. R. L. Singal's Aristotle and Bharata: A Comparative Study of Their Theories of Drama directly examines the two traditions, while Rama Nand Rai's Theory of Drama: A Comparative Study of Aristotle and Bharata similarly undertake a systematic comparison of dramatic theory. Bharat Gupta's Dramatic Concepts: Greek and Indian, in particular, represents a major methodological intervention. Gupta criticizes purely concept-to-concept comparison and instead reconstructs Greek and Indian theatre



as performance systems, examining gesture, dance, music, space, dramatic structure, emotional arousal, katharsis, and rasa.

This existing scholarship creates an important methodological challenge. A further paper merely stating that “Aristotle emphasizes plot and catharsis whereas Bharata emphasizes rasa and acting” would reproduce established arguments rather than advance the field.

The present study therefore changes the comparative question.

Instead of asking:

What is Aristotle's equivalent of Bharata's rasa?

it asks: How does each dramatic system organize the transformation of human experience into an aesthetic experience for the spectator?

This shift from conceptual similarity to functional style establishes the central plan of the paper.

Research Problem and Research Gap:

Existing comparative study has demonstrated that Aristotle and Bharata can be compared across a wide range of categories. Gupta's study is particularly significant because it clearly examines mimesis and anukarāṇa, the media of imitation, gesture, acting, theatrical space, visual and auditory content, dramatic structures, emotional arousal, katharsis, and rasa.

Later study has also continued to compare catharsis and rasa, including studies that examine their suggestions for contemporary theatre and audience psychology.

The research gap identified here is therefore not a lack of comparison. Rather, it is the need for a comparative model capable of explaining the functional relationship among the different concepts within each system.

The paper proposes that Aristotle and Bharata should be understood not as offering two lists of corresponding concepts but as constructing two different systems of aesthetic change.

Research Questions:

The study addresses four questions:

- How does Aristotle transform human action into dramatic structure through mimesis?
- How does Bharata transform emotional experience into aesthetic experience through bhava, abhinaya, and rasa?
- At what theoretical level do catharsis and rasa operate, and why should they not be treated as direct equivalents?
- What can a process-oriented comparison contribute to contemporary comparative theatre?

Methodology:

The study employs a qualitative, comparative, and hermeneutic methodology. The primary texts are Aristotle's Poetics and Bharata Muni's Natyashastra. The analysis is accompanied by established comparative study, particularly the works of Singal, Rai, and Gupta. Gupta's methodological position is especially important because he identifies the limitations of merely juxtaposing Greek and Indian concepts.

The study does not attempt to establish historical borrowing or direct cultural influence between Aristotle and Bharata. Nor does it treat Greek and Indian aesthetics as homogeneous “Western” and “Eastern” categories.

Instead, it employs functional comparison: concepts are compared according to the role they perform within the total dramatic process. The analytical sequence is:

Human experience → Representation → Dramatic organization → Performance → Spectator → Aesthetic experience



The study then examines how each theoretical system looks at this sequence differently.

Aristotle: From Human Action to Dramatic Effect:

- **Mimesis as Transformative Representation:**

Aristotle's concept of mimesis is frequently translated as imitation. Such a translation, however, should not be interpreted as mechanical copying. The dramatist selects and organizes human actions into an clear artistic structure. Tragedy is an imitation of a serious and complete action of appropriate magnitude, and Aristotle consequently gives priority to mythos, or plot.

The important theoretical movement is therefore:

Human action → Mimesis → Artistic organization

Mimesis is thus not simply the starting point of drama; it is the mechanism through which unorganized reality becomes organized dramatic action.

- **Plot as Dramatic Architecture:**

Aristotle's six elements of tragedy are plot, character, thought, diction, song, and spectacle. Among these, plot occupies the highest position. This emphasis establishes a structural model of drama. The dramatic work achieves unity when its incidents are causally and artistically connected. Reversal (peripeteia) and recognition (anagnorisis) intensify the movement of the action.

The Aristotelian model can therefore be represented as:

Action → Plot → Reversal/Recognition → Emotional Intensification

The fundamental unit of organization is consequently action, rather than isolated emotion.

Bharata: From Emotional Situation to Aesthetic Experience:

- **The Natyashastra as a Performance System**

Bharata's Natyashastra operates at a wider level than a theory of dramatic plot. It integrates dramatic composition with acting, gesture, speech, costume, music, dance, stagecraft, and audience experience. This is not merely an expansion in the number of theatrical elements. It represents a different conception of what establishes dramatic meaning.

Meaning can be produced through: speech, bodily movement, facial expression, gesture, rhythm, music, costume, spatial arrangement, and emotional representation.

Drama therefore becomes a multimodal aesthetic system.

- **Bhava as the Intermediate Mechanism:**

A major advantage of a process-oriented comparison becomes visible here. Comparative discussions frequently move directly from Aristotle's catharsis to Bharata's rasa. Such a comparison risks ignoring the mechanism through which Bharata explains the production of aesthetic experience. That mechanism is bhava. Bharata's rasa-sutra states:

“Vibhava-anubhava-vyabhichara-samyog rasa-nishpatti.”

The formulation places vibhava, anubhava, and vyabhichary-bhava within the process through which rasa is realized.

Consequently:

Dramatic situation → Bhava → Expression → Aesthetic realization

This intermediate structure is crucial.

Rasa is not simply an emotion that happens to occur in the spectator. It is the result of a structured aesthetic process.

Abhinaya and the Transformation of Emotion:



The four forms of abhinaya—angika, vacika, aharya, and sattvika—provide the mechanisms through which emotional and dramatic meaning becomes perceptible in performance. The body becomes an expressive medium. Speech becomes an expressive medium. Costume becomes an expressive medium. The representation of inner states becomes an expressive medium. Thus, the actor is not simply reproducing an emotion. The actor converts an emotional condition into theatrical signs.

This allows a new formulation of Bharata's system:

Bharat Muni's dramatic art is not simply a theory of emotion; it is a theory of the transformation of emotion into performative signs and subsequently into aesthetic experience.

This is an important distinction from the common shorthand that reduces Bharata to “the theory of rasa.”

Catharsis and Rasa: A Functional Rather Than Equivalence-Based Comparison:

The conventional comparison of catharsis and rasa is useful but insufficient. Aristotle associate's tragedy with pity and fear and refers to their catharsis. The precise interpretation of catharsis remains contested, and therefore it should not be assigned a simplistic single meaning. Rasa, by contrast, is an aesthetic experience emerging through the structured representation of emotional states. The functional difference may be represented as:

Aristotle

Dramatic action → Emotional arousal → Catharsis

Bharata

Emotional determinants → Bhava → Abhinaya → Rasa

The distinction is theoretically significant.

Catharsis primarily describes an effect within tragic experience.

Rasa describes the aesthetic understanding produced through a process of representation and performance.

Therefore, rasa and catharsis are comparable as theories of audience experience, but they are not theoretical equals.

Unity: Action versus Aesthetic Unity:

One of the most productive comparative findings concerns unity. For Aristotle, unity is primarily the unity of action. Events should form a clear causal whole. In Bharata, dramatic unity cannot be separated from the emotional and aesthetic orientation of the performance. Thus, the two systems may be distinguished as:

Aristotelian unity = unity of dramatic action

Bharatian unity = unity of aesthetic/emotional realization

This distinction does not mean that Bharata ignores plot or that Aristotle ignores emotion. Rather, it identifies what each theory places at the organizing centre.

Character: Agent and Embodied Sign

Aristotle treats character as one of the six elements of tragedy but gives priority to plot. Character becomes dramatically significant through action.

Bharata's character is also an agent of action, but performance gives the character additional dimensions.

The character is communicated through:

body + voice + gesture + costume + emotional state + action.

Thus:

Aristotle: character primarily functions within the architecture of action.



Bharata: character functions simultaneously within narrative, performance, and emotional communication. This difference becomes especially significant when the theories are applied to acting and performance rather than to printed dramatic texts.

Spectator and the Completion of Dramatic Experience:

The spectator represents another crucial point of comparison.

In Aristotle, the spectator experiences pity and fear generated through the dramatic action, leading toward catharsis. In Bharata, the spectator realizes rasa through the aesthetic representation of emotional states. The distinction can therefore be formulated as:

Aristotle emphasizes what dramatic structure does to the spectator.

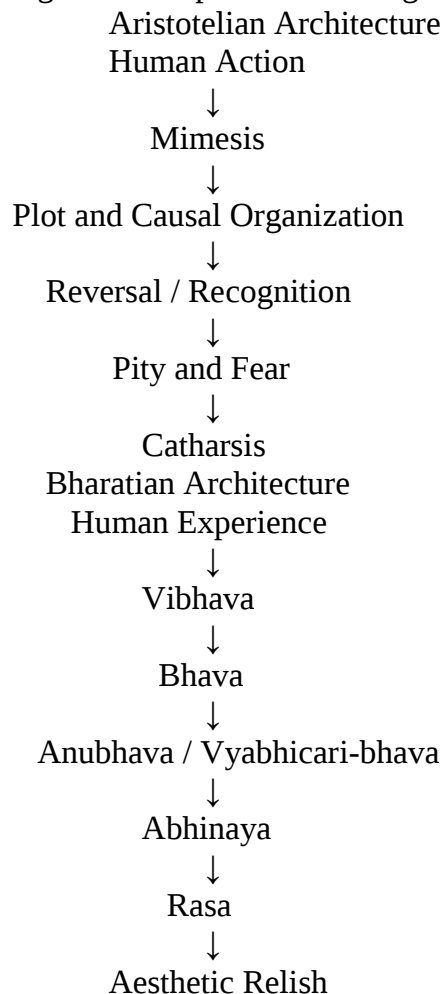
Bharata emphasizes how aesthetic experience is realized by the spectator.

This distinction is important because it avoids describing the Bharatian spectator simply as a passive receiver of emotion.

The spectator is necessary to the realization of rasa.

Theoretical Synthesis: Two Architectures of Dramatic Experience:

The comparative findings can be represented through two models.



This model is the central theoretical contribution of the study. It demonstrates that the two systems do not merely differ in terminology. They organize the sequence of aesthetic transformation differently.



Results:

The comparative analysis yields seven principal results.

Result 1: Mimesis and rasa operate at different levels. Mimesis explains the transformation of reality into artistic representation. Rasa explains the transformation of represented emotion into aesthetic experience. They therefore cannot be treated as equivalent concepts.

Result 2: Catharsis and rasa are functionally related but theoretically dissimilar. Both concern spectator experience, but catharsis is primarily associated with the effect of tragedy, while rasa describes aesthetic realization.

Result 3: Bhava is the crucial mediating category. The inclusion of bhava reveals a process between representation and rasa that is frequently obscured by a direct catharsis–rasa comparison.

Result 4: Aristotle privileges dramatic causality. Plot, reversal, recognition, and action give Aristotle's system a strong structural orientation.

Result 5: Bharata privileges performative transformation. Abhinaya, emotion, gesture, voice, music, dance, and theatrical representation create an integrated performance system.

Result 6: The actor occupies different theoretical positions. Aristotle's primary analytical unit is dramatic action. Bharata's system gives the actor's expressive body a much more systematic theoretical role.

Result 7: The two theories are complementary. Aristotle explains more powerfully how dramatic action is constructed. Bharata explains more powerfully how dramatic experience is performed and aesthetically realized.

Discussion:

The results suggest that comparative theatre should move beyond the search for one-to-one equivalents. The question “What is Bharata's equivalent of catharsis?” assumes that both theorists are describing the same aesthetic phenomenon from different cultural perspectives. The evidence suggests a more complicated situation. Aristotle's theoretical centre is dramatic action. Bharata's theoretical centre is aesthetic transformation through performance. This does not make one system superior to the other. Rather, their analytical priorities are different. The significance of this distinction becomes clearer in contemporary performance.

A contemporary film, for example, may possess an Aristotelian narrative architecture involving conflict, reversal, recognition and resolution. At the same time, its acting, music, cinematography, costume, gesture, sound design and emotional atmosphere may generate an experience that can be fruitfully examined through Bharatian categories.

The two frameworks can therefore be combined without being blended.

Theoretical Contribution:

The paper proposes the concept of Dramatic Transformation Architecture (DTA) as a comparative analytical framework. DTA defines drama as a process involving five stages:

Experience – human action, emotion or situation;

Representation – transformation into artistic form;

Organization – structural or performative arrangement;

Reception – spectator engagement;

Aesthetic realization – the final experiential effect.



Aristotle's theory places greatest analytical emphasis on stages 2 and 3, particularly representation and structural organization.

Bharata's theory places greater emphasis on stages 3–5, especially performance, emotional communication, and aesthetic realization.

This framework provides a way to use both theories together without collapsing their conceptual differences.

Limitations:

The study has three principal limitations.

First, the surviving Poetics is incomplete, and Aristotle's complete theory of drama cannot be reconstructed with certainty from the surviving text alone.

Second, the Nāṭyaśāstra is a complex textual tradition whose chronology, composition, transmission, and later interpretation remain subjects of scholarly debate.

Third, concepts such as mimesis, catharsis, bhava, and rasa have acquired extensive interpretive histories. No comparative framework can exhaust their meanings.

Accordingly, the proposed model should be regarded as an analytical framework rather than a claim that either classical theorist consciously formulated the model in these exact terms.

Conclusion:

The comparison of Aristotle's Poetics and Bharata Muni's Nāṭyaśāstra has traditionally focused on similarities and differences between concepts such as mimesis, anukarṇa, plot, character, catharsis, and rasa. Such scholarship remains valuable, and major studies have already covered these areas extensively. Bharat Gupt, in particular, demonstrated the limitations of simple concept-to-concept comparison and developed a broader performance-oriented approach. The present study proposes a different direction.

Instead of treating Aristotle and Bharata as theorists who independently provide answers to identical questions, it understands them as constructing different architectures of dramatic experience.

Aristotle begins with human action. Through mimesis, action becomes plot; through plot, dramatic tension develops; through pity and fear, the spectator undergoes the emotional consequences of tragedy; and through catharsis, the tragic experience reaches its distinctive effect. Bharata begins from human experience and its emotional potential. Through vibhava, bhava, anubhava, vyabhicari-bhava, and abhinaya, emotional experience becomes performative representation; through performance, it becomes aesthetically accessible; and through the spectator, it culminates in rasa.

The most significant conclusion is therefore that mimesis, catharsis, and rasa should not be placed on the same conceptual plane. Mimesis primarily concerns representation. Catharsis primarily concerns the effect of tragic representation. Rasa primarily concerns aesthetic realization.

The inclusion of bhava and abhinaya reveals the mediating processes through which Bharata's theory moves from representation toward aesthetic experience.

The proposed concept of Dramatic Transformation Architecture consequently offers a way of bringing Aristotle and Bharata into dialogue while preserving their theoretical uniqueness.

This approach also has contemporary relevance. Modern theatre, cinema, television, and digital performance combine narrative structure with embodied performance and multimodal communication. Aristotle can illuminate the architecture of action; Bharata can illuminate the architecture of aesthetic transformation. The enduring value of placing the two thinkers in



dialogue therefore lies not in proving that they anticipated one another, but in demonstrating that dramatic art can be understood simultaneously as an architecture of action and an architecture of experience.

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