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The *Alaṅkāra* Theory: A Reconsideration

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The theory of *alaṅkāra* is the earliest and the most characteristic theory of Indian poetics, which is known by the name of *alaṅkāra-śāstra*. In contrast to the theory of *rasa* which evolved in the context of plays, the *alaṅkāra* theory emerged with the ascendance of narrative (*prabandha*) and stanzaic (*muktaka*) poetry. It is primarily concerned with what is known as *Śravya Kāvya*, the poetry that is recited or read. (Gerow 251). The present papers focuses on the insight on the part of *alaṅkāra*-theorists which has established its appropriate use in *kāvya*.

Keywords: *alaṅkāra, saudaryam, camatkāra, kāvya, dhvani, bhāva.*

The *alaṅkāra* theory is often equated with rhetoric, and *alaṅkāras* are translated as ‘rhetorical figures’. But this is incorrect and misleading, for, as H. Jacobi has pointed out, the subject matter of the *alaṅkāra* theory is consistently determined in the best examples of ornate poetry rather than in the arena of debate and public persuasion. (Gerow 13). In the same view is expressed in recent times by Daniel H.H. Ingalls who asserts that “the Sanskrit analysis is based directly on poetry whereas the Greco-Roman analysis is based in the first instance on oratory”. (Ingalls 9). In fact, early Indian poetics conceived *alaṅkāra* as a comprehensive theory of poetry. From the very beginning they concentrated on the

poetic form or expression (termed *Kāvya śarīra* by Dandīn) rather than its content, and looked for the factors that contributed to its beauty. Their investigations led to the conclusion that *alaṅkāra* is the fundamental source of poetic beauty. Bhāmaha, the earliest exponent of the *alaṅkāra* theory, stresses this point when he says that “a damsel’s face, though beautiful, does not shine, if it is devoid of ornaments” (*Kāvyaalaṅkāra*, I. 13). Dandīn makes this idea more explicit when he declares that the term ‘*alaṅkāra*’ stands for all the elements that contribute to poetic beautyḥ - ‘*Kāvyaśobhā-karan dharmanalaṅkāran pracaksyate*’ (*Kāvyaadarśa*, II.1). In this wide sense, *alaṅkāra* includes *gunā* and *rasa* besides figures of speech (which is usually meant by *alanakara*). Vāmana, too, identifies *alaṅkāra* with beauty - ‘*saundaryam alaṅkārah*’ (*Kāvyaalaṅkāra-sūtra*, I.I.2), and states that figures of speech such as *anuprāsa* and *upamā* are also called *alaṅkāra* simply because they are the instruments of beautification. However, he locates the source of beauty not in *alaṅkāra* but in *gunā*. According to him, *gunās* are the creators of poetic beauty while *alaṅkāras* only serve to enhance it (*Kāvyaalaṅkāra-sūtra*, III.I.1-2). He illustrates this point with the following example:

“Just as a young woman endowed with beauty looks charming, and wearing of ornaments enhances this natural charm, so is the case with poetry. If it is endowed with *gunās*, it acquires a peculiar charm, and the presence of *alaṅkāras* serves to enhance this charm.”

Vāmana further adds that *gunās* are indispensable (*nitya*) for poetry, implying thereby that *alaṅkāras* are dispensable.

This view is drastically different from that of both Bhāmaha and Dandīn who regard *alaṅkāras* not only integral

to poetry but also the characteristic modes of poetic expression which transcends the normal or standard use of language. All *alañkāras*, according to them, are marked by obliquity (*vakratā*) or excess (*atīśayokti*) which lends to poetic expression a peculiar charm, called *camatkara* or strikingness. This meaning is gradually lost, and *alañkāras* come to be regarded just as mere tricks of expression, and likened to bodily ornaments such as neckless or ear-ring, which are detachable and at times even ostentatious.

The process of the devaluation of the *alañkāra* theory starts with Vāmana's privileging *gunīas* over *alañkāra*. What was *śobhākāraka* (creator of beauty) in Dandin becomes *śobhāvardhaka* (enhancer of beauty) for Vāmana. He is also responsible for introducing the notion of the 'soul' (*ātman*) of poetry in implicit contrast with the earlier concept of *Kāvya-śarira*, consisting of word and meaning. This paved the way for the *dhvani*-theorists to place *alañkāra*, which adorn the word and meaning (*śabdārtha*), at a third remove. This shift in the position of *alañkāra* is reflected in Mammata's definition: "*Alañkāras*, such as *anuprāsa*, *upamā*, etc., are those qualities which, like necklace, etc., subserve *rasa* (i.e., *ātman*) through the adornment of the body of poetry" (*Kāvya-prakāśa*, VIII. 67). Visvanatha, in his *Sāhityadarpaṇa* (X.I), makes it even more explicit. He says: "*Alañkāras* are the unstable (dispensable) qualities of words and meanings, which, like bracelets, etc., enhance their beauty, and ultimately subserve *rasa*". This becomes the dominant view of *alañkāra* after the establishment of the *dhvani* theory by such stalwarts as Ānandavardhana, Abhinavagupta and Mammata. A major attempt to restore the *alañkāra* theory to its pristine glory was made by Kuntaka, who, taking his cue from Bhāmaha's concept of *vakrokti* (which, according to him, characterizes all *alañkāras*)

developed a comprehensive theory of *vakrokti*, but it failed to have any impact on the prevailing antipathetic view of *alaṅkāra*. Jayadeva's passionate outburst in *Candraloka* (I.8) - "why those, who accept poetry devoid of speech, do not accept fire as fire when devoid of heat?" - proved a cry in wilderness. The *alaṅkāra* theory could not regain its original significance and prestige even though the *alaṅkāra* tradition continued.

There were also a few other factors which contributed to the decline of the reputation of the *alaṅkāra* theory. For one thing, the term '*alaṅkāra*' proved an unhappy choice. It was used originally metaphorically (etymologically, the word means 'to make adequate or sufficient' as well as 'to embellish') but it readily got identified in popular imagination with bodily ornaments like necklace, etc. Secondly, the increasing display of *alaṅkāras* by the court poets without any aesthetic appeal led to the gradual dissatisfaction with the *alaṅkāra* theory.

However, the theory itself is based on a sound foundation. As V. Rāghavan observes, "All poetic expression involves some kind of expressional deviation of beauty, some out-of-the-way-ness. This expressional deviation, the striking disposition of words and ideas, is *Alaṅkāra*; this constitutes the beautiful poetic form". (Rāghavan and Nagendra 94). Thus, far from being extrinsic, *alaṅkāras* are fundamental to poetic expression. They are, E. Gerow states, "the very means through which poetry is distinguished and becomes *voll Gesinnung*". (Rāghavan and Nagendra 15). I.A. Richards even goes to the extent of asserting that "metaphor is the omnipresent principle of language". (92). However, the *alaṅkāra* theorist would add that figuration in poetry is acceptable only when it contributes to aesthetic charm.

Alaṅkāras are also the indispensable means of image-building. As John Livingstone Lowes warns us, “we are apt to forget, in our boredom with the eternal truism about similes and metaphors as poetical embellishment, the pregnant fact of the inevitability of imagery — an inevitability rooted and grounded as deeply in the nature of the poet’s medium, language, as stage time is inherent in the necessities of the dramatic medium, or perspective in the restrictions of a flat surface (Lowes 6). V.K. Chari makes this idea more explicit when he says: “The poetic body is constituted by sound and sense and rendered picturesque by figures; figuration is poetry’s special mode of being” (Chari 34).

The soul-body metaphor used by the *dhvani*-theorists to denigrate the *alaṅkāra* theory is not very sound. Both the soul and the body are interdependent; one without the other is meaningless. In a sense, the body is more important, for it is through the body that the soul realizes itself.

Nor is it fair to compare *alaṅkāras* with necklaces, armlets, etc. They should rather be compared, as V. Rāghavan suggests, with *hāva*, *bhāva*, etc., the *alaṅkāras* of maidens, described in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* under *Sāmānyabhinaya* (general representation).

The *alaṅkāra* theorists are also criticized for their continuous search for new *alaṅkāras*. From Bharata to Appayya Dikṣita, the number of *alaṅkāras* rises from 4 to about 125. This proliferation of *alaṅkāras* is generally viewed as a meaningless scholastic exercise. But this, of course, is not true. *Alaṅkāras*, as Paramānanda Cakravartin in his commentary on *Kāvya-prakāśa* (I.4) rightly observes “are variable and their possibilities are endless; hence theorists can go on adding to their number by discovering fresh shades of figurative beauty in any given specimen of poetry”. Far

from being a vain enterprise, this has resulted in charting almost the whole gamut of poetry. At this stage, “we see”, V. Rāghavan notes, “that the whole range of poetry is almost ‘*vyāpta*’ [pervaded by] with *Alaṅkāra* in general, is ‘*Avinabhuta*’ [inseparably connected] with *Alaṅkāra*” (Chari 95).

The following examples, as pointed out by S.K. De demonstrate how a simple fact such as the beauty of maiden’s face may be described variously, giving rise to difficult *alaṅkāras*:

Her face is like the moon	<i>Upamā</i>
The moon is like the face	<i>Pratīpa</i>
Her moon-face is captivating	<i>Rūpaka</i>
Is this the face or is this the moon	<i>Sasaṅdeha</i>
This is the moon, not your face	<i>Apahnuti</i>
The moon is like her face and her face is like the moon	<i>Upameyopamā</i>
Her face is only like her face	<i>Ananvaya</i>
Seeing the moon, I remembered her face	<i>Smarana</i>
Thinking it to be the moon, the <i>chakor</i> bird flies towards her face	<i>Bhārantimān</i>
This is the moon; this the lotus; thus the <i>chakor</i> and the bee fly towards her face	<i>Ullekha</i>
Her face is verily the moon	<i>Utprekṣa</i>
Her face is a second moon	<i>Atiśayokti</i>
The moon and the lotus are vanquished by her face	<i>Tulyayogita</i>

Her face and the moon rejoice in the night	<i>Dipaka</i>
The moon shines in the night, but her face always shines	<i>Vyatireka</i>
In the heavens the moon, on the earth her face	<i>Dr̥ṣṭānta</i>
The moon reigns in the heavens, her face reigns on the earth	<i>Prativastupamā</i>
Her face bears the beauty of the moon	<i>Nidarśana</i>
The moon looks pale before her face <i>prasiṅsa</i>	<i>Aprastuta</i>
The warmth of the passion is cooled by her moon-face	<i>Pariṅāma</i>
Her face is beautifully spotted with black eyes and adorned with the light of the smile	<i>Samāsokti</i>

Dey 68-9

It is this insight on the part of *alaṅkāra*-theorists which has prompted Daniel H.H. Ingalls to declare that they surpass the Greeks and the Romans “not only in subtlety but also, as it seems to me, in understanding”. (9).

In fact, the *alaṅkāra* theory is basically sound, but it is liable to misuse in practice. Kṣemendra, in his *Aucitya-vicāracārca*, demonstrates clearly how an *alaṅkāra* ceases to be *alaṅkāra* if it is improperly used. In this context, it is worth remembering what Mahimabhatta says: “The poet’s chief business is to create extraordinary beauty in his work, not to turn *alaṅkāras* for their sake”. (Dwivedi, 397). *Alaṅkāras* are justified only if they contribute to poetic charm. They are means, not an end in themselves.

The following two examples show how *alaṅkāras* can be used effectively:

- (i) ‘Vala, his prowess roused, glared like a lion, Venòudari who set upon him like an elephant” (*Śiśupālavadhā*, 19.2).

Here there are two similies which, though common place, are noteworthy for their suggestiveness. The implication is that Vala will shortly kill Venòudari; for, in a fight between lions and elephants, it is the elephants who get killed.

- (ii) The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the
window panes,
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the
window panes
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
And seeing that it was a soft October night,
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.

T.S. Eliot, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’

This is an example of the figure *utprekṣā*. Here the fog is delineated as a cat. It helps in describing the evening scene vividly.

The following verse, on the other hand, is an example of the misuse or abuse of *alaṅkāra*:

“Now the great cloud-cat
darting out his lightning tongue,
licks the creamy moon
from the saucepan of the sky”.

Yogeśvara

Here, the metaphor (*rūpaka*) is strikingly elaborate, complete in every detail, but it does not serve any aesthetic purpose. It gives the impression of an intellectual exercise, characterized by mathematical precision.

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