

BOOK REVIEW

Pollock, S. (2016). *A Rasa Reader. Classical Indian Aesthetics.* Columbia University Press: New York. 442pp. ISBN 9780231173902 (cloth: alk. paper)

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Sheldon Pollock's most recent book *A Rasa Reader. Classical Indian Aesthetics* (2016) is the first book of a new series titled *Historical Sourcebooks in Classical Indian Thought* published by Columbia University Press. The second book in the series, this one on Dharma, edited and translated by Patrick Olivelle, was also published in 2016. Each volume in the series promises to bring important new translations as well as contextualizations of different primary texts related to the classical Indian thought under study.

Professor Sheldon Pollock is the Arvind Raghunathan Professor of South Asian Studies at Columbia University. He was previously the William B. Ransford Professor of Sanskrit and Indian Studies. A graduate of Harvard, he first studied Classical Studies, but then went on to receive an MA and a Ph.D. in Sanskrit and Indian Studies with a focus on Indian and comparative intellectual and literary history. His interest in comparative studies is visible throughout *A Rasa Reader*.

Outside of India, the study of rasa is a rather neglected topic of study for most students of aesthetics. While Japanese aesthetics, especially zen, has received a lot of attention when it comes to academic and popular publications, either in philosophy, religion, or the arts, classical Indian aesthetics is still not readily available outside of India. The topic is difficult, not only because of the lack of available Sanskrit translations, but also because of a lack of publications going beyond certain texts, schools of thoughts or historical time periods. Indeed, although different primary texts dealing with rasa are available to the students of Indian aesthetics and Indian art, Professor Pollock's book goes beyond particular time periods or specific treatises and looks at classical Indian aesthetics as a changing and evolving concept. Pollock has gathered an imposing number of classical Indian texts of different natures, including poetry, commentaries and art treatises from the early 300CE to the 17th century. The chapters are not divided by random chronological markers, but are focusing on changes in the evolution of Indian thought on rasa.

A Rasa Reader is an imposing academic text, yet it manages to remain relevant to the student and scholars interested in comparative studies, as well as specialist of rasa. For example, Pollock brings interesting and helpful relations and comparisons between western and Indian aesthetics, helping the unfamiliar reader to navigate the different theoretical concepts under scrutiny. Students of aesthetics who are less familiar with Indian rasa will find relations and comparisons, especially in the book's introduction, with western philosophers of aesthetics such as Kant and Hume, with whom they are

presumably more familiar. At the same time, the justifications and explanations of his extensive and well researched translations can also be followed throughout his numerous notes. Professor Pollock presents complex concepts such as the location of *rasa*, imitation and manifestation, morality, passion, but also the very nature of aesthetics in a way that is accessible to most academic readers.

The book is divided into six chapters, which are further separated into sections, each focusing on a particular text, or sections of a text. Each subsection contains a short introduction to the text, including information about the author and historical context, but also information about the text itself, highlighting its main ideas, important points of departure, and controversies. In other words, the introductions help us contextualize these texts within the development of *rasa* and see how each text and author respond to each other. For example Chapter 1 *The Foundational Text, c.300, and Early Theories, 650-1025*, focuses on eight texts and commentaries laying out the foundations of *rasa* theories. In this chapter, Pollock sets the stage for some of the main theoretical concepts of Indian *rasa* revisited throughout the book, including *rasa* on the performative (the seen) versus *rasa* on the poetic/literary (the heard). Most importantly, this first chapter shows how early texts were more interested in *rasa*'s formal elements and processes of creation, either general or specific (*rasa* as inferred, manifested or engendered), rather than focusing on the viewer/reader's response.

Chapter 2 *The Great Synthesis of Bhoja, 1025-1055*, contains only two subsections focusing on texts by Bhoja, a king of the Paramara dynasty. Here Pollock shows how the king was interested in understanding "how literary characters can be shown to experience and express the emotions they do" (113), which is based on a sense of self, or passion. Although the chapter is short, it is important in the history of Indian *rasa*, as it marks the beginning of a shift in the theory of *rasa*, from an interest in the process of *rasa*, to one interested in reception.

In Chapter 3 *An Aesthetic Revolution, 900-1000*, Pollock brings forth the first revolution in *rasa* theory when it fully changed its focus of study from the process of creation to the reader/viewer's reception. In other words scholars changed from a formalist approach, to a subjective approach to *rasa*. This theoretical change is due to Bhatta Nayaka's, now mostly lost, texts. What remains of his work are a few lines and a few commentaries on his texts. Because of the scarcity of clearly attributed texts to Bhatta Nayaka, Pollock indicates that he "err[ed] on the side of inclusiveness" (148) with his choice of texts, acknowledging that some of the sources he uses in this chapter are still a matter of debate. Pollock relates Bhatta Nayaka's interest in scriptural hermeneutics with his new approach to *rasa*, both being action driven.

Chapter 4 *Abhinavagupta and His School, 1000-1200*, is subdivided into four sections, focusing on Abhinavagupta's original texts, which are more numerous, or more numerous preserved, than any other writers mentioned in the previous chapters. Following the revolution in *rasa* theory, this chapter focuses on concepts related to the reader/viewer. The chapter investigates types of emotional responses and what the viewer/reader gain from literary texts, such as the degree these texts, literature or drama, "offer social and moral 'instruction'" (192). It also looks at different types of emotional responses, and the claim that emotional response "to poetry about love for God cannot be *rasa*"(225), a concept which is revisited in chapter 6.

Chapter 5 *Continuing the Controversies beyond Kashmir, 1200-1400* is divided into three subsections. This section questions if rasa is “essentially pleasurable” (240). Pollock indicates that this question is of particular importance when we take into account that the scholars who raised the question at the time were Jain scholars, and therefore valued nonviolence. For example, the claim that viewers can still enjoy and find pleasure in the play where violence and pain is depicted on stage is, from a Jain perspective, problematic. This section also offers a first, although tentative, return to the location of rasa that is not only in the viewer, but also in the characters.

With Chapter 6, *Rasa in the Early Modern World, 1200-1650*, which is divided into four subsections, Pollock brings us back to the division between literary texts and religious texts of chapter 4. This chapter focuses on the theologization of rasa, which proved to be a second revolution in the theory of rasa. With this new rasa of devotion, rasa’s location returns to the character, in other words the deity, as opposed to focusing on reception.

Sheldon Pollock’s translations of previously inaccessible texts, at least for those of us not versed in Sanskrit, is an imposing academic work, but so are the numerous explanations and contextualizations he gives, helping the reader contextualize the different texts he translated. Pollock’s work is a monumental achievement and a classical piece of academic research. We should look forward to the other books of this new *Historical Sourcebooks in Classical Indian Thought* series.

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