



## Unveiling the Unspoken: A Critical Study of 'Dhwani' in Indian Aesthetics

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### Abstract

In the rich heritage of literary theory and criticism of the Indian Knowledge System, we have seven different approaches to evaluating literary works. Theories such as Rasa (Bharata), Alankara (Bhamaha), Guna (Dandin), Riti (Vamana), Dhwani (Anandavardhana), Vakrokti (Kuntaka) and Auchitya (Khemendra) are some of the sharpest and subtlest contributions of Indian Poetics to the understanding and evaluation of works of art. The theoreticians are called the originators as they established new dogmas in Sanskrit poetics. While the 'Rasa' theory concerned itself with aesthetic effect, 'Alankara' with figures of speech, modes, and devices, 'Riti' with stylistic values, and 'Guna -Doshā' with excellence and defects, 'Dhwani' deals with the aesthetic suggestiveness of words which bursts ('sphota') upon or stimulates the 'sahridaya' (sensitive/ responsive) reader or listener. The aesthetic pleasure (Dhwanyarasa), which is an essential characteristic of all good literature, springs from this.

Anandavardhan, a Kashmiri poet-critic of the ninth century A.D., unified criticism by taking poetry and drama together and applying to all genres of literature the same principles of analysis and evaluation. To formulate his theory of Dhwani he considered a question that is fundamental to all critical analysis: How do words convey their meaning? He considered the signifier and the signified<sup>i</sup> by differentiating them broadly into the primary and the implied. To be more specific, these were the 'abhidha' (literal), 'lakshana' (indicated) and 'vyanjana' (suggested) meanings of words. Anandavardhan implied that the role of 'vyanjana', or suggested meaning of words is central to the richness of poetry; that it is the soul of poetry. For a long, we have been applying Western critical theories to our evaluation of literature including Indian writing in English and even regional literature in translation. A study of literature from the standpoint of our fine-tuned ancient theories of aesthetics would perhaps yield rich dividends in terms of interpretation. This paper proposes to examine some famous works of British literature and Indian writing in English from the perspective of the critical theory of 'Dhwani'.

**Keywords:** Aesthetics, Dhwani, meaning, *sphota*, *sahridaya*, suggestiveness.



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### Introduction

Art is not words, however, the expression of art, the propagation of it, and our perception are couched in language which conveys to us multiple layers of meaning which resonates with us on a semantic and emotive level and elicits from us a response.

**Article History:** Received: 15 Jun 2024. Revised: 25 Jul 2024. Accepted: 10 August 2024. Published: 24 Aug 2024

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**Citation:** Sinha, Samira. 2024. Unveiling the Unspoken: A Critical Study of Dhwani in Indian Aesthetics. *Journal of South Asian Exchanges* 1.1 < <https://saexchanges.com/v1n2/v1n202.pdf> >

Every act of speech, and also its representation in writing, has three distinguished aspects, that is, expression, suppression, and impression. Expression is what the speaker is saying, while suppression is what the speaker is not articulating but wants to say perhaps. Impression, on the other hand, is what the listener gains from the utterance of the speaker. Communication often takes place on all these levels at the same time making it a complex process to analyse. But can words by themselves create meaning because they represent something in the physical world or can they elicit a response because they conjure images and sounds in the imagination of the writer/reader and reader/ audience? How is it transported from the imagination of the writer to the imagination of the reader? Can it be standardized? Will it not result in a multiplicity of interpretations as every reader's experience will be different? Indeed these, and many more complex questions have vexed the formulation of critical theory. In the rich heritage of literary theory and criticism of the Indian Knowledge System, we have seven different approaches to literary works. Theories such as the Rasa theory, evolved by Bharata, Alankara theory by Bhamaha, Guna theory by Dandin, Riti by Vamana, Dhvani by Anandavardhna, Vakrokti by Kuntaka and Auchitya by Khemendra, are some of the sharpest and subtlest contributions of Indian Poetics to the understanding and evaluation of works of art. The origin of specific theories is ascribed to the Acharyas who established the particular theory as the central principle of evaluation of literary excellence. Not just excellence, the flaws too were equally, minutely discussed. While the reader-response theory came into critical discourse much later in Western poetics (late twentieth century), the 'sahridaya' or the sensitive reader/ audience was always the focus in discussions of Indian poetics. Semiotics as a serious branch of study came after the 1950s with the study of the concept of sign, signifier, and the signified by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Linguistics and grammar, however, were always part of Indian poetics in discussing various elements of literature.

The study of Indian Poetics spreads over fifteen hundred to two thousand years from the second century B.C. to the seventeenth century A.D. with Bharata's 'Natyashastra' at one end and Pandit Raja Jagannatha's 'Rasagangadhara' at the other. (Choudhary, 2010, p.1). The Sanskrit Acharyas not only expounded the theories of poetic forms but about drama as well. Bharata's expansive and detailed treatment of it in 'Natyashastra' is evidence of the fact that the tradition of dramatic art was prevalent in the country for many centuries prior to him.

Bharata was an exponent of 'rasa' (sentiment) theory which concerned itself with the aesthetic effect of rasa. Bhamaha and Dandin were exponents of 'alankara' (embellishment or figurative beauty), that is, figures of speech, modes, and devices. The ninth century A.D. saw the emergence of three Acharyas, Vamana, Udbhata, and Anandvardhana in the field of poetics. Vamana supported 'riti' (poetic diction or style). Udbhata, who was a follower of Bhamaha and Dandin, supported 'alankara'. Anandvardhana, however, stated that 'dhvani' (an aesthetic suggestiveness) is the soul of all poetry. Dandin also dealt with 'guna- dosa', that is, excellence and defect. 'Vakrokti' was emphasized by Kuntaka and 'auchitya', or appropriateness, by

Kshemendra. All these theories have cumulatively and continuously gone into the making of Kavyashastra or Indian poetics. (Upadhyay, 2021, pp. 11-15)

### **Dhwani theory**

Of all the theories, the Dhwani theory is considered very important as it was the first attempt into the field of semantics, a field which in Western poetics came as late as the 1960s. It was considered so important that the entire history of Indian poetics is divided broadly into pre- Dhwani period, 'Dhwanikaal' (Age of Dhwani), and the post-Dhwani period, but it was not as if the Dhwani theory was accepted immediately. Anandvardhana's theory of aesthetic suggestiveness was a perspective different from other proponents of poetic theory and for almost two hundred years his theory of 'dhwani' was refuted by many aestheticians. However, in the eleventh century A.D., Mammata defended and reestablished the theory indisputably in his work 'Kavyaprakasa', which is a compilation of almost all the main doctrines of Poetics. As the originators of various theories on poetics were followed by many commentators on their work, they can be considered no less significant, as they added value and elaboration, refining the theory further. Among the many commentaries on *Dhwanyaloka* by Anandvardhana, the most significant is *Dhwanyaloka- Lochana* by Abhinavgupta. He deliberates on Bharata's Rasa theory and Anandavardhana's Dhwani theory. According to him, poetry presents emotion through a process of suggestion (Dhwani), and every poem is governed by one prominent rasa. The emotion which already exists in the reader (as it is 'sthayin') is aroused and given expression by poetry. Prof. C.D. Narasimhaiah (1977) in his book *Moving Frontiers of English Studies in India* addresses the question of how rasa (aesthetic pleasure) is awakened. He writes,

. . . the mind of the responsive reader is attuned to the emotional situation as portrayed in the work of art (sahriday samvada) and is then absorbed (tanmayta) in its portrayal and this absorption results in the experience of aesthetic pleasure (rasa anubhava). The organization of the poem should involve all the significant emotions (akhandananda) not as in Aristotle's pity and fear only but the erotic, the comic, the frightened, the disgusting, the tender....and the tranquil. . . (p.89)

In order to formulate his theory of dhwani, Anandavardhan considers a fundamental question: how do words convey their meaning? He differentiates the meaning of words broadly into the primary and implied, that is, the literal (abhidha), the indicated (lakshana), and the suggested (vyanjana). He emphasizes vyanjana as central to good (uttam) poetry. That it is the soul of poetry. To explain the meaning of Dhwani, Anandavardhan uses a story that is oft repeated. It goes like this: There was a woman who used to meet her lover in a secret place on the banks of river Godavari. It was a well-forested area and well-suited for her purpose. But there was a sadhu too who used to frequent the river to bathe in it. This the woman did not like. There was a dog as well who used to bark at the sadhu whenever he came. One day the woman said to the sadhu that he could now come to the river without any fear of the dog because the dog had been killed by an angry lion who resides in the same forest. This statement of hers can be understood at two levels. The first or literal meaning (vachyarth) is that

it is now safe for the sadhu to come because the dog is dead. The second or suggested meaning (vyanjanarth) is the exact opposite because the woman is suggesting that it is now even more unsafe for the sadhu to come as there is an angry lion in the forest. This in effect is the 'dhwani' of the woman's statement which can be understood by the sadhu if he is a sensitive listener. (Sinha & Kumar, 2022, p. 123)

So far as poetry is concerned, Anandavardhan emphasizes vyanjana as its central element. Dhwani is the meaning conveyed by the vyanjana power of the words or sentences, in other words, its aesthetic suggestiveness. This is what gives poetry multiple layers of meaning, its suggestiveness distinguishing it from other forms of writing. It is this core idea around which Anandavardhan's theory is constructed. He included drama along with poetry as drama was also written in verse. In defining Dhwani, he says that when both, the literal expression and its literal meaning, are given less importance than what they suggest or imply, it is called Dhwani:

Yatraathah shabdo vaa tamartham upsarjanikrit swarthau,

Vyangtah kavya visheshah sa dhwaniriti surbhih kathitah. (Choudhary, 2010, p.49)

Where the 'vaachak' (literal expression) or signifier and 'vaachya' (its literal meaning) or signified make themselves and their meaning secondary to express their symbolic meaning (vyanjanarth), scholars call it Dhwani. The theory of Dhwani presupposes that the ultimate aim of poetry is not to state the literal but to convey the deeper implicit meaning. No matter what the form of the poem, if it does not have Dhwani then it is not poetry at all. Only that poetry can be called truly beautiful which conveys a deeper implicit meaning. This is the finest kind of poetry for it has rasa or the essence of delight. Around the same time, in Western theory too we can refer to the Greek scholar Cassius Longinus who addressed the idea of greatness in prose and poetry. Analysing the sources of sublimity, for instance, Longinus mentions great ideas, controlled passions, noble diction, and figures along with unity or criticality of the organization to produce on the hearer or reader the shock-like effect of sudden illumination and ecstasy. This is a similar notion to the 'sphota' theory of Sanskrit grammarians such as Bhartrihari, Panini, and Patanjali. In their linguistic philosophies, they analysed what precisely is the bearer of the meaning of a word or sentence, in other words, 'that from which the meaning bursts forth'. The concept of 'sphota' is central to the theory of Dhwani as it is the sudden illumination of suggested meaning on the 'sahridaya' which is the source of aesthetic pleasure.

Let us first consider whether the mere utterance of the words 'shringara' or 'karuna' gives rise to any feeling of love or pathos. They do not by themselves arouse any emotion because contain only the 'vachya' element, however, when we read about Ram and Sita meeting in the royal garden of Janakpur or Dushyant's meeting with Shakuntala, it at once evokes a feeling of love. Likewise, when we read/ hear about Ram banishing Sita or Dushyant's rejection of Shakuntala, it at once evokes the feeling of pity and sadness. Those who propounded the rasa theory were not able to provide a satisfactory explanation for this issue. At this point, Anandavardhana explained that the words in the first instance, that is, shringara and karuna, are expressly mentioned and possess only abhidha and lakshana, whereas in the second instance, they are

suggested from the situations, that is, they have the 'vyanjana' element. Only when the feeling is suggested, they can call forth the 'bhav' in us and then it results in our enjoyment of aesthetic pleasure. Thus, he brought to the understanding of literature in general and poetry in particular, the theory of 'rasadhvani', later explained in detail by Anandagupta, which in turn helped in covering the lacuna in the rasa theory.

So, the Dhvani theory is central to the meaning, symbolism, and suggestiveness in poetry without which there can be no poetry. Multiple layers of meaning, both literal (Vachya) and implied (pratyaman), are what distinguish poetic expression from the prosaic one and make it excellent (Uttam). It evokes rasa through the three-layered meaning of words or sentences, that is, abhidha, lakshana, and vyanjana. Words in poetry go beyond linguistic structures and evoke emotions and in turn, these words become emotive.

### **Application of the theory of Dhvani**

For a long time, we have been applying Western critical theories in our evaluation of Western literature, Indian writing in English, and even translated regional literature. A study from the point of view of ancient theories of poetics will perhaps bring rich dividends. It will not be simply a matter of finding approximations or equivalents to the theory of objective correlative and deconstruction. It will mean reaching into the center of the quintessential Indian worldview in which the critical theory is grounded. Some path-breaking work has been done by Pandurang Vaman Kane in *History of Sanskrit Poetics* (1971) and also by V. S. Sethuraman in a book that he edited, entitled *Indian Aesthetics: An Introduction* (1992). Another compilation of essays by M. S. Kushwaha in the volume entitled *Indian Poetics and Western Thought* (1988) deserves to be mentioned here. L. C. Knight (1963) made such a study in his essay "King Lear as Metaphor" and he highlights Dhvani. Whether he calls Shakespeare's use of suggestiveness of words in his dramatic poetry Dhvani or not is another aspect, but the fact that his use of the suggestive power of words is exemplary is a well-recognized fact. King Lear's daughters are unkind to him to the extent of being toxic. He compares them to a disease plaguing his body. Shakespeare here overturns the cliché that the child is the flesh and blood of his parents. Instead of describing the child as being a physical embodiment of his parents, Shakespeare describes the daughters as being a disease of Lear's flesh.

We will find further examples from the verses of Shakespeare, Keats, and Coleridge in the context of Dhvani. In Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet*, Mercutio, who is grievously injured and bleeding to death says, "Ask for me tomorrow and you shall find me a grave man". (2018, III, i) Here the phrase "grave man" may have two interpretations. It may be interpreted as both a man of serious disposition, or it can mean that he will be in the grave, a dead man. This is a fine example of Abhidhamooladhvani and Lakshanamooladhvani since the meanings are both literal and indicated, that is, abhidha and lakshana. It is the polysemous nature of the word that makes both meanings relevant. In Western poetics, it is called a pun and engages the delight of the reader/ audience. Shakespeare, in Sonnet XXIII, begs his friend "to

hear with eyes". Now eyes cannot hear. The poet is suggesting to his friend to perceive his love from his face. This is the 'vyanjanadhwani' of the phrase.

In the following lines from John Keats' poem *Ode to a Nightingale*:

Tasting of Flora and the country green,  
Dance, and Provencal song, and sunburnt mirth!  
O for a beaker full of the warm South  
Full of the true and blushful Hippocrene  
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,  
And purple-stained mouth; (lines. 13- 18)

the evocation of fullness, gusto, ease, and freedom symbolizes an imaginative escape from reality. The power of the words "sunburnt mirth" and "warm South" would immediately evoke (photo) a feeling of blissfulness in the 'sahriday' European. It is a fine example of Vyanjanadhwani. This suggested meaning may not be the same for everyone unless the context is explained.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem *Kubla Khan* may be viewed from the prisms of remembrance, poetic experience, insight into the mysterious, and as a psychological curiosity. In the lines:

It was a miracle of a rare device,  
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice! (Lines. 34-35)

Kubla Khan, Xanadu, and the palace with the pleasure dome are literal but they take us to the subterranean world of the "great romantic chasm" which destroys the synthesis achieved by the structured dome until the poet becomes present: "Could I revive within me". (Line. 41)The poet alone will be able to revive the music of the damsel with her dulcimer within himself:

That with music loud and long,  
I could build that dome in air,  
That sunny dome! Those caves of ice! (Lines. 44-46)

Coleridge is invoking the powers of esemplastic imagination which is the core of poetic creation similar to that of Dhvani. The poem itself is an act of actualizing an inarticulate experience in a comprehensible form.

Jayant Mahapatra, an Indian poet writing in English, explores human relationships, and social problems among other themes in the backdrop of Orissa, which also acts as a symbol. In his poem, *Evening Landscape by the River*, ('Life Signs', 1993), the poet tries to translate a state of being into images drawn from the sights and sounds of this location. The stone, enshrined in the temple, is a symbol of longevity and inertness, a silent witness to the flow of time. The river symbolizes the constant flow of memory, accumulated over time, which constitutes everyone's life. Light, the third symbol in the poem, is used twice in the following lines:

It is evening, there is light laughter,  
and the abundant darkness of water  
over which an uncertain light of the moon  
lies like a familiar but useless ornament. (lines 11-14)

In these lines 'light' suggests transience and luminosity in both instances as opposed to the continuous flow of the abundant darkness of the water, which signifies time, tradition, and continuity. These three symbols create the overall aesthetic experience of the poem, an oxymoron, the contrast of somber stillness suggested by "darkness", "reverie" and the continuous motion of the river waters signifying the flux of life in which the dance of light (happiness) is so transient that it becomes a "useless ornament". In this poem we see 'vaastudhwani', alankaardhwani and rasadhwani. Vaastudhwani is the suggested meaning in which no figure of speech has been used; Alankaardhwani is the suggested meaning of an expression in which a figure of speech has been used which in turn creates the implied sense. Rasadhwani, on the other hand, is the emotion evoked by such an expression. (Sinha and Kumar, p. 129) The emotion evoked by the poem is a pensive sadness for which the poet offers no palliatives.

In the 'Mangalacharan' with which *Dwanyaloka* begins, Anandavardhana seeks the blessings of the almighty for his listeners in the following lines:

Swechhaakesarinah swachhswachhayayasitendawah

Trayantam vo madhuripoh prapannartichhido nakhaha (Pathak, 2014, 3)

Here Anandavardhana has brought three types of Dhwani into play, that is, rasadhwani, alankara Dhwani, and vastu Dhwani. The Narasimha incarnation of Lord Vishnu is invoked as the protector of all who come to him. This indicates the veer rasa. The lion or Kesari is so illuminated that he puts even the moon (Indu) into the shade. This is an example of 'Vyatirek alankar dhwani' in which the object compared is shown as superior to the object with which it is compared. The moon is suffering from weariness because the comparison to the cleanliness and shine of the nails of the lion has diminished it. This is an example of 'Utpreksha alankar dhwani' where finally, not Vishnu, but merely his nails are enough to protect those who go to him. Here 'Vastu dhwani' comes into light as the nails themselves are enough. In this way, Anandavardhana begins his treatise (perhaps unintentionally) with a fine example of his theory. The glorious power of Vishnu is suggested by references to Kesari and Madhuripu and his power is suggested by the nails which protect.

## Conclusion

Mimesis and the Rasa theory, Katharsis, and the Dhwani theory have their significance and variations. G. B. Mohan Thambi's singular work *The Response to Poetry: A Study in Comparative Aesthetics* (1968) offers a parallel view of Western and Eastern aesthetics. The perception of aesthetic pleasure is essentially a personal or private experience. The multiplicity of interpretation gained currency with the coming of the Reader Response theory and Deconstruction in Western poetics in the late twentieth century. In Indian aesthetics, Anandavardhana, as early as the ninth century and later, Abhinavagupta, dealt in detail with the role of the 'sahridaya' in the experience of rasa or aesthetic pleasure. In addition, once a poem has been created in its entirety, it becomes independent of the compulsions of its creator. It becomes transpersonal creating the potential to become everyone's poem, that is, universal. It can be interpreted in multiple ways depending on how the reader perceives or responds to it

(vyanjanadhwani). The theory of 'sphota' is, therefore, central to the theory of Dhvani. The suggested or symbolic meaning, which can be understood from the context, dawns upon the reader.

As heirs of a very highly developed critical tradition and with training in Western critical theories the Indian English critic will perhaps be able to make the best of both, to the advantage of literary interpretation. In a world where everything is becoming digitized and instantaneous and life increasingly materialistic, it will be worthwhile to pause and appreciate the aesthetic pleasure that literature brings. For aspiring scholars, it will be an exciting foray into a less explored area of applying the principles of Indian poetics to the interpretation of Western and Indian writings in English.

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