# Rasa Theory as a Decolonial Approach to Indian Drama with Reference to Chandrashekhar Kambar's Play Siri Sampige

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Abstract— During the colonial era, Western literary theories dominated and overshadowed the native aesthetics in the study of literature. Decolonisation has helped the various nations after their independence to restore their cultural heritage, historical narratives, and literature, which had been suppressed under colonial rule. It has also helped to redefine their identity, which includes their native languages, traditions, and practices. Aesthetics in India has been its pride from ancient times and has played a significant role in the decolonisation of literary theory by providing various theories such as Rasa Theory, Dhvani Theory, etc. Rasa Theory is the most significant literary theory in Indian aesthetics due to its universal applicability in the interpretation of literary works. It talks about the evocation of the emotions leading to aesthetic pleasure.

The present study identifies Rasa Theory as a decolonial approach to analysing Indian drama, focusing on Chandrashekhar Kambar's play Siri Sampige. This play is deeply rooted in folklore, mythology, and native narrative traditions. Through the application of Rasa Theory, Karuna Rasa emerges as a dominant rasa in the play by the identification of its Vibhāva (Determinants), Anubhāva (Consequents), and Vyabhicāri-bhāva (Transitory States), etc. It takes the reader/spectator towards the relish of emotions. Thus, this research paper emphasises Rasa Theory as a medium to foster a decolonised approach to literary studies and also presents Rasa Theory as an indigenous approach to analysing literary works by applying it to the play Siri Sampige.

Keywords: Rasa Theory, Karuna Rasa, Indian Drama, Decolonisation, Chandrashekhar Kambar, Siri Sampige.

## I. Introduction

Colonisation was a process of controlling an entire country or territory by European countries such as Britain, Spain, France, and Portugal. They dominated a whole society and exploited its resources, which led the society to a major change in its culture, economy, and political structure. This process, "known as "colonial expansion" describes how European countries expanded their influence over areas outside of their borders in an effort to gain economic, political, and strategic advantages" (Kumar 2). These European countries were engaged in colonising other countries and expanding their empire across Africa, Asia, and America, etc., from the fifteenth to twentieth centuries. As an impact, colonisation has shaped political boundaries, economic inequalities, and social divisions as well as literary works in the postcolonial states/countries. During the twentieth century a major change was seen in various colonised countries. After a long struggle, these countries got freedom from colonisation and started to regain their own identity through the process of decolonisation.

Decolonisation refers to getting complete independence by dismantling the system of colonial governance, economic control, and cultural dominance. It helps a country to get its identity back by gaining control over itself by various means. It reflects "a transition from a world of empires to a world of states" (Raghavan 813). Decolonisation occurred in the twentieth century, especially after World War II, which shifted global attitudes against colonial rule. Decolonisation is helping the countries that were affected by colonialism through reviving their cultural heritage, literature, economic developments, and political improvements. These countries were left with harsh challenges when they got independent. "The practice and theory of decolonization was more complicated" (Raghavan 813). A major change was seen in literature after colonisation, but decolonisation is reviving the native literature by bringing it forward to interpret it through indigenous literary theories.

Literary theories that were imposed by colonialists along with their literature are also being decolonised. The term 'decolonising literary theory' refers to the efforts to minimise the impact of Western literary theories and approaches to interpreting literature, which have been shaped by the Eurocentric perspectives. It "is an intellectual movement with the purpose of deciphering western literature and disclosing its colonizing forces Disguised in noble intentions" (Bartiza 69). Decolonisation in literary theory means giving importance to indigenous literary and aesthetic traditions and retracting from the dominating Western thoughts. Western theories like structuralism, postmodernism, and Marxist criticism have been used to analyse literature for decades in the colonised countries such as India, Africa, and America. However, literature in India has its own rich tradition of literary criticism and aesthetics, such as Rasa

Theory, Dhvani Theory, and Alamkāra Theory, which suggest exclusive methods to understand poetry, drama, and storytelling. Analysing literature through native methods or theories is encouraged by decolonising literary theory. Decolonising literary studies does not mean rejecting Western theories, but it means balancing them with Indian thoughts and applying Indian aesthetic principles to literature and art.

## II. Indian Aesthetics and Poetics

Indian Poetics (*Bharatiya Kāvya-Shāstra*) is an ancient tradition that explains how poetry and drama should be created and experienced. It indicates the concepts used in Indian literature that reflect its oneness and relevance in literature. It is often known as Sanskrit Poetics, that focuses on beauty (*Saundarya*), emotions (*Bhāva*), and artistic pleasure (*Ananda*). Indian Poetics has been developed by various schools of thought of Indian traditions. These schools were stabilised and developed by the eminent literary figures such as Bharata, Dandin, Bhamaha, Kuntaka, Kshemendra, Anandvardhana, and Abhinavagupta.

Rasa Theory was introduced by Bharata-Muni in *The Natyaśāstra*. This theory describes nine emotions (*Navarasa*) that a work of art can evoke in the audience. Initially eight *rasas* were introduced by Bharata-Muni, but the ninth *rasa* was added by Abhinavagupta in his commentary on *The Natyaśāstra*, entitled *Abhinavabhāratī*; then the concept of *Navarasa* came into existence. Dhvani Theory was introduced by Anandavardhana in *Dhvanyāloka*. It argues that the best poetry does not state everything directly but suggests deeper meanings (*Dhvani* means 'resonance' or 'echo'). The audience's imagination is important in interpreting poetry. Alamkara Theory was developed by Bhamaha and Dandin. It focuses on how poetic devices like similes, metaphors, and personification enhance artistic beauty. *Alamkāras* make poetry more vivid and expressive. Vakrokti Theory (Mode of Expression), which was introduced by Kuntaka, suggests that poetry is not direct but has a unique and artistic way of expressing ideas (*Vakrokti* means 'twisted expression'). It is represented as a source of beauty that is quite different from the description of a thing as it appears. Kshemendra developed Aucitya Theory, which suggests that the structure of the poetry, including words, emotions, and expressions, should be appropriate and should align with the theme and situation. The poetry, structured in this way, enhances the overall experience enjoyed by the readers.

Indian theories are universal and can help analyse literature of any culture. Even Rasa Theory can explain the emotional appeal of Shakespeare's tragedies, and Dhvani Theory can help interpret Japanese *haiku* poetry. Thus, decolonising literary theory in India means giving equal importance to Indian aesthetics by using concepts like *Rasa*, *Dhvani*, and *Vakrokti* to analyse literary works. Indian Poetics offers aesthetic depth, emotional richness, and cultural context that help understanding literature in a more intrinsic way. A balanced and inclusive approach to literary studies can be developed by assimilating indigenous traditions.

# III. Rasa Theory

Rasa Theory (*Rasa-Siddhānta*) has occupied a significant place among the schools of Indian poetics because of its universal applicability. It was propounded by Bharata-Muni in his celebrated dramaturgy, *The Natyaśāstra*. *Acharyas* of the *Alamkara* School recognised *rasas* as an element of decoration in literature and did not give any specific attention to it. Later, with the passage of time, *rasas* were identified as the fundamental element to literary works in their analytical interpretation. *The Natyaśāstra* is a major discourse on the dramaturgy of Indian *Kāvya-Shāstra*, which contains the various features of drama like elucidation, nature of drama, language structure, techniques, characters and types, etc. Rasa Theory is explained in the sixth chapter of *The Natyaśāstra*. Bharata-Muni's famous *Rasasutra* "*Vibhāvānubhāvavyabhicārisamyogādrasa-nispattih*" (*The Natyaśāstra*, Ch. VI), states that *rasa* emerges with the presence of determinants, consequents, and transitory states. The term '*rasa*' means 'taste', 'flavour', or 'essence'. The concept of sentiments (*rasa*) is universally known and can be used in connection with all forms of art. Bharata-Muni emphasises *rasa*, as it is a kind of sentiment that manifests through *Sthāyibhāva* (dominant state). A literary work becomes perfect and pleasurable with the proper combination of *bhavas*. All the elements of a literary work are rendered meaningful by *rasa* (105).

This theory highlights the significance of emotions in a literary work, which manifests the sentiments of the audience towards a work. It is *rasa* that brings out the emotions by shocks, delights, and intrinsic touches to the beauty of a literary work or an art form, which makes us feel the sensibility of emotions. Rasa Theory claims that *rasa* is essential to a literary work or an art form.

The eight rasas, which were introduced by Bharata-Muni in The Natyaśāstra, are Śṛṅgāra (erotic), Hāsya (comic), Karuṇa (pathetic), Raudra (furious), Vīra (heroic), Bhayānaka (terrible), Bibhatsa (odious), and Adbhuta (marvellous). These rasas (sentiments) arise from their resembling Sthāyibhāva (dominant states), which are Rati (love), Hasya (laughter), Soka (sorrow), Krodha (anger), Utsaha (dynamic energy), Bhaya (fear), Jugupsa (disgust), and Vismaya (astonishment). Abhinavagupta later wrote a commentary on The Natyaśāstra titled Abhinavabhāratī. In this work, he introduced Santa rasa (tranquil sentiment) as the ninth rasa. Santa rasa (tranquil sentiment) has the permanent emotion of Sama (peace). Thus, the concept of Navarasa came into existence, which was accepted by most literary critics.

Rasa Theory is applicable to any literary genre because of its universality. But essentially it was propounded for the interpretation of drama and poetry, especially Indian drama and Indian poetry. Indian drama, which has a rich and diverse history, spans a long time of more than 2000 years. It has evolved from religious and mythological performances to modern theatrical expressions, which are deeply rooted in tradition, combining storytelling, music, dance, and dialogue. Indian drama is a dynamic art form that blends

ancient traditions with modern storytelling. From Sanskrit theatre to folk performances and contemporary plays, it continues to evolve, reflecting the rich cultural and social diversity of India. There are various Indian playwrights, such as Mahesh Dattani, Girish Karnad, Badal Sircar, Manjula Padmanabhan, Vijay Tendulkar, and Dharamvir Bharati, etc., who have made a great contribution to the evolution of Indian drama in contemporary times. One of them is Chandrashekhar Kambar.

Chandrashekhar Kambar is a well-known Indian poet, playwright, and film director. He is a prominent literary figure as well as the founder and vice-chancellor of Kannada University. He is primarily recognised for his works in the Kannada language. In his writings, Kambar has induced the various dimensions of culture, traditions, and myths of rural India. He blends his works with modern themes, ancient stories, and folklore. He is prominently celebrated for his contributions to Kannada drama and poetry. He has been honoured with many prestigious awards, including the Padma Bhushan, Padma Shri, and Sahitya Akademi Awards. His most famous work is the play *Jokumaraswamy*, which has earned him wide recognition and several prestigious awards. His writings are known for their deep connection to the Indian tradition and his ability to address contemporary social and cultural issues. For his overall contribution to literature, he has been awarded the Jnanpith Award, one of the highest literary honours of India.

His Kannada play *Siri Sampige*, rooted in folklore and mythology, is full of various emotions. It is set in the kingdom of Sivapura, where Queen Mayavati rules after the death of her husband, King Nagara Nayaka. Her son, Prince Sivanaga, refuses to marry, as he is obsessed with a mysterious Lamp-Maiden, a woman who appeared in his vision and disappeared into his body. Sivanaga convinces his people to perform the sacred ritual where he is cut into two parts and buried in separate pots. He believes that when the pots are opened, he will be reborn along with the Lamp-Maiden. But after the ritual, instead of the Lamp-Maiden, a serpent comes out from the second pot and slithers away. After marriage, he does not show any interest in his wife, Siri Sampige, and continues to stare at his reflection in the water, believing the Lamp-Maiden exists within him. Meanwhile, the serpent-god Kalinga, fascinated by Siri Sampige, appears before her as Sivanaga. Siri Sampige finds herself mysteriously drawn to him. The prince suspects Siri Sampige and demands proof of her chastity. To prove her innocence, she undergoes a sacred test and comes out unharmed. When the truth about Kalinga comes out, the prince, filled with jealousy and rage, kills it. However, as soon as the serpent dies, the prince himself collapses and dies. This fulfils an ancient prophecy that his life was mysteriously linked to that of his other half—the serpent.

## IV. Application of Rasa Theory in the Play

The play is deeply tragic, bringing out *Karuṇa Rasa* (pathetic sentiment) as the dominant *rasa*, which arises from the *Sthāyibhāva* (dominant state) of *Soka* (sorrow). *Vibhāva* (determinants/causes of sorrow), like Queen Mayavati's deep love for her son, her unfulfilled dreams for his future, and her helplessness in stopping his downfall, create a strong sense of grief. She is heartbroken by Sivanaga's obsession with the Lamp-Maiden and his rejection of Siri Sampige. The Queen Mother's *Chinta* (worry) and *Dainya* (sadness) grow as she sees her son losing himself. She cries out, "I had hoped to spend the last days of my life gazing on my son as King and head of a family, playing with my grandchildren. How can Siva punish me so?" (Kambar, 32). *Anubhāva* (consequents/expressions of sorrow), like weeping, sighing, and speaking in a broken voice, show her deep pain. The *Vyabhicāri-bhāva* (transitory states) reflect *Vishada* (hopelessness) and detachment (*Nirveda*) through her words, as she realises that she cannot change fate.

A powerful moment occurs at the time of Siri Sampige's trial to prove her chastity. Even after accusation and humiliation, she remains calm and declares, "Look, that snake which is crawling there on the Nagalinga—I will let it climb on my body. If I am a pure and virtuous wife, it will move over my body without stinging me and go away. Otherwise, it will use its poison and sting. By this trial, the truth can be tested and punishment be given at the same time" (Kambar 51). This scene strongly evokes *Karuṇa Rasa* (pathetic sentiment) through the *Vibhāva* (determinants/causes of sorrow), which include the unjust accusations against Siri Sampige, the pressure of proving her innocence, and her helplessness before societal judgement. Her *Anubhāva* (consequents/expressions of sorrow) are seen in her calm yet desperate words, her firm stance, and the silent suffering in her heart. The *Vyabhicāri-bhāva* (transitory states) in this scene include *Bhaya* (fear), *Dhriti* (determination), *Vishada* (despair), and *Nirveda* (eventual relief) when the snake moves away from Siri Sampige without harming her, proving her innocence.

One of the most heartbreaking moments happens when Sivanaga finally learns the truth about Kalinga and Siri Sampige. Filled with regret, he says, "The Queen would have understood all these things. Siri Sampige has not committed any wrong, mother. When I split myself, we got separated into body and mind. Kalinga became my body. I became his mind. Siri Sampige became pregnant by my body" (Kambar 66). His words show his pain and guilt for misunderstanding Siri Sampige and making terrible mistakes. *Vibhāva* (determinants/causes of sorrow) in this scene include Sivanaga's jealousy, his wrong belief that Siri Sampige betrayed him, and his realisation that his obsession led to disaster. *Anubhāva* (consequents/expressions of sorrow) are seen in his broken speech, his crying, and his eventual physical weakness due to guilt. *Vyabhicāri-bhāva* (transitory states), such as *mōha* (confusion) and *Vishada* (despair), demonstrate his regret and emotional numbness and make his suffering even stronger.

The greatest tragedy happens at the end when Sivanaga, overcome by *Irshya* (jealousy), kills Kalinga, only to die himself, fulfilling an ancient prophecy. *Vibhāva* (determinants/causes of sorrow), like jealousy, fate, and obsession, lead him to disaster. In his final moments, his *Anubhāva* (consequents/expressions of sorrow)—trembling, frantic movements, and regretful words—show his realisation of his mistake. As the prophecy comes true, he experiences *Shoka* (grief), *Chinta* (worry), and *Glani* (exhaustion) before his tragic death. His fate, dying after killing the serpent, deepens *Karuna Rasa*, as his desires and destiny lead him to ruin.

Besides Karuṇa Rasa (pathetic sentiment), other rasas are also present in the play. Śṛṅgāra Rasa (Erotic Sentiment) is evoked from Sthāyibhāva (dominant state) of Rati (love), which includes love, beauty, and attraction, seen in Prince Sivanaga's deep love for the Lamp-Maiden. He describes how she appeared to him in his dream and danced around him, saying, "While I was fast asleep, the wall of this palace cracked, and someone drew a sword from its scabbard and let my thighs feel its edge... She started to dance around me holding the holy flame in her palm" (Kambar 23). This shows his strong attraction to an imaginary woman, which leads him to split into two. This moment exemplifies Śṛṅgāra in its divine and aesthetic form. Siri Sampige and Kalinga's attraction also embodies erotic love, particularly when she feels an unknown longing for him. Siri Sampige also feels drawn to Kalinga, the serpent-god, saying, "Someone is opening the doors of my youthful breast, and shaking all my desires to awaken them... Longings I had not known before are now standing with their mouths open" (Kambar 37). This interaction suggests a sensuous, mystical form of attraction.

*Vīra Rasa* (heroic sentiment) is evoked by *Sthāyibhāva* (dominant state) of *Utsaha* (dynamic energy) in the play when the prince boldly demands to split himself into two. This is reflected in Sivanaga's bold decision to prove his love. He tells his mother and the elders that he must be cut into two pieces and buried in two pots to bring back the Lamp-Maiden. He declares, "With this sword which you see before you and the family god as witness, I am to be split into two equal pieces" (Kambar 27). His fearless commitment to his vision reflects *Vīra Rasa* (Heroic Sentiment), emphasising courage and determination in the face of societal disbelief.

The Sthāyibhāva (dominant state) of Bhaya (fear) results in Bhayānaka Rasa (terrible sentiment), which is reflected in several moments of supernatural tension in the play. It emerges, especially when the prince's body is cut into two parts, and instead of the Lamp-Maiden, a snake appears and disappears into the forest. This made the queen and other elders terrified, to which Bhagawata states, "Saying 'Hit it!' 'Kill it!' They attacked it. Alas! They saw it disappearing into the forest" (Kambar 28). The unexpected emergence of the serpent in place of the expected goddess-like maiden creates a sense of dread. Siri Sampige's encounter with Kalinga also invokes fear, as she realises his inhuman nature and asks Kalinga, "You were like a hissing snake, and now you are like the Prince. How many existences do you have?" (Kambar 38).

Anger plays a significant role in the prince's downfall. *Raudra Rasa* (furious sentiment) evoked from *Sthāyibhāva* (dominant state) of *Krodha* (anger) is seen when Sivanaga becomes jealous of Siri Sampige and Kalinga. His rage leads him to kill the serpent, but this act causes his own death, showing how anger can destroy a person. His killing of Kalinga is the peak of this sentiment, leading to his tragic death.

The play is filled with mysterious and surreal elements that inspire wonder. It includes *Adbhuta Rasa* (marvellous sentiment) aroused from *Sthāyibhāva* (dominant state) of *Vismaya* (astonishment), seen in its magical elements. The prince's rebirth, Kalinga's transformation, and Siri Sampige's test of purity all create a sense of mystery. One of the most magical moments is when Siri Sampige holds a snake to prove her purity, and it does not harm her, showing the divine power of truth. Another magical event occurs when the transformation of the Lamp-Maiden from a statue into a living being evokes astonishment when the prince states, "It suddenly filled with life, and its face bloomed with youth, and blossomed with a mysterious smile" (Kambar 23). The prince's experience at the pond, where he sees his reflection as a divine entity, also conveys amazement in his statement, "Both of us together became this new god—ah! It was like air, it was like light, it was like the blue of the sky" (Kambar 35).

Evoked from *the Sthāyibhāva* (dominant state) of *Hasya* (laughter), *Hāsya Rasa* (comic sentiment) also emerges, as seen in the statements of Awali and Jawali, the jesters, who lighten the play's intensity. Their playful argument about who should marry Kamala showcases humour:

AWALI. If I had a couple of fangs, I would have sucked your blood. I have spared you because I don't have them.

JAWALI. If I had a couple of horns, I would have run them through your belly. I have spared you because I don't have them. (Kambar 18)

Their exaggerated rivalry and absurd logic entertain the audience amidst heavier themes in the play.

In the play, *Sthāyibhāva* (dominant state) *Jugupsa* (disgust) that evokes *Bibhatsa Rasa* (odious sentiment) is experienced when the prince sees Siri Sampige as unworthy compared to the Lamp-Maiden. His rejection of his wife, after staring at her and not finding the Lamp-Maiden, is cruel and unsettling. He sees in her eyes and says to the princess, "There is no Lamp-maiden in your eyes, Lady. Go away!" (Kambar 32). His obsession with an illusion over reality conveys *Bibhatsa Rasa* (Odious Sentiment).

At the end of the play, the prince understands that love, desire, and obsession transcend the physical body and lead to spiritual dissolution. It reflects a glimpse of *Santa Rasa* (tranquil sentiment) through the *Sthāyibhāva* (dominant state) of *Sama* (peace), but the tragic death of the prince leads it to the dominance of *Karuṇa Rasa* (pathetic sentiment). The prince's realisation at the pond, where he merges with his reflection, symbolises peace, about which he tells his friend Jawali, "Like two halves coming together, we had become one... an indivisible zero" (Kambar 35). This moment of spiritual awareness provides a rare sense of transcendence in an otherwise tragic narrative. Even though the play is tragic, there is a feeling of balance being restored. The prince's obsession with an illusion leads

to his downfall, but it teaches the lesson that true peace comes from accepting reality. Thus, it can be concluded that the play *Siri Sampige* is resplendent in many *rasas*, where *Karuṇa Rasa* (pathetic sentiment) shines out. The other *rasas* get subordinated and enhance the aesthetic beauty of *Karuṇa Rasa* (pathetic sentiment).

#### V. Conclusion

Thus, on the basis of the analysis of the play, *Siri Sampige*, in the light of Rasa Theory, it can be concluded that this theory can be used as a powerful tool to study Indian drama from an Indian perspective, rather than relying on Western ideas. This research paper highlights the importance of looking at Indian plays through their own traditional window by using Bharata's Rasa Theory. *Karuṇa Rasa* (pathetic sentiment/the emotion of sorrow) emerges as a dominant sentiment in the play that shapes the story, characters, and audience's emotional experience. The play, *Siri Sampige*, from beginning to end, is filled with misunderstandings, unfulfilled love, and tragic fate that makes *Karuṇa Rasa* the strongest emotion. The play leaves the audience feeling deep sorrow, proving that tragedy is at its heart. We can understand the emotional depth and cultural richness of the play, *Siri Sampige*, by studying it in the context of Rasa Theory. This approach also aims to lessen the dominance of Western literary theories in Indian studies and encourages a return to our own storytelling traditions. Finally, this research supports the idea that Indian drama should be analysed using Indian frameworks to restore the value of indigenous ways of understanding art and emotions.

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