

Rasa in John Keats's *Lamia*

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Abstract. This paper intends to explore the Indian theory of “Rasa” in a Western literary work like John Keats’s *Lamia*. Rasa is one of the most prominent concepts of Sanskrit Poetics. We see its usage in almost every piece of ancient and modern Indian literature. Since the base of Rasa is human sentiment, it is likely to be found in global literature. Rasa itself stimulates in the sensibility of the speculator. *Rasa* is the resultant of the unification of *Vibhavas* (Determinants), *Anubhavas* (Consequent) and *Vyabhicharibhavas* (Transitory Feelings). This is a small venture to explore it in a western discourse. *Lamia* is one of the well-known narrative poems of Keats. *Lamia* provides us amazing colourful imagery and well-executed depiction of human sentiments. Being a romantic poet Keats, though unconsciously, is very near to the concept of *Rasa*. The creation of poetry is not possible without the awakening of *Rasa* in the sensibility of the poet. *Lamia* is a love poem and hence it contains a lot of imaginative bulk in it, extending the scope of searching out for the basic elements of Sanskrit poetics in the poem. Written in Heroic Couplets *Lamia* is full of examples of *Shringara* (Erotic) *Rasa*, *Adbhut* (Wonderful) *Rasa* and *Karun* (Pathetic) *Rasa*. The first half of the poem constitutes of *Shringara* (Erotic) *Rasa*, *Adbhut* (Wonderful) *Rasa* whereas the second half of the poem exemplifies mostly *Karun* (Pathetic) *Rasa* and to some extent *Bhayankara* (Furious) *Rasa*.

Keywords: Keats; *Lamia*; Sanskrit poetics; *Rasa*; sentiments.

In a letter to John Taylor on February 27, 1818 Keats stated :

If poetry comes not as naturally as leaves to a tree it
has better not come at all. (Radcliff 210)

Similar is the awakening of *Rasa* in a person, especially in a poet. The awakening of *Rasa* is not obligatory. Rasa is initially present in each and every human being. When a work of art is speculated, read or seen, be it poetry, drama, dance, music, painting anything. Rasa itself stimulates in the sensibility of the speculator. Poetry is the purest and most spontaneous form of literature as Wordsworth puts it :

Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful
emotions recollected in tranquility. (Ibid.)

This spontaneity results into the awakening of *Rasa*. *Rasa* is actually an old theory of Sanskrit Poetics. In the context of Poetics, “*Rasa* stands for an inexplicable inward experience of a connoisseur on witnessing a dramatic performance or reading a poetical work. It is the reader’s reaction to his personal involvement with literature. The *Rasa* when it relished by a man of poetic nature appears as if it were throbbing him before, penetrating the deepest recesses of his heart, inspiring his whole frame of body and eclipsing everything else”. (Kashyap 3)

Pur iva parisphuran hridaymiva pravishan
 sarvadraga gonamiv Lidgan abhyantarvmiva
 tiroddhed, brahmaswadamivanubhavayan Alaunkik
 chamatkari shringaradiko rasah.
 (Mammata *Kavyaprakash* IV, ed. Vesesvara, 109)

The theory of *Rasa* was first of all propounded by Bharatamuni on a full-blown level in his *Natyashastra*. Though the concept of *Rasa* is much older than Bharata himself, it came as a principle of Poetics with the same. It is estimated that Nandikeshwar was the original exponent of the *Rasa* doctrine. Even Bharata has not discussed *Rasa* as his principal theme but explained it only in connection with his theories on *Rupaka* (drama). The English rendition for *Rasa* is “Sentiment” (in some places the word “Pleasure” is also used). However, no English word can match the original sensitivity of the word *Rasa*. Bharata says that *Rasa* is the resultant of the unification of “*Vibhavas* (Determinants), *Anubhavas* (Consequent) and *Vyabhicharibhavas* (Transitory Feelings).” (Tiwari 52)

*Vibhavanubhava vyabhchari-sanyogadr
 as-nishpatti* (Bharat: *Natyashastra*)

Vibhavas are the determinants of eruption of emotions. *Vibhavas* are classified into two categories: *Alamban* (Supporting causes) and *Uddipan* (Stimulating causes). *Alambana* is further divided into two categories: *Vishyalambana* (Object) and *Ashraylambana* (Subject). *Anubhavas* are the consequent of the sentiment which happens after the eruption of the particular emotion; those emotions which are transitory and do not effect the permanent sentiments of the heart are called *Vyabhicharibhavas*. *Rasa* also constitutes of *Sthayibhavas*. (Permanent Emotions) These are those feelings which reside in human heart permanently and are eight in number: *Rati* (Love), *Hasa* (Mirth), *Shoka* (Sorrow), *Krodha* (Rage), *Utsaha* (Zeal), *Bhaya* (Fear), *Jugupsa* (Disgust) and *Vismaya* (Astonishment).

Lamia is one of the well-known narrative poems of Keats. It is based on Robert Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*, written in 1621. According to Greek myth of Lamia, she was a beautiful woman whose children were taken away in jealousy

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by Hera because Zeus had loved her. In revenge, Lamia began to steal and kill the children of others. She became a hideous creature. In later legends the Lamia was a vampire that seduced young men; this version of the story inspired the poem *Lamia* (1820) by John Keats. *Lamia* is a ballad about a young man from Ancient Greece who unwillingly falls in love with a serpent disguised as a beautiful woman. Lycius and the title character Lamia, a serpent had a love affair and are engaged to be married; their relationship, however, is destroyed when a cunning old sage Apollonius reveals Lamia's true identity, whereupon she returns to her serpent's state and Lycius dies of grief. The poem explores Keatsian themes such as the reason and sensation, and the illusory but redemptive quality of poetry and love.

Being a romantic poet Keats, though unconsciously, is very near to the concept of *Rasa*. The creation of poetry is not possible without the awakening of *Rasa* in the sensibility of the poet. *Lamia* is a love poem and hence it contains a lot of imaginative bulk in it, extending the scope of searching out for the basic element of Sanskrit poetics in the poem. Written in Heroic couplets *Lamia* is full of examples of *Shringara* (Erotic) *Rasa*, *Adbhut* (Wonderful) *Rasa* and *Karun* (Pathetic) *Rasa*. The first half of the poem constitutes of *Shringara* (Erotic) *Rasa*, *Adbhut* (Wonderful) *Rasa* whereas the second half of the poem exemplifies mostly *Karun* (Pathetic) *Rasa* and to some extent *Bhayanaka* (Furious) *Rasa*.

Bharatamuni has depicted eight *Rasas* namely *Sringara Rasa* (Erotic Sentiment), *Hasya Rasa* (Comic Sentiment), *Karun Rasa* (Sentiment of Pathos), *Raudra Rasa* (Furious Sentiment), *Veer Rasa* (Heroic Sentiment), *Bhayanaaka Rasa* (Furious Sentiment), *Beebhatsa Rasa* (Odious Sentiment), *Adbhut Rasa* (Sentiment of Wonder). There is one more *Rasa* added later by him namely *Shanta Rasa* (Quietistic Sentiment), but as it is very little dramatic so it is not considered as a dependable *Rasa*. The *Shringara* (Erotic) *Rasa* is counted on the first position of all the *Rasas*. It is considered as the supreme among all the *Rasas* as it is the sentiment of love and beauty and love is what makes the world go round. According to *Atharva Veda*, “Desire came into being in the beginning. Desire is the primal seed and germ of spirit.” (Kashyap 99) Secondly, the *Adbhut* (Wonderful) *Rasa* is known as the most important among all the *Rasas*. Kaviraj Vishwanath says that the real essence of sentiment is wonder (chamatkara) which is experienced from beginning to end in the whole world.” (37)

Homer says that the end of poetry is pleasure produced by some sort of artifice and the seductive power of poetry. This pleasure arises from the existence of beauty; beauty of any sort, external or interior, eternal or transitory. Keats is famous for his notion of beauty and sensuousness. He is acutely sensitive with his senses and feels beauty with his keen eyes and every creation. But his idea of beauty is quite unconventional. That's why the creature, Lamia, herself is even described as an animal, with nature playing a large part in the description in a supernatural

sense. She is composed of both mortal and immortal elements which was unusual in literature of that time.

She was a Gordian shape of dazzling hue,
Vermillion-spotted, golden and blue;
Striped like zebra, freckled like a pard,
Eyed like a peacock, and all crimson barr'd... (I. 47-50)

While the first half of the example represents *Shringara Rasa* with its colour management, the second half corresponds to *Adbhut Rasa* where the poet is contrasting his heroine to a 'zebra' and a 'leopard'. Keats brings the unusual convention of the supernatural to life by interviewing familiar and unfamiliar elements while describing *Lamia*. Sexual temptation is another convention of the Gothic that Keats uses in *Lamia*. He brings this convention to life because rarely was extreme sexual temptation used in neo-classical texts. He also makes it unusual by creating the desire of a mortal for an immortal being. *Lamia* is described as temptress,

She seem'd at once, some penanced lady elf.
Some demon's mistress, or the demon's self. (I. 55-56)

Lamia's physical beauty is excessive. Even nature is affected by this beauty, for it is said that while a serpent, "her mouth foamed, and the grass, therewith besprent / Wither'd at dew so sweet and virulent." (I. 148-149) The poet uses contradictory terms in this creation. He calls her elf and even a demon. So here, the beauty lies in adventure and mysticism. Each and every line where *Lamia* is described, a combination of *Shringara Rasa* and *Adbhut Rasa* can easily be explored,

Upon her crust she wore a wannish fire
Sprinkled with stars, like Ariadne's tiar:
Her head was serpent, but ah, bitter-sweet !
She had a woman's mouth with all its pearls complete... (I. 57-60)

The application of *Viyoga Shringara* is also there when *Lamia* begs Hermes to restore her, her previous form. The ache of being departed is presented in these lines with all its tenderness,

I was a woman, let me have once more
A woman's shape, and charming as before.
I love a youth of Corinth- O the bliss!
Give me my woman's form, and place me where he is. (I. 117-120)

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The beauty of Lamia is described in a womanly form here with the eyes of Lycius, where Lycius is the *Ashryalambana* (Subject), Lamia is the *Vishyalambana* (Object), Lamia's beauty is *Uddipan* (Stimulating Causes) and *Rati* (Love) is *Sthayibhava*. (Permanent Emotions)

For so delicious were the words she sung,
It seemed he had lov'd them a whole summer long;
And soon his eyes has drunk her beauty up,
Leaving no drop in the bewildering cup... (I. 249-252)

When Lamia comes to be with Lycius, their union is excessive and so powerful that "Love, jealous grown of so complete a pair." (II. 12) There are some other examples of beauty other than Lamia in the poem. Lamia herself describes the beauty of Nymph whom Hermes loves. In contrast to Lamia's venturous self, the Nymph is confined to be described with all the delicacies, for which the poets of *Shringara Rasa* are famous,

Free as the air, invisibly, she strays
About these thornless wilds; her pleasant days
She tastes unseen; unseen her nimble feet
Leave traces in the grass and flowers sweet;
From weary tendrils, and bow'd brances green,
She plucks the fruit unseen, she bathes unseen:
And by my power is her beauty veil'd
To keep it unaffronted, unassail'd
By the love-glances of unlovely eyes,
Of Satyrs, Fauns and blear'd Silenus' sighs. (I. 94-103)

The second part of the poem starts with a caution that love is soon going to be shattered. Starting with the paradigm of *Viyog* (Separation) *Shringara*, this part finally ends with *Karun* (Pathetic) *Rasa*. It arises from the *Sthayibhava* of *Shoka* (Grief).

Love in a hut, with water and a crust,
Is-Love, forgive us! Cinders, ashes, dust;
Love in a palace is perhaps at last
More grievous torment than a hermit's fast: (II. 1-4)

The conflict between fancy and philosophy is everlasting. When Appollonius, Lycius's philosopher and guide, observes Lamia, he at once comes to realize her reality that she is a mere illusion. He is not able to feel the tender heart of a woman behind her serpent breast. The poet asks,

Do not all charms fly
At a mere touch of cold philosophy? (II. 229-230)

These lines portray Keats's own torment of life when he had to give up his love life because of the bitter realities of life. The suffering of Lamia and Lycius represents Keats' own suffering, as he had to leave Fanny Brawne for the reason that he was a victim of consumption and poverty. As a result, the anguish for this sort of reality flowed with Keats' pen in form of his creations,

Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings,
Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,
Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine-
Unweave a rainbow, as it erewhile made.
The tender-person'd Lamia melt into a shade. (II. 234-238)

In the following lines, along with the *Karun Rasa*, the use of *Bhayanaaka Rasa* could also be noticed to some extent. When Apollonius discovers Lamia's reality, she grows not pale but white with fear. Lycius unaware of all that was happening holds his beloved's hand to console her,

'Twas icy, and the cold run through the veins;
Then sudden it grew hot, and all the pains
Of an unnatural heat shot to his heart. (II. 251-253)

And she faints leaving

A deadly silence step by step increased,
Until it seem'd a horrid presence there... (II. 66-67)

The grief of Lycius at this time is beyond any prediction. His heart is broken, her nerves slow, his world shattered. He dies the same night,

...no pulse, or breath they found,
And, in its marriage robe, the heavy body wound. (II. 310-311)

The sentiments of Pathos (*Karun Rasa*) could be speculated in the above examples. In all these the speculator or reader is *Ashrayalambana* (Subject), Lamia and Lycius are *Vishayalambana* (Objects), dying of Lycius and vanishing of Lamia are *Uddipans* (Stimulating Causes) and *Shoka* (Grief) is the *Sthayibhava* (Permanent Emotions). Besides the application of *Rasa* theory, one can also see the use of *Alamkara* (Figures of Speech) in the above extracts. *Upma* (Simile), *Rupak*

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(Metaphor), *Atishayokti* (Hyperbole) and many more *Alamkaras* are widely used in *Lamia*".

The doctrine of *Rasa* is confined mostly to Indian tradition and literature. It has been very little explored in English in its initial form, as this literature is not written according to the restrictions of *Rasa* theory. But the theory of *Rasa* could be found out in each literature of the world more or less since each literature is judged by its sensitivity and not by its ideology. Keats is a Romantic poet. Romanticism drives on impulses and assertive emotions. So, some, if not all, of the *Rasas* could be surveyed in his works.

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