

Truth, Beauty, and the Aesthetic Quest: Arjun Bharadwaj's Exploration of Homer through Indian Thought

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review

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Abstract:

This review examines Arjun Bharadwaj's Indian Perspective of Truth and Beauty in Homer's Epics, a comparative literary study that applies Indian aesthetic philosophy to Homer's Iliad and Odyssey. Bharadwaj employs millennia-old Indian aesthetic theories from scholars like Ānandavardhana and Abhinavagupta to explore universal principles of truth and beauty in Western epic literature. Rather than examining Greek influence on Indian civilization—the dominant scholarly discourse—this work reverses the trajectory by using Indian frameworks such as puruṣārthas (life goals) and rasa (aesthetic emotions) to analyze Greek epics. The author's methodology includes comparative analysis of the Rāmāyaṇa, Mahābhārata, Iliad, and Odyssey, examining their spatial-temporal constructs, character ethics, and divine-human relationships. Bharadwaj also analyzes Homer's use of arthālaṅkāras (figures of sense) through Indian poetic theory. The review suggests that Bharadwaj approaches Homer not merely as a scholar but as a

poet seeking to discover the eternal aesthetic essence that transcends civilizational boundaries, creating a dialogue between Vālmīki, Vyāsa, and Homer across millennia.

Keywords:

Comparative aesthetics, Indian poetics, Cross-cultural literary analysis, Rasa theory, Epic literature

Editorial Note:

This review by Amritanath Bhattacharya offers a compelling examination of Arjun Bharadwaj's groundbreaking work that reverses traditional scholarly paradigms by applying Indian aesthetic principles to Western epic literature. Bharadwaj's approach challenges centuries of colonial-influenced discourse that primarily explored Greek influence on Indian civilization. Instead, he demonstrates how Indian concepts of rasa, puruṣārthas, and aesthetic theory can illuminate universal truths within Homer's epics. This cross-cultural literary analysis represents a significant contribution to comparative aesthetics, offering fresh perspectives on both Indian and Western literary traditions while fostering meaningful dialogue between civilizations separated by millennia.

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[Book Review]

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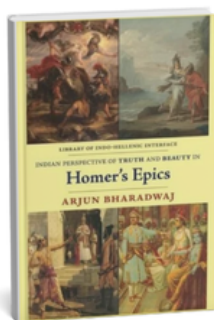
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Bharadwaj, Arjun.

*Indian Perspective of **Truth** and **Beauty** in Homer's Epics.*

Prekshaa Pratisthana, Ed II, Oct. 2024.

The qualitative assessment of any art form is fundamentally based on two dialectical perspectives: first, the socio-historical, and second, the aesthetic. Although these two may appear distinct at first glance, they ultimately serve the same purpose. The practice of purely aesthetic elements, devoid of social elements, seems ungrounded. When evaluating art from a perspective of social utility, the fundamental question posed by the connoisseur, reader, or spectator is whether

the artwork embodies truth. From an aesthetic standpoint, the question is whether the artwork is beautiful. However, in this context, "truth" and "beauty" are not mere commercial catchphrases but philosophical terminologies.

For several millennia, Indian aesthetic theorists such as Bhāmaha, Daṇḍin, Ānandavardhana, and Abhinavagupta have explored how art can encapsulate truth and beauty. The book under discussion presents the work of a contemporary artist and poet, Śrī Arjun Bharadwaj, who seeks to trace these eternal aesthetic principles within Homer's two great epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Upon reading the book, however, I felt that rather than merely examining Homer, the author seems to be searching for Vālmīki and Vyāsa within his works. Is he attempting to uncover a universality that transcends the spatial-temporal distances between these two civilisations? In that case, could Arjun Bharadwaj's approach be likened to Byomkesh Bakshi, the famed literary detective created by Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay—an investigator pursuing artistic truth? These are the very questions we aim to explore in this discussion.

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The book, titled *Indian Perspective of Truth and Beauty in Homer's Epics*, highlights "Truth" and "Beauty" in bold—an immediate indication of its core subject. As previously mentioned, the inquiry into an intrinsic unity beyond apparent civilisational differences sheds light on art's broader social history and aesthetics. Who, then, is the intended reader of this book? Any connoisseur, spectator, or individual interested in literature and the arts can engage with it. Moreover, Arjun Bharadwaj ensures that the reader does not feel burdened by the necessity of prior familiarity with the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

Indian aesthetic philosophy is not a singular theoretical proposition but the culmination of millennia of artistic inquiry and the pursuit of the Absolute through art. Here, art is not merely an object but a *sādhana* (spiritual practice); the artist is a *sādhaka* (seeker). As Kapila Vatsyayan observes,

"Any form of sādhana is a means of achieving a state of complete harmony (samarasya) and thus of total release (svātantrya) from the 'so-much-ness' (iyattā) of life; it leads to a recognition of one's truer self." (Vatsyayan, 5)

However, this realisation does not come through the negation of sensory faculties but rather through their engagement, where both the artist and the connoisseur experience the transition from the manifest to the unmanifest, from the *saguṇa* to the *nirguṇa*. In this framework, art becomes a form of *yoga*, *yajña*, and *pūjā*. From Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* to the *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa*, the *Agni Purāṇa*, and the works of aestheticians such as Bhāmaha, Daṇḍin, Ānandavardhana, and Abhinavagupta, we find the same guiding principles shaping the understanding of art.

The preservation of the Vedas was the primary necessity behind Bharata's composition of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. The objective was to guide society—those not inclined toward the path of renunciation—toward a spiritual trajectory through the experience of aesthetic relish (*rasa*). The aforementioned masters of aesthetics sought to eliminate any hindrances to this experience. The artist, while composing his work with physiurgic (*ādhibhautika*) elements, elevates them into the realm of the theurgic (*ādhidaivika*). This journey from the physiurgic (*ādhibhautika*) to the theurgic (*ādhidaivika*) can be termed hierurgic (*ādhyājñika*), following the perspective of Dr R. Ganesh, wherein artistic practice itself is a form of *yajña* (sacrificial offering). (Ganesh and Hari 35-39) Thus, every actual work of art is inherently theurgic (*ādhidaivika*). The entire cast of the *Rāmāyaṇa* embodies theurgic qualities, and the internal universe of the *Mahābhārata* is likewise theurgic in nature. Through this theurgic artistic sensibility and its aesthetic experience, the connoisseur (*rasika*) attains a higher realisation—an aesthetic intuition, archirhetic (*adhirasa*). Within this supreme aesthetic

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experience, the *Rasika* first relishes the qualitative aesthetic essence (*saguṇa rasa*)¹ and, beyond that, perceives a noetic glimpse of über-worldly aesthetic essence (*nirguṇa Rasa*)². Through this fleeting glimpse of the *nirguṇa*, the *Rasika* momentarily apprehends the noergic (*adhyātma*), the Ultimate Truth and enjoys Bliss (*Brahmāsvādan*). Simply put, the perception of Truth and Beauty transforms the empirical (*ādhibhautika*) into the spiritual (*adhyātma*). Now, Arjun takes Bharata's attempt to elevate the connoisseur (*rasika*) to the status of a Vedic knower (*vedajña*) through the experience of *rasa* and the aestheticians' efforts to remove any impediments to such an experience one step further—he seeks to explore the universality of this very aesthetic experience.

For Arjun, beauty and truth are not merely attributes of literature or poetry; instead, they constitute the intrinsic value of art. To him, truth is not just a collection of facts but aligns with the concept of *Puruṣārtha*—the fundamental goals of human life. Similarly, regarding beauty, M. Hiriyanna once wrote:

“Those who identify beauty with these external factors and seek it as an attribute forget that while these are perceivable by the senses, beauty is disclosed only to the 'inward eye.' True beauty is neither expressible in words nor knowable objectively; it can only be realised.” (Hiriyanna 9)

Arjun firmly subscribes to this view. Thus, the truth and beauty he seeks in Homer's poetry are not transient or superficial but rather an eternal essence—the ultimate of poetry.

To my knowledge, no other civilisation has developed such a continuous and intricate aesthetic tradition as India. Even the scope of Aristotle's *Poetics* does not extend to such vast dimensions. The Western notions of truth, reality, and falsity diverge to some extent from Indian conceptualisations. Consequently, because of the colonial influences, the scholarly discourse over the past two centuries has primarily been centred on investigating the extent of Hellenic influence on Indian civilisation. However, Bharadwaj's approach appears to take a reverse trajectory, challenging the dominant framework of the Aryan Migration Theory to some extent. Therefore, examining the objectives and methodology underlying this work is worthwhile.

Arjun adopts a comparative approach, placing the *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Mahābhārata*, *Iliad*, and *Odyssey* side by side to explore their spatial and temporal constructs, ethical dimensions of characters, and the intricate relationship between the human and the divine, along with the evocation of aesthetic emotions (Bharadwaj 302-351). By weaving Indian philosophical and

¹ In the context of *saguṇa rasa* (*Rasyate iti rasah*), the experience of *rasa* occurs **within the realm of qualities (guṇas)**—where artistic beauty and aesthetic delight are associated with form, attributes, and perceptible elements.

² *Nirguṇa rasa* (*Rasanam rasah*) refers to an experience of *rasa* that transcends perceptible qualities (*guṇas*). It points toward a **formless, attribute-free aesthetic or spiritual experience**, where *rasa* is not tied to specific artistic forms but becomes an intuitive realization of the ultimate essence (*parama-tattva*).

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literary concepts such as *puruṣārthas* and *rasas* into studying these Western epics, he creates a dialogue between traditions while maintaining an Indian vantage point (Bharadwaj 314-325). The reliance on Indian frameworks might appear biased to some in the present socio-political context, as Greek epics are being evaluated against ideals they were never meant to align with (e.g., *mokṣa* p. 325). However, one cannot ignore the fact that for centuries, Indian epics, too, have been viewed through the lens of Greek ideals—without ever being labelled as biased.

Arjun’s analysis is not limited to ideologies; it also extends to the practical aspects of poetry, where he maintains a balanced perspective. He examines the application of Indian aesthetic theory—particularly the concept of *arthālaṅkāras* (figures of sense)—to analyse the rhetorical devices in Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Drawing a parallel between Homer and the Indian poets Vālmīki and Vyāsa, he highlights their shared mastery in crafting nuanced expressions (Bharadwaj 363–364). He relies on the *Loeb Classical Library* translations of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* for textual analysis, cross-referencing them with the original Greek (Bharadwaj 365). His study reveals that due to Greek’s linguistic constraints, sound-based figures (*śabdālaṅkāras*) are less prevalent, making *arthālaṅkāras* more prominent and abundant (Bharadwaj 365). By employing Indian poetics to interpret Greek literature, Arjun’s cross-cultural approach offers fresh insights into Homer’s artistry while systematically cataloguing and analysing various literary devices.

The defining characteristic of an epic is its vastness— not just in scale but in its comprehensive scope and depth. Before Vālmīki composed the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the discipline of Yoga was already established, and the extensive *Brāhmaṇa* texts had been composed. The presence of numerous narrative elements within these *Brāhmaṇas* suggests that the *Purāṇas* may have existed in some form before they were systematised. This makes it evident that the foundation for the epic compositions of Vālmīki and Vyāsa was already laid. However, in the case of Homer, the same cannot be said. Within his cultural context, he was the first of his kind. His blindness, much like that of Dhṛtarāṣṭra in the *Mahābhārata*, raises numerous questions about the nature of his vision—both literal and metaphorical.

Homer’s epics have, both directly and indirectly, shaped Western literature, art, and even scientific thought for over a millennium. His influence was profoundly felt even during the European Renaissance. Arjun Bharadwaj’s perspective on this matter is therefore well-founded:

“The Greek poet Homer occupies a stature similar to that occupied by the seer-poets Vyāsa and Vālmīki in India—he is the first epic poet of the West and occupies the highest echelons among the best poets the world has ever seen. Just as Vyāsa and Vālmīki laid the foundations for everything Indian, Homer laid the foundation for the classical culture of the West.” (Bharadwaj XX)

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The book is structured into four primary chapters. The first and second chapters interpret the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* through the lens of Indian aesthetic thought and the concept of *puruṣārthas*. The third chapter presents a comparative study of the four great epics—Indian and Greek. The fourth chapter examines the presence of *arthālaṅkāra*, drawing definitions from the Indian treatise *Candrāloka* by Jayadeva within the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. (Bharadwaj 365) Following the author’s suggestion in the prologue, I approached the book non-linearly—starting with the third chapter, then moving to the fourth, and finally reading the first and second chapters.

One of the most commendable aspects of this book is its structural precision. For the diligent and curious reader, the appendices, index, and glossary serve as valuable resources, while the chapter titled *A Note on Other Technical Terms Associated with Indian Aesthetics* caters to newer readers. Such meticulous book design is a rarity amidst today’s publishing trends, making it a welcome feature.

That which is true is also beautiful. That which is true and beautiful is *śiva* (the universal). But has Arjun Bharadwaj discovered this universality within Homer’s works? And if so, how? These are questions that demand an engaged reading of the book. I will conclude by stating that Bharadwaj does not merely approach this inquiry from the perspective of a research scholar. Instead, he immerses himself in Homer’s world as a *poet*, experiencing and articulating his engagement with profound artistic sensibility. As one reads the book, it feels like a conversation unfolding between Vālmīki, Vyāsa, Homer, and Arjun himself. Across a span of millennia, Homer’s poetic imagination, Vālmīki and Vyāsa’s seer-vision, and Arjun’s linguistic brilliance weave together a new tapestry of thought and expression. Whether he has succeeded in this endeavour is not for me to judge, nor do I presume to do so.

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