

Elements of a ‘Buddhist Literary Theory’ as Depicted in Pali Literature

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The beginning of critically reading or analyzing poetry in India is traced back to the NāṭyaŚāstra of Bharatamuni (circa 3rd/2nd century B.C.), which is considered as the earliest treatise on drama in India. This is regarded as the fifth Veda in some consideration, recognizing the holiness of dramatic art almost with religious dignity. However, on close observation into the earliest Buddhist (Pāli) literature, that began several centuries before Bharatamuni, certain elements of poetic criticism are found in the Buddhist scriptures.

Strengthened by the theory of sentiments (*rasa*-s) of heroism, eroticism, etc. in the dramas and poetry, the Hindu poets had freedom to explore any theme of their interest with no restriction from religion. For the traditional Buddhist, however, strict moral principles were associated with the sanctified concept of detachment from sensual engagements (*virāga*) which had immense impacts on their literary practices. The Buddhists, therefore, have developed an aesthetic mode of their own, distinct from the theories of Hinduism and of the West.

The Buddha’s method of literary criticism can be conveniently substantiated firstly, by observing the way the Buddha talked about his contemporary (Vedic) literature and secondly, from the Buddha’s discussions, although only a meager account is found, on literary concepts and terminologies. In my research, I explore and find reasons for instances where the Buddha i. denounced poetry (*kaṅkaya*) as ‘base art’ (*tiracchānavijā*), a wrong livelihood [*micchājivā*] of many

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contemporary Brahmins, in Brahmajālasutta; ii. praised Venerable Vaṅgīsa, for instant verse compositions in Saṃyuttanikāya; iii. classified four types of poets as: *cintākaṇṇi*, *sutakāṇṇi*, *atthakāṇṇi*, and *paṭibhāṇakāṇṇi* (“romantic”, “classicist”, “objective”, and “subjective” poets respectively), in Aṅguttaranikāya, and iv. analyzed basic components of a verse into metres, syllables, etc. in Saṃyuttanikāya.

I also intend to examine the ethics of speech and the concept of detachment (*virāga*) that are connected to poetry compositions of Buddhist “saints”. I wish to discuss this evidence and generate a dialogue on the formulation of a Buddhist literary theory, which would be “perhaps the earliest on poetics that can be culled from any literature.” (Paranavitana, S, (1956), Sigiri Graffiti, p.cxciii”).

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