



ISSN Print: 2664-8717  
ISSN Online: 2664-8725  
Impact Factor: RJIF 8.00  
IJRE 2024; 6(1): 167-170  
[www.englishjournal.net](http://www.englishjournal.net)  
Received: 07-01-2024  
Accepted: 15-02-2024

**Dr. Bipasha Som Gune**  
Assistant Professor,  
Department of English,  
Gautam Buddha University,  
Greater Noida, Uttar Pradesh,  
India

**Dr. Bipasha Som Gune**  
Gautam Buddha University,  
Greater Noida, Uttar Pradesh,  
India

**Corresponding Author:**  
**Dr. Bipasha Som Gune**  
Assistant Professor,  
Department of English,  
Gautam Buddha University,  
Greater Noida, Uttar Pradesh,  
India

# International Journal of Research in English

## From ontology to literary aestheticism: Western and Indian metaphysics

**Dr. Bipasha Som Gune and Dr. Bipasha Som Gune**

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26648717.2024.v6.i1c.184>

### Abstract

The intersection between ontology and literary or artistic aestheticism is profound, rooted in their shared inquiry into the fundamental nature of reality, existence, and the human experience. In the vast landscape of Western ontology, diverse philosophical traditions and schools of thought converge to explore the essence of being, the nature of existence, and the fabric of reality itself. Meanwhile, delving into the rich tapestry of Indian philosophical traditions reveals a deep-seated engagement with ontology, as unravelling the mysteries of reality serves as the cornerstone for three intertwined pursuits: the acquisition of knowledge, the cultivation of virtuous conduct, and the quest for liberation from the ceaseless cycle of human suffering. Furthermore, the exploration of aesthetics within the broader philosophical framework offers invaluable insights and elucidation. Central to Indian aesthetic philosophy is the concept of *Rasa*, which encapsulates the essence, flavour, and sentiment of artistic expression. Alongside *Rasa*, various other theories such as *Alankara*, *Dhwani*, *Nirguna* and *Saguna Bhakti*, and *Katha* contribute to the rich tapestry of Indian aesthetic discourse. In the Western tradition, an array of aesthetic theories has flourished over time, ranging from classical aesthetics to neo-classicism, romanticism, realism, modernism, and post-modernism. In tracing the historical trajectory of Western and Indian philosophical thought and their evolving relationship with the metaphysics of consciousness, it becomes evident that juxtaposing these traditions fosters a fertile ground for cultural dialogue and philosophical exchange. Through such comparative analysis, new vistas of understanding emerge, enriching both traditions and nurturing a deeper appreciation for the complexities of human thought and experience across diverse cultural landscapes.

**Keywords:** Ontology, aestheticism, Vedanta, *rasa*, romanticism, existentialism

### Introduction

The connection between ontology and literary or artistic aestheticism lies in their shared concern with the nature of reality, existence, and human experience. Ontology, as we know, is a branch of philosophy that investigates the fundamental nature of being and the structure of reality. It delves into questions about what exists, how things exist, and what it means to exist. Literary and artistic aestheticism, on the other hand, is concerned with the appreciation and creation of beauty, as well as the exploration of the human experience through artistic expression. Aestheticism often focuses on the emotional, sensory, and perceptual aspects of human existence, seeking to evoke particular feelings, experiences, or responses in the audience or observer. Artists and writers often make implicit or explicit ontological assumptions about the nature of reality, existence, and human consciousness in their work. These assumptions shape their artistic vision and influence the themes, symbols, and imagery they employ. For example, an artist who embraces a materialist ontology might create artworks that emphasize the physicality of existence, while an existentialist writer might explore themes of individuality and alienation. Literary works can serve as vehicles for representing and exploring ontological concepts and ideas. Through narrative, symbolism, metaphor, and imagery, artists may depict abstract philosophical concepts such as identity, consciousness, time, and reality. By engaging with these representations, audiences are prompted to reflect on their own understanding of ontology and existence. Aesthetic experiences can provide insights into the nature of reality and existence. When one engages with a painting, a poem, or a piece of music, it may lead to profound emotional, intellectual, and perceptual transformations. These experiences can further lead to questioning various assumptions about the world and our place within it, prompting ontological inquiries into the

nature of beauty, meaning, and existence in general. Some philosophical theories of aesthetics propose that beauty and aesthetic experience have ontological significance. For example, Plato's theory of Forms suggests that beauty is a transcendental, objective reality that exists independently of human perception. Similarly, Kantian aesthetics argues for the existence of a realm of aesthetic ideas that transcend empirical reality. These ontological theories of beauty and aesthetics raise questions about the relationship between the subjective experience of beauty and the objective reality of existence.

### Methodology

This paper employs a comparative method to analyze Western and Indian ontological and aesthetic theories. By juxtaposing these traditions, it aims to uncover similarities, differences, and intersections. Through careful examination, it seeks to illuminate underlying themes and implications. This approach deepens our understanding of how diverse cultures address questions of reality and artistic expression. Through comparison, it offers new insights into philosophical thought across cultural boundaries.

### Discussion

Western ontology encompasses various philosophical traditions and schools of thought that investigate the nature of being, existence, and reality. Some major schools of Western ontology include: Platonism, Aristotelianism, Scholasticism, Cartesian Dualism, Idealism, Existentialism, Phenomenology etc. Derived from the teachings of Plato, Platonism posits the existence of an eternal realm of Forms or Ideas, which are perfect and immutable, and the physical world is a mere reflection or imperfect realisation of these Forms. Aristotelian ontology, on the other hand, emphasizes the study of substances and their essential properties. Aristotle categorized entities into substances (primary beings) and accidents (secondary qualities), and he introduced the concept of potentiality and actuality. Scholasticism developed in the medieval Christian context. It synthesized Aristotelian metaphysics with Christian theology. Scholastic philosophers like Thomas Aquinas explored questions about the nature of God, the soul, and the relationship between faith and reason. Moving forward in time, René Descartes in the early seventeenth century proposed a dualistic ontology that distinguishes between mind (*res cogitans*) and matter (*res extensa*). According to Cartesian dualism, however, the mind and body are distinct substances with different essential properties. Idealist ontologies, exemplified by the works of philosophers like George Berkeley and Immanuel Kant, assert that reality is fundamentally mental or constructed by the mind. Berkeley's subjective idealism posits that only minds and ideas exist, while Kant's transcendental idealism argues that the mind imposes its own conceptual framework on experience. Existentialist ontology, as articulated by philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger, focuses on individual existence and the subjective experience of being. Existentialists emphasize themes such as authenticity, freedom, and the nature of existence in a seemingly indifferent universe. Phenomenological ontology, developed by Edmund Husserl and furthered by thinkers like Maurice Merleau-Ponty, seeks to describe the structures of human consciousness and the phenomena experienced by conscious beings. In his definition and construction of 'self'

human body is an important factor. Phenomenology emphasizes the subjective experience of phenomena and the intentionality of consciousness.

When exploring various Indian philosophical traditions, it becomes evident that all of them deeply engage with ontology, as understanding the nature of reality lies at the core of three interconnected objectives: knowledge, proper conduct, and liberation from the perpetual suffering inherent in human existence. Indian philosophy is commonly divided into two categories: *astika* philosophy and *nastika* philosophy. *Astika* philosophy encompasses subtypes such as Nyaya-Vaisesika, Sankhya, Mimamsa, and Vedanta.

Within the Nyaya-Vaisesika school, reality is delineated into seven categories: substance, quality, motion, universal, particular, inherence, and not-being. While all are regarded as genuine entities and objects of cognition, substance holds primary significance, as the others depend on it in some manner. There exist nine eternal substances: earth, water, fire, air, ether, time, space, self, and mind. Nyaya metaphysics acknowledges sixteen *padarthas* or categories, incorporating all six Vaisesika categories within the second one, known as *prameya*. Nyaya epistemology perceives knowledge (*jnana*) or cognition (*buddhi*) as apprehension (*upalabdhi*) or consciousness (*anubhava*).

Vedanta, also known as Upanishad or the culmination of the Vedas, is philosophical, speculative, and mystical in nature. One of the earliest documented commentaries on Vedanta is found in the Vedanta Sutra, composed by Maharshi Badrayana. The central concept of this sutra is Brahman, leading to its designation as Brahma Sutra. Subsequent philosophers built upon Badrayana's work, resulting in two major branches: Advaita Vedanta and Vishishtadvaita Vedanta. Acharya Shankara was a significant figure in Advaita Vedanta, while Ramanuja was known for Vishishtadvaita Vedanta.

Shankara's Advaita Vedanta posits that Brahman is the sole reality, the physical world is an illusion, and the individual soul (*jeeva*) is non-different from Brahman. Brahman and *jeeva* (*paramatma* and *jeevatma*) are identical. Brahman is singular, beyond attributes, without differentiation, formless, self-expressive, true knowledge, and boundless. These are not attributes of Brahman; they are Brahman itself. The world is not an effect of Brahman but is Brahman itself or its manifestation. There is nothing other than Brahman. Thus, understanding Brahman reveals the world as an illusion, and the individual soul (*atman*) is none other than Brahman. Shankara termed this Brahman as *Nirguna* Brahman. He further explained that for ordinary individuals, perceiving Brahman as *Nirguna* is challenging. The human mind tends to comprehend things through attributes or qualities. When attempting to grasp Brahman through attributes, thereby making it comprehensible within the human mind's scope, it is termed *Saguna* Brahman or *Ishvara* (God) by Shankara.

Studying aesthetics within the broader context of philosophy can provide valuable insights and clarity. The most ancient text of Indian aesthetics in *Natyashastra*. While majority of Indian philosophies harp on the idea of all encompassing consciousness in different ways, the question remains if the consciousness is all the same then why there are so many distinctions and so much effort to make the different disciplines. The answer to this thing actually has not been found in the philosophic texts. But it has been dealt well in the anecdote that can be found in the beginning of

Natyashastra. As per the anecdote, Indra went to Brahma and asked for something to entertain him; something very pleasant but it should be seen and heard at the same time. Brahma in response offered him the fifth Veda. Natyashastra was that fifth Veda. It does not only have all the elements of Veda, but it also has the life giving property. It does not belong to a definite Philosophy. It is a method or discipline of the natya. But a method that is going to bestow righteousness, renown, long life, fortune, increase of reason, and affording counsel to the world. In Indian system natya stands symbolically for every other art form. First of all it provides a framework in which one sees how the three purusharthas are fulfilled. That is the whole purpose. And when that is the purpose of natya, then it asserts the purpose of life as well. And that is the reason why Natyashastra becomes a Vedanta in the higher sense. But then there is a difference. Upanishads and philosophy give advices. Natya is distinct, it does not give advice. It give rasa. When Bharat enumerates what are the different constituents of Natya, the first and the foremost is rasa. So the first aesthetic theory that comes out of this is rasa theory. Central to Indian aesthetic thought is this concept of Rasa, meaning "flavor," "essence," or "sentiment." Originating in Natyashastra, Rasa theory elucidates the emotional impact of artistic expression on the audience. According to Rasa theory, the artist evokes specific emotional states (Rasas) such as love (Shringara), heroism (Vira), or compassion (Karuna) through the portrayal of characters, plot, language, and music. The audience, in turn, experiences aesthetic delight (Rasa) by empathizing with these emotional states, transcending their individual identities to participate in a shared aesthetic experience. Other than rasa few other theories are Alankara, Dhvani, Nirguna and saguna bhakti and katha. Alamkara, or "ornamentation," theory focuses on the embellishment of language and the aesthetic qualities of literary expression. Developed primarily by the Sanskrit rhetorician Bhamaha and later refined by Anandavardhana and Abhinavagupta, Alamkara theory identifies various figures of speech, poetic devices, and stylistic embellishments that enhance the beauty and impact of literary compositions. These include metaphors, similes, alliteration, and other forms of verbal adornment that evoke aesthetic pleasure in the reader or listener. Dhvani, (meaning "suggestion" or "resonance,") theory elaborates on the power of suggestion and implication in poetic language. Proposed by Anandavardhana and expanded upon by Abhinavagupta in his commentary on the Dhvanyaloka, this theory asserts that the true meaning (Vyanjana) of a literary work lies not in its explicit denotative content (Abhidha) but in the evocative power of suggested meanings (Dhvani). Dhvani operates on multiple levels, encompassing both the literal and the symbolic, and stimulates the reader's imagination, intellect, and emotions, leading to a deeper appreciation of the text. Bhakti, or devotional, literature encompasses two major strands: Nirguna and Saguna Bhakti. Nirguna Bhakti, associated with the poetry of saints like Kabir and Ravidas, emphasizes devotion to a formless, attribute-less divine reality (Brahman) beyond material manifestations. In Nirguna Bhakti poetry, language is used to convey ineffable spiritual experiences and the longing for union with the divine. Saguna Bhakti, on the other hand, celebrates devotion to personal deities with attributes (Saguna Brahman), such as Vishnu or Shiva. Bhakti literature expresses intense emotional devotion, often employing vivid imagery, metaphor, and allegory to evoke a sense of divine

presence and intimacy. Akhyaana and Kathaa are narrative genres in Indian literature that emphasize storytelling as a means of moral and philosophical instruction. Akhyaana literature, exemplified by the Jataka tales and Panchatantra, consists of didactic narratives featuring animal fables, allegories, and parables that convey ethical lessons and practical wisdom. Kathaa literature, including epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, presents expansive mythological narratives imbued with philosophical insights, exploring complex themes such as duty, fate, and the nature of dharma (righteousness). These Indian aesthetic and literary theories reflect a profound engagement with the human condition, spirituality, and the pursuit of artistic excellence. They offer valuable insights into the cultural, philosophical, and aesthetic dimensions of Indian literature and serve as enduring sources of inspiration for literary scholars, writers, and artists around the world.

While we consider Western aesthetic and literary theories, we see that there is an equally rich tapestry of ideas that have shaped the interpretation and appreciation of literature and art there too. Various theories provide frameworks for understanding the nature of beauty, artistic expression, and the role of the audience in the creative process. Some major branches of Western aesthetic theories are classical aesthetics, neo-classicism, romanticism, realism, modernism and post modernism. Originating in ancient Greece, classical aesthetics, as exemplified by the works of philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, emphasizes the pursuit of beauty, harmony, and proportion in art. Plato's theory of Forms posits an ideal realm of eternal and immutable forms, including the Form of Beauty, which artists strive to imitate in their creations. Aristotle's Poetics, meanwhile, explores the elements of drama and the principles of tragic and epic poetry, focusing on concepts such as plot, character, and catharsis. Emerging in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, neoclassical aesthetics revived classical principles of order, clarity, and rationality in art and literature. Neoclassical thinkers such as Nicolas Boileau and Johann Joachim Winckelmann advocated for a return to classical ideals of balance, symmetry, and decorum, rejecting the ornate and extravagant styles of the Baroque period in favor of simplicity and restraint. In contrast to neoclassicism, Romanticism, which flourished in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, celebrated individuality, emotion, and the sublime in art and literature. Romantic thinkers such as Friedrich Schiller and William Wordsworth championed the expression of personal experience and the exploration of nature, myth, and the supernatural. Romantic aesthetics valued spontaneity, imagination, and the transcendent power of art to evoke profound emotional responses. Emerging in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, realism and naturalism sought to depict the world with fidelity and accuracy, focusing on the ordinary lives of everyday people and the harsh realities of social and economic inequality. Realist writers like Gustave Flaubert and Émile Zola emphasized the objective representation of reality, while naturalist authors like Stephen Crane and Édouard Manet depicted the deterministic forces of nature and society shaping human lives. Modernist aesthetics, which emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, rejected traditional forms and conventions in favor of experimentation, fragmentation, and innovation. Modernist writers and artists such as T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Pablo Picasso, and Wassily Kandinsky explored themes of alienation, uncertainty, and the disintegration of traditional values and beliefs. Modernism challenged audiences to

rethink their assumptions about art, language, and the nature of reality. Building on the critiques of modernism, postmodern aesthetics emerged in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, questioning the idea of objective truth and embracing a plurality of perspectives and voices. Postmodern writers and artists like Jean Baudrillard, Jorge Luis Borges, and Cindy Sherman engaged in pastiche, parody, and intertextuality, blurring the boundaries between high and low culture, originality and appropriation. Postmodernism challenged the authority of the author and the coherence of grand narratives, celebrating the multiplicity and fluidity of meaning. These branches of Western aesthetic theories offer diverse perspectives on the nature of art, beauty, and creativity, reflecting the evolving cultural and intellectual currents of their respective eras. Exploring these theories provides valuable insights into the interpretation and analysis of literature and art across different historical periods and cultural contexts. While studying these different theories it becomes apparent that in the late 17<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Western aesthetics underwent a slow revolution into what is often called modernism. German and British thinkers emphasized beauty as the key component of art and of the aesthetic experience, and saw art as necessarily aiming at absolute beauty. For Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten aesthetics is the science of the sense experiences, a younger sister of logic, and beauty is thus the most perfect kind of knowledge that sense experience can have. For Immanuel Kant the aesthetic experience of beauty is a judgment of a subjective but similar human truth, since all people should agree that "this rose is beautiful" if it in fact is. However, beauty cannot be reduced to any more basic set of features. For Friedrich Schiller aesthetic appreciation of beauty is the most perfect reconciliation of the sensual and rational parts of human nature. For Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, the philosophy of art is the "organon" of philosophy concerning the relation between man and nature. So aesthetics began now to be the name for the philosophy of art. Friedrich von Schlegel, August Wilhelm Schlegel, Friedrich Schleiermacher and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel also gave lectures on aesthetics as philosophy of art after 1800. For Hegel, all culture is a matter of "absolute spirit" coming to be manifest to itself, stage by stage, changing to a perfection that only philosophy can approach. Art is the first stage in which the absolute spirit is manifest immediately to sense-perception, and is thus an objective rather than subjective revelation of beauty. For Arthur Schopenhauer aesthetic contemplation of beauty is the most free that the pure intellect can be from the dictates of will; here we contemplate perfection of form without any kind of worldly agenda, and thus any intrusion of utility or politics would ruin the point of the beauty. It is thus for Schopenhauer one way to fight the suffering.

### Conclusion

While trying to delineate the historical trajectory of Western and Indian philosophical thought and their evolving relationship with the metaphysics of consciousness, it is clear that juxtaposing them can create a fruitful cultural dialogue and philosophical exchange. Western literary traditions, rooted in Greco-Roman antiquity and evolving through movements like Romanticism, Modernism, and Postmodernism, often prioritize individual expression, narrative innovation, and the exploration of existential themes. Conversely, Indian aesthetics, deeply entrenched in ancient philosophical texts such as the *Natyashastra* and the Vedas, emphasize interconnectedness, spirituality, and the

cyclical nature of existence. While Western aesthetics often spotlight the tension between the self and society, Indian aesthetics foreground the harmony between the individual and the cosmos. Yet, these seemingly disparate traditions frequently intersect, fostering a cross-pollination of ideas that enrich both traditions. Western writers, from Emerson to Eliot, have drawn inspiration from Indian philosophy, incorporating themes of karma, dharma, and reincarnation into their works. Likewise, Indian authors, such as Tagore and Rushdie, have engaged with Western literary forms and techniques, infusing them with Indian sensibilities. This ongoing dialogue between Western and Indian aesthetics illuminates the universal aspirations of human creativity while celebrating the diverse expressions of cultural identity.

### References

1. Abhinavagupta. *Abhinavabharati*. Edited by Pandit Kshemaraja. Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office; c2015.
2. Adorno TW. *Aesthetic Theory*. Translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor. University of Minnesota Press; c1997.
3. Coomaraswamy AK. *The Transformation of Nature in Art*. Dover Publications; c1956.
4. Muni B. *Natyashastra*. Translated by Manomohan Ghosh. Asiatic Society of Bengal; c2001.
5. Pierre B. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Translated by Richard Nice. Harvard University Press; c1984.
6. Datta DM. *The Six Ways of Knowing: A Critical Study of the Advaita Theory of Knowledge*. Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd.; c2010.
7. Hegel GWF. *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*. Translated by T.M. Knox. Oxford University Press; c1998.
8. Heidegger, Martin. *The Origin of the Work of Art*. Translated by Albert Hofstadter. Stanford University Press; c2017.
9. Jha, G. *Kautilya Arthashastra*. Motilal Banarsidass Publishers; 2013.
10. Joshi K. *Indian Aesthetics and Bharata's Natyashastra*. Motilal Banarsidass Publishers; c1998.
11. Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgment*. Translated by James Creed Meredith. Hackett Publishing Company; c1987.
12. Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Colin Smith. Routledge; c2012.
13. Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. Vintage Books; c1967.
14. Plato. *The Republic*. Translated by Allan Bloom. Basic Books; c1991.
15. Radhakrishnan, Sarvepalli, and Moore, Charles A. *A Source Book in Indian Philosophy*. Princeton University Press; c2014.
16. Santayana, George. *The Sense of Beauty*. Dover Publications; c1955.
17. Singh J. *Kavya Shastra*. Sampurnanand Sanskrit University; c1982.
18. Sinha, Jadunath. *Indian Psychology: Perception*. Vol. 1. Motilal Banarsidass Publishers; c2003.
19. Upadhyaya KP. *Bharata: The Nāṭyāśāstra*. Sahitya Akademi; c2006.
20. Wollheim, Richard. *Art and Its Objects*. 2nd ed. Cambridge University Press; c1980.