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Beyond the Colonial Gaze: Rasa, Post-humanism, and the Metaphysics of *Shrungara* in Upendra Bhanja's *Labanyabati*

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Abstract

To demonstrate Upendra Bhanja's work as a sophisticated site of aesthetic and philosophical synthesis, this paper offers a rigorous critical re-evaluation of the poet's masterpiece, *Labanyabati*, going beyond the historically reductive 'obscurity' debate. Western-educated critics have often referred to Bhanja's vivid portrayals of 'Shrungara Rasa' as 'profane' or 'bibhatsa' since the late 19th century due to the Victorian moral standards of the British Raj and the reformist fervour of the Brahmo Samaj. This study contends that these criticisms amount to an 'Internalised Colonial Gaze' that ignores the pre-colonial indigenous worldview in which the metaphysical and the biological are intricately intertwined. The study illustrates how Bhanja uses complicated Alankaras to depersonalise the physical union and turn it into a universalized aesthetic experience- a "Vaikuntha" of the senses- by utilizing 'Rasa Theory', particularly the idea of 'Sadharanikarana'. Additionally, the article examines the 'Ecology of the Body,' where the heroine is presented as a microcosm of the Odisan environment rather than as a solitary object of love, through the prisms of postcolonialism and posthumanism. Lastly, the study presents the suffering of separation (Vipralambha) as a deep existential state through phenomenology and the concept of the 'Lived Body.' In the end, the study comes to the conclusion that *Labanyabati* serves as a 'Transcendental Ladder,' using the body as a sacred vehicle to attain both cultural resistance and heavenly beauty.

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Keywords: Ecocriticism, Shrungara, Colonial Gaze, *Labanyabati*, Rasa Theory, Postcolonialism, and Ecology of the Body

Introduction

The 'Poet Emperor' of Odia literature, Upendra Bhanja, has long held a contradictory position in the canon of Indian literature. During the 19th-century colonial encounter, his masterpiece, *Labanyabati*, caused great moral tension despite being praised for his unmatched linguistic dexterity and mastery of Alankara (ornamentation). His vivid representations of 'Shrungara Rasa' were originally condemned as 'obscene' or 'nauseating' by reviewers who were influenced by Victorian prudery and the reforming fervour of the Brahmo Samaj. However, such labels frequently result from a 'Colonial Gaze' that fails to appreciate the philosophical depth of indigenous aesthetics. Using four different theoretical frameworks—Rasa Theory, Postcolonial Critique, Post-humanism, and Phenomenology—this study aims to provide a serious academic assessment of Bhanja's creativity rather than merely defending his morality. We can understand how Bhanja uses the physical body as a vehicle for the divine by considering *Labanyabati* as a sophisticated 'Ecology of the Body' and a 'Transcendental Ladder,' rather than as a remnant of feudal hedonism. In his world, the erotic is the very route that leads to the sacred rather than its opposite.

An in-depth knowledge of Odisha's sociocultural environment in the eighteenth century is necessary to assess Kavi Samrat Upendra Bhanja's literary legacy. A new kind of feudalism that was greatly impacted by Mughal hedonism developed during this time, with the royal courts serving as the main centers of cultural patronage. Although Bhanja's work has occasionally been called 'obscene' by contemporary critics who are influenced by Western education and Brahmo Samaj ideas, this assessment frequently ignores the historical 'heartbeat' of his time. Bhanja creates a 'Triveni Sangam' where sex, love, and beauty come together in his masterwork *Labanyabati*, rather than just portraying sensual yearning. Bhanja embraces 'Shrungara Rasa' (the erotic sentiment) as a transformational power by basing his story on marital devotion (Swakiya Priti) and elevating the physical body as a sacred stairway to divine union. According to his writings, eroticism transcends animalistic instinct and becomes a unique, heart-melting manifestation of eternal love when it is practiced with reverence and societal legitimacy.

The social and cultural climate and prevailing trends of any given age must be the primary consideration while analysing its literature. A misconception might readily result from evaluating the past just in light of contemporary preferences and viewpoints. Additionally, this method lacks objectivity; in order to evaluate ancient literature, one must psychologically connect oneself with that age and familiarise oneself with its innate inclinations. This makes it possible to see the 'heartbeat' of that era and evaluate its literature accurately.

Upendra Bhanja wrote during the first four decades of the eighteenth century (1701–1740 AD). Odisha came under Mughal administration during this period, shattering the region's

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unity. The Mughal court and its rulers were emulated by regional feudal kings. By this time, a new type of feudalism had formed, radically altering the healthy conventional feudalism that had evolved from mythological India into historical India.

Hedonism was the cornerstone of this new feudalism. This was the main emphasis of poets in such a culture, and the feudal court dominated their literary discourse. These poets' main clients were the feudal class and the group of academics they supported. As a result, although it cannot be claimed that the general public did not read or hear this poetry, poets did not compose for them. The renowned 'Poet Emperor' (Kabisamrat) of this era was Upendra Bhanja. He wrote numerous poems that fall under the mythological and fictional categories. His poetry was mostly about marital love (Swakiya Priti). Marital love took center stage, yet he also composed poems on extramarital love (Parakiya Priti). It's probable that hidden or lusty love (Vita Prema) had such a profound impact on social life at the time that domestic life frequently turned unpleasant. Evidence of this licentious love can be found as far back as the time of Sarala Das, who condemned extramarital relations. Brajanath Badajena too portrayed this hideous, insatiable love not long after Upendra's time. Naturally, the poetry written in accordance with Sri Chaitanya's teachings on the path of love praised the victory of adulterous (Parakiya) love. Under a spiritual façade, this Parakiya sentiment grew. With a thunderous voice, Upendra declared the triumph of household devotion by accepting Rama and Sita as models to write poetry based on marital love. We can use certain theoretical frameworks that connect 18th-century Odia aesthetics with contemporary literary criticism to improve this analysis of Upendra Bhanja's *Labanyabati*. By using these theories, the conversation shifts from a 'defence' of Bhanja against allegations of obscenity to an in-depth scholarly assessment of his brilliance.

'Sadharanikarana' (Universalisation) and Rasa Theory

'Shrungara Rasa' has already been discussed, but using the idea of 'Sadharanikarana' (from Bharata Muni's *Natyashastra*) offers a compelling refutation of the detractors from the Victorian era. 'Sadharanikarana' is a universalisation process in which the audience experiences the 'essence' of an emotion by going beyond their own ego. Bhanja does not encourage the reader to engage in a voyeuristic act (desire) when he recounts the physical union of Chandrabhanu and Labanyabati. Rather, he 'depersonalises' the act and transforms it into a universal aesthetic experience through his intricate metaphors and Alankaras (ornamentation). The 'Vaikuntha' experience uses the physical body as a medium, moving the emphasis from the biological to the metaphysical.

Both 'Sambhoga' and 'Vipralambha Shrungara Rasa' are beautifully described in the Kabya *Labanyabati*. Eroticism expresses the essence of love and transcends limited sexuality to become timeless beauty. Upendra valued the body since he thought that love could not exist without it. In his view: "The body of the one with lips like the Hibiscus is not ordinary; for a youth, it is the abode of Vaikuntha". He was aware that Cupid ruled over the body, love ruled

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the head, and women ruled over love. Nobody can be patient and forget a woman like that. The poet says:

ଦେହ ଉପରେ ମନ ପ୍ରଭୁପ୍ରମାଣ ଧନ ମନରୁ ମଳ ପ୍ରୀତିରେ
ରେ ପ୍ରୀତିର ପ୍ରଭୁ ନାରୀ ତାଙ୍କୁ ପୁଣି ପାସୋରି କେନ୍ଦୁ ଧରିବ ଧୃତିରେ,
ପ୍ରାଣବନ୍ଧୁ । ପୁଣି ଆରତୀ ମୁହିଁରେ
ମନକୁ ଅନୁରୂପେ ଯୁବତୀ ମିଳେ । ତପେ ଏଣୁ ଦୁର୍ଲଭ କହି ।
(-୨୭ଶ ଛାନ୍ଦ)

‘The Colonial Gaze’ is a postcolonial theory.

The criticism by Bijay Chandra Mazumdar and others who labeled Bhanja ‘obscene’ is an example of Colonial Mimicry and the Internalized Colonial Gaze. We can contend that Victorian prudery imposed on Indian aesthetics led to the 19th-century rejection of Riti poetry. Postcolonial scholars (such as Edward Said and Homi Bhabha) contend that colonized elites frequently adopt the colonizer’s moral standards to appear ‘civilised.’ Bhanja functions in a pre-colonial indigenous context where the Kamasutra and Bhakti coexist. Still, the Brahma Samaj and Western-educated critics were seeing it through the prism of 19th-century British morality, which divided the ‘sacred’ from the ‘profane.’ Bhanja's work is framed as a location of cultural resistance when this theory is used.

“I cannot resist the temptation of saying that all that Upendra Bhanja has composed in the name of the sentiments of love or Rasa is bibhatsa or ugly and nauseating; the sweet sentiments of lovers are nowhere met with in the voluminous writing of the author,” wrote Bijay Chandra Mazumdar in his critique of Bhanja's writings. This opinion has been expressed by many others, who frequently call Bhanja’s work offensive. However, no Indian literature was evaluated according to the criteria of “decency” or “obscenity” before the introduction of Western education and the beliefs of the Brahma Samaj. In the past, what is now considered indecent was joyfully embraced by society.

Bhanja’s writings were not considered obscene in Odia literature before the final three decades of the 1800s. Riti poetry was deemed vulgar and immoral due to the influence of the Brahma Samaj and new preferences brought about by Western education. Bhanja’s literature was evaluated by critics such as Pyarimohan Acharya, Lala Ramnarayan Ray, Biswanath Kar, Manmohan Chakravarti, and Bijay Chandra Mazumdar based on its obscenity. On the other hand, Pandit Nilakantha Das logically denied each of these objections. Even though Bhanja's writing was the hedonistic literature of a collapsing feudal system, it nevertheless included portrayals of the common society of that age. It was Rasa literature, though.

Its main attraction is Shrungara Rasa. Shrungara Rasa is demonstrated by Princess *Labanyabati* and her companions’ clever banter and the poet’s description of their attractiveness as they stroll through the flower garden. “Where the forehead is like the face of

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the moon, The hair is like the whisk of the fly-brush; Where the eyes are like the restless deer or a horse, Dancing within; The breasts are like golden pitchers, The bells of the waist-chain ring out as the hem of the garment flutters."

ଲଲାଟ ଲପନ ଚାନ୍ଦ ଦରପଣ ଚିକୁର ଚାମର ଯହିଁରେ
ତରଙ୍ଗ କୁରଙ୍ଗ ନୟନ ତୁରଙ୍ଗ କିରଙ୍ଗ କରଇ ଡହିଁରେ ।
କଳଶ । ଚନ୍ଦ୍ର କୁଚ ଶ୍ରେଣୀ ଚତୁଳ
କଟୀ ମେଖଳା ଘଣ୍ଟି ଯହିଁ ପ୍ରକଟି ଅଞ୍ଜଳ ପତାକା ଚଞ୍ଚଳ ।
(ଲାବଣ୍ୟବତୀ – ୫ମ ଛାନ୍ଦ)

This description conveys the thrill of 'Shrungara Rasa' and exhibits an aesthetic sense. Labanyabati takes a swim in the garden's crystal-clear lake with her companions. The sensual feeling is also symbolised by this swimming scene. The awe of 'Shrungara Rasa' is created by Chandrabhanu's emotional change upon viewing Labanyabati's image. A lovely example is Labanyabati's dream encounter with Chandrabhanu and her subsequent lament: "Waking up with cleverness at the end of the night, she saw no divine youth by her side; striking her heart with her hand, crying 'My Lord! My Lord! she mourned loudly, searching restlessly, her consciousness struck by the moon, turning the bed, loosening her hair, placing her hands upon her breasts."

ଚେତି ଚାତୁରୀ ଚାହିଁଲା ନିଶିନାଶେ ପାଶେ ନାହିଁ ଦିବ୍ୟ ତରୁଣ
ମାରି ହୃଦେ ହାତ ନାଥ ନାଥ ବୋଲି ଅତି ଉଚ୍ଚ କଲା କାରୁଣ୍ୟ
ଖୋଜେ ଅଧୀରେ । ଚେତନା ହତ ସେ ବିଧୁରେ
ଶେଯ ଲେଉଟାଇ କବରୀ ଫିଟାଇ କର ଭରି କୁଚ ସନ୍ଧିରେ ।
(-୧୨ଶ ଛାନ୍ଦ)

Another feature of 'Shrungara Rasa' is the onset of the rainy season and the ensuing anguish of separation experienced by Labanyabati. To describe her beauty, the poet says: "Flaunting her nose, playing with her eyes, moving her face, speaking endearing words; Standing with her forefinger upon her chin, has any other such beauty ever been seen by the eyes?"

ପୁଲାଇ ନାସା ଡୋଳାକୁ ଖେଳାଇ ନେବାର
ମୁଖ ହଲାଇ ଗେହ୍ଲାଇ ଭାଷା କହିବାର ଯେ
ଚିରୁକେ ଡର୍ଜନୀ ଦେଇ ହୋଇବାର ଉଭା

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ନେତ୍ରେ ଦେଖୁଥବ କି ଏପରି ଆନ ଶୋଭା ଯେ ।

(-୨୮ଶ ଛାନ୍ଦ)

‘Sambhoga Shrungara’ is symbolized by the physical union of Labanyabati and Chandrabhanu in their pleasure abode. Eroticism is also demonstrated by the way her friends make fun of her after the union. When the protagonist and the heroine are separated, Chandrabhanu grieves elsewhere: “Day by day, I meditate on the many sentiments of her golden body; As long as I live, I wander as a Yogi, making this my livelihood. While chanting the name of the fair-natured one, let Cupid strike me alone, let my praise remain essential within the world of Rasikas.” “Because I know her, she has brought such grace with a slight smile; wherever I look, only she, the moon-faced one, is visible.”

ଦିନକଦିନକ କନକ ଅଙ୍ଗୀର ଅନେକ ଭାବକୁ ଧାୟି

ଜୀବ ଥିବାଯାକ ଜୀବିକା କରି ମୁଁ ବୁଲୁଛି ଯୋଗୀ ହୋଇ ।

ଚାରୁଶୀଳା ନାମ ଉଚ୍ଚାରଣେ ଉଚ୍ଚାରୁ ମାରୁ ଏକା ମୋତେ ମାର

ରସିକ ସଂସାର ମଧ୍ୟରେ ପ୍ରଶଂସା ସାର ହୋଇ ରହୁ ମୋର ।

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ଜାଣିଛି ବୋଲି ଆଣିଛି କି ଭଙ୍ଗୀକି ଅଳପ ହସିଲା ହୋଇ

ଯେଣେ ଅନାଇଲେ ତେଣେ ତ ଦିଶଇ ଜଣେ ସିନା ଚନ୍ଦ୍ରମୁହିଁ ।

This is a very moving description. Furthermore, the way Chandrabhanu thinks of her during separation is sweet and full of affection: “The way she smiles, as if nectar falls from her face-- it remains visible; the way she comes and sits before him-- it enters his mind. The way she speaks-- he feels as if she is speaking this very moment; that which once cooled him so deeply now burns him. If he attains the deer-eyed once again, he shall do this: he shall not leave her for a moment, he shall not blink his eyes, he shall hold her in his lap. He shall become her companion and increase her daily ritual; he shall make his meal like the five ritual morsels of food.”

ଯେଉଁ ରୂପେ ଭାଷେ ବଚନ କହେଁ କି ଏକାଣି କହୁଛି

ତେବେ ଅତ୍ୟନ୍ତ ଶୀତଳ କରୁଥିଲା ଏବେ ତ ଦହୁଛି ।

ଏଶାନନ୍ଦନାକୁ ପାଇଲେ ଏଣିକି ଏମନ୍ତ କରିବି

ଦଣ୍ଡେ ହେଁ ନ ଛାଡ଼ି ଚନ୍ଦ୍ର ନ ପିଛାଡ଼ି କୋଳରେ ଧରିବି ।

ମୁହିଁ ସଖୀ ହୋଇ ନୀତିକିବଢ଼ାଇ ଦେବି ଯେ ତାହାର

ନିୟମ ପକାଇ ପଞ୍ଚଗ୍ରାସୀ ପରି କରିବି ଆହାର ।

(-୩୪ଶ ଛାନ୍ଦ)

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The “Ecology of the Body” and Post-humanism

Since we have a background in Environmental Humanities, we can apply an eco-critical lens to the ‘Shrungara’ descriptions in *Labanyabati*. The distinction between the natural and human worlds is dismantled by posthumanism. The heroine’s body is frequently represented as a landscape rather than in isolation in Bhanja’s descriptions. Her hair is ‘fly-brush’ (a natural or animal product), her eyes are ‘restless deer,’ and her grin is ‘nectar.’ This is not merely fancy terminology; it is a fusion of the Odisan ecology and the human form. By using this, we can contend that Bhanja’s ‘Shrungara’ is an ecological celebration rather than merely a carnal description since he sees the sensual body as a microcosm of the natural world. Its main attraction is ‘Shrungara Rasa’. ‘Shrungara Rasa’ is demonstrated by Princess Labanyabati and her companions' clever banter and the poet's description of their attractiveness as they stroll through the flower garden. “Where the forehead is like the face of the moon, The hair is like the whisk of the fly-brush; Where the eyes are like the restless deer or a horse, Dancing within; The breasts are like golden pitchers, The bells of the waist-chain ring out as the hem of the garment flutters.”

ଲଲାଟ ଲପନ ବାନ୍ଧ ଦରପଣ ଚିକୁର ବାମର ଯହିଁରେ
 ତରଙ୍ଗ କୁରଙ୍ଗ ନୟନ ତୁରଙ୍ଗ କିରଙ୍ଗ କରଇ ଡହିରେ ।
 କଳଶ । ଚନ୍ଦ୍ର କୁଚ ଶ୍ରେଣୀ ଚତୁଳ
 କଟୀ ମେଖଳା ଘଣ୍ଟି ଯହିଁ ପ୍ରକଟି ଅଞ୍ଜଳ ପତାକା ଚଞ୍ଚଳ ।
 (– ଝମ ଛାନ୍ଦ)

‘The Transcendental Ladder’ and existentialism

D.H. Lawrence writes of beauty and sex: "Now sex and beauty are one thing, like flame and fire. If you hate sex, you hate beauty. If you love living beauty, you have a reverence for sex... But to love living beauty, you must have a reverence for sex" (Lawrence, 15). Like fire and its flame, sex and beauty are inextricably linked. One must appreciate sex to enjoy live beauty; to despise sex is to despise beauty. Sex does not become love when there is no regard for it and merely an animalistic desire for pleasure. Sex and beauty are intertwined, just as life and consciousness are. According to Sambodhi, sex is the source of instinct, and enlightenment is its leaves and petals. Everything unites in the delight and praise of love. Love is a creative inspiration and a movement. A divine sentiment is portrayed when sex, beauty, and love come together in one place. In his poems, Upendra Bhanja skilfully combined these three. Upendra's writings appear to be the “Triveni Sangam” (confluence of three rivers) of beauty, love, and sex.

We brought up D.H. Lawrence’s concept of the body as a “ladder” is consistent with phenomenology, particularly Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work on the “lived body,” which holds that the body is not an item we possess but rather the state of our experience in the world. It is

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said that Chandrabhanu had a physical burning during his separation (Vipralambha). We can contend that Bhanja's emphasis on physicality is really a thorough examination of the human situation by applying the theory of the Lived Body. The existential states of "burning" and "restlessness" are characterised by a fragmentation of the self due to the absence of the "other" (the beloved).

The physical union in the pleasure house of Labanyabati and Chandrabhanu signifies *Sambhoga Shrungara*. The way her friends tease her after the union also signifies eroticism. When the hero and heroine are separated, Chandrabhanu mourns while abroad: "Day by day, I meditate on the many sentiments of her golden body; As long as I live, I wander as a Yogi, making this my livelihood. While chanting the name of the fair-natured one, let Cupid strike me alone, let my praise remain essential within the world of Rasikas." "Because I know her, she has brought such grace with a slight smile; wherever I look, only she, the moon-faced one, is visible."

ଦିନକଦିନକ କନକ ଅଙ୍ଗୀର ଅନେକ ଭାବକୁ ଧାୟି

ଜୀବ ଥିବାଯାକ ଜୀବିକା କରି ମୁଁ ବୁଲୁଛି ଯୋଗୀ ହୋଇ ।

ଚାରୁଶୀଳା ନାମ ଉଚ୍ଚାରେ ଉଚ୍ଚାରୁ ମାରୁ ଏକା ମୋତେ ମାର

ରସିକ ସଂସାର ମଧ୍ୟରେ ପ୍ରଶଂସା ସାର ହୋଇ ରହୁ ମୋର ।

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ଜାଣିଛ ବୋଲି ଆଣିଛ କି ଭଙ୍ଗୀକି ଅଳପ ହସିଲା ହୋଇ

ଯେଣେ ଅନାଇଲେ ତେଣେ ତ ଦିଶଇ ଜଣେ ସିନା ଚନ୍ଦ୍ରମୁହିଁ ।

Conclusion

Ultimately, Upendra Bhanja's *Labanyabati* stands as a monumental synthesis of aesthetic refinement and moral grounding. Even though he centres his lyrical cosmos around the physical body, he deftly makes sure that eroticism never devolves into hideous lust but instead acts as the fundamental 'fire' that keeps the 'flame' of beauty alive. Bhanja offers a potent counter-narrative to the licentious inclinations of his era by depicting a love that transcends several incarnations and culminates in the sanctity of marriage, elevating the domestic devotion of figures like Rama and Sita to the pinnacle of ideal. True love is an all-encompassing movement of the soul, as demonstrated by his perfect control over 'Shrungara Rasa' in both union (Sambhoga) and separation (Vipralambha). As a "Poet Emperor," Bhanja solidifies his position as the creator of a literary tradition where "from love comes the greatest fame in this world" by demonstrating how the physical becomes a portal to the divine when beauty is revered.

In the end, Upendra Bhanja's *Labanyabati* is a magnificent confluence of intellectual foundation and artistic perfection. From Sadharanikarana's perspective, we can see that his depictions of Chandrabhanu and Labanyabati's union are exercises in universalisation, in

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which the biological body is transformed into a “Vaikuntha” experience, rather than calls to voyeurism. By demolishing the “Colonial Gaze” that had stigmatised this work, we uncover a poet who was able to effectively reject the division of the “sacred” and the “profane,” preserving a pre-colonial equilibrium in which the Bhakti and Kamasutra coexist.

Furthermore, we can see that Bhanja's “ornamentation” is actually a profound acknowledgement of the human-nature continuum and the “lived body” as a place of existential desire by using contemporary eco-critical and existential frameworks. Bhanja demonstrates that sensuality never slips into the grotesque when it is led by the purity of marriage and a love that spans several births. Rather, it is the fundamental fire that keeps the flame of timeless beauty alive. As the creator of a literary tradition in which “from love comes the greatest fame,” Bhanja continues to be a visionary who recognised that the physical becomes the ultimate portal to the divine when beauty is reverently studied.

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