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Reckoning on Aesthetic Dissension: Was Ānandavardhana an Iconoclastic Theoretician?

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Abstract:

Suffice it to say, Ānandavardhana's *Dhvani* theory has acquired enormous popularity in the arena of Aesthetics. Being blessed with the gift of the gab, he tenably reinforced the need to take recourse to the prevailing idea of *Dhvani* to realize the aesthetic contents of a literary text. Iconoclastic spirit of Ānandavardhana can be traced in his instinctive attempts to anticipate the theoretical insights of Deconstructionism in well advance thereby outshining the brilliance of his contemporary peers. Instead of yielding to the prevailing aesthetic trends of his time, he chose to reckon on his aesthetic dissension. This paper thus is intended to lay bare the iconoclastic spirit of Ānandavardhana as a theoretician, keeping the comparison between *Dhvani* theory and Deconstructionism at the backdrop of it.

Keywords: *Dhvani* **theory; Deconstructionism; Aesthetic Dissension; Iconoclasm.**

I

Being the votary of aesthetic contentment, Ānandavardhana went off the trend of his time by exhibiting his aesthetic dissension to the ruling aesthetic convictions and conventions. Instead of subscribing to *Rasa* theory, he thought of bringing the idea of *Dhvani* to the fore to moot an alternative approach to Poetic Truth. His sole intention was to reinforce the notion of *Dhvani* in his epoch-making work *Dhvanyaloka* and to insist connoisseurs to pay adequate heed to *Dhvani* as a distinct theoretical tool among others. The importance and relevance of this work has pertinently been brought out by Prof. P.V. Kane in the following words: "The *Dhvanyāloka* is an epoch-making work in the history in Vedāta of Alańkāra Literature. It occupies the same position in the Alańkāraśāstra as Pānini's sūtras in grammar and the Vedāntasūtra" (Kane 161). Neither anybody before Ānandavardhana had been able to decipher the crux of Poetic Truth nor anyone has been able to explain it clearly as of now. What is important for one to subsume is that Ānandavardhana exercised his individual faculties to look up for an alternative way to break in the domain of Poetic Truth probably because he did not want to conform to the conventional terms. One may reasonably argue that Ānandavardhana could comprehend why approaching Poetic Truth seemed recondite to connoisseurs of different generations before him and that is

why, he attempted to reinforce *Dhvani* theory as one of the feasible ways to make inroads into Poetic Truth. Prof. Ramaranjan Mukherjee has brilliantly put it as:

> Though much attempt has been made to define Poetry and identify its various varieties and forms, yet no clear cut definition of Poetry has yet been adumbrated [. . .]. The reason is simple and clear. In Poetry the symbolic content is of profound importance and once the function of suggestion is triggered into action it signifies a large number of contents, which are comprehended by persons of different sensibilities. (Mukherjee qtd in Mukhopadhayay vii)

Ānandavardhana's iconoclasm as a distinguished theoretician is reflected in his unique consideration of the suggestive contents of an aesthetically charged work to be of paramount import so far aesthetic exploration is concerned. He has worked out suggestive elements and arrived at that the aesthetic pleasure of connoisseurs hinge on the proper realization of *Dhvani*. In other words, he has meant to say that the pursuit of aesthetic pleasure is to be the sole intent of connoisseurs following suggestions of a poetic work. He stands out among others in that he has tried to rationalize the reiterative attempts of connoisseurs to explore Poetic Truth in aesthetic terms. His persuasive contentions in support of the establishment of *Dhvani* as a discrete theoretical school attest to the fact that he was an iconoclastic theoretician.

II

In order to provide a comprehensive view of Ānandavardhana's aesthetic dissension to the prevalent aesthetic conventions, it needs to be stated how he defends dhvani as a distinct theoretical tool. In *Dhvanyāloka*, he, at first, has presumed that there could be three feasible antagonistic school of critics who may contest *Dhvani* theory— Abhāvavādins, Bhāktavādins, and Anirvacanīyavādins. Having stretched the limit of his imagination he thinks that Abhāvavādins may argue that there can be no existence of *Dhvani* inasmuch as words have denotative power only and are signs to meanings. The second school of critics may hold that even if there is any meaning other than the denotative one, it must have direct nexus to the connotative power of word. The third school of critics may put forward that *Dhvani* cannot be explained in words and thus can only be perceived by a man of distinguished aesthetic potentials. The first skeptical school of critics may take up three different arguments to refute the existence of *Dhvani*. They may hold that *Dhvani* can either be equated to *Guṇa* as it embellishes the aesthetic beauty of a poetic work or can be subsumed under any of the prevalent figure of speech or can be comprehended as a figment of imagination and thus *Dhvani* does not exist. The second skeptical school of critics may tend to equate *Dhvani* with *Bhakti* that is connotation. The third skeptical school of critics may think that *Dhvani* exists beyond words and thus cannot be explained. Ānandavardhana, on the contrary, proclaims that *Dhvani* is a 'profound verity'. In order to prove his claim, he has said that words have layers of meaning—*abhidhā*, *lakṣaṇā*, and vyañjanā. While *Abhidhā* means the denotative power of word, *lakṣaṇā* implies the connotative power of word and vyañjanā refers to the suggestive power of words. Ānandavardhana thinks that words work as signs and refer to the objects these signified. He argues that sometimes

denotative power of words fails to help readers delve deep into it thereby suggesting the limitations of the denotative power of word. He said that connotative power of word comes into play given the following conditions—when the denotative meaning seems inapplicable in the provided context, when denotative meaning of a word has some definite nexus to its connotative meaning, and when connotative meaning fits the usage or purpose. Further, he continues that a word has one more type of meaning that is suggestive meaning. When connotative meaning remains incomplete in the given context, connoisseurs are bound to resort to the third layer of meaning—vyañjanā.

Ānandavardhana's iconoclastic thinking needs to be appreciated, for he could intuitively presume that words function as signs in the arena of literature and meanings are invested on words contextually. If the context is blurred for the time being, the exact meaning of a word cannot be understood. For instance, the meaning of *abhidhā* will only be clear if it is pitted against the *lakṣaṇā* and vice versa. In other words, the existence of vyañjanā presupposes the existences of both *abhidhā* and *lakṣaṇā*. When vyañjanā is posited in contrast with the rest it is always privileged. The point is that Ānandavardhana could think of "binary opposition" at that time when the term "binary opposition" was not in vogue. It shows that Ānandhavardhana had strong belief in the inconsistencies of meanings of words, which led him to trace out the third layer of meaning. He knew that Poetic Truth is elusive in nature and thus went to equate suggestive meaning to *Dhvani* thereby trying to bring to an end to the prolonged debate on Poetic Truth.

III

Ānandavardhana's iconoclastic refusal to comply with the customary aesthetic conventions coupled with his insightful presumptions pertaining to Deconstructionism in well advance can better be perceived if Derrida's Deconstructionism is drawn at this point. Jacques Derrida is famous for his astounding contribution in the domain of Western Philosophy and literature. He has propounded the concept of Deconstructionism in his seminal work *Of Grammatology* and further has illustrated it in some of his subsequent essays. It is supposed that Deconstructionism emerged as a counter discourse to Saussurean Structuralism. Lois Tyson in *Critical Theory Today: A User-friendly Guide* has observed:

> Thus, deconstruction is called a Poststructuralist theory, not only because it emerged in the wake of Structuralism's popularity but also because it constitutes a reaction against Structuralism's orderly vision of language and human experience. (Tyson 257)

In an influential essay entitled as "Structure, sign and play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" Derrida has elucidated the notion of "decentering" through the following argument:

> The centre is at the centre of the totality, and yet, totality has its centre elsewhere. The centre is not the centre [. . .]. The concept of centered structure is in fact the

concept of a play based on a fundamental ground, a play which itself is beyond the reach of play. (Derrida qtd in Lodge and Wood 108)

It means that Derrida has insisted readers to move away from 'logocentrism' which puts logos meaning words at the centre. Derrida has actually meant to say that it is because of the unstable nature of language, there is no fixed meaning of a word. Thus there is no fixed centre. Lois Tyson has said that according to Derrida, no concept can evade "dynamic instability of language, which disseminates infinite number of possible meanings . . ." (Tyson 256). Derrida himself defines it as "What is deconstruction? Nothing, of course" (Derrida qtd in Rolfe 274). In another article he said, "[. . .] deconstruction does not consist in a set of theorems, axioms, tools, rules, techniques, methods" (Derrida qtd in Rolfe 274). Thus, it can be understood as a process that is always already present in reading. Deconstructionism connotes a tension between what the text means to say and what it actually means. Thus, it is clear that deconstructionism lays stress on the text itself. Spivak puts it as, "All texts . . . are rehearsing their grammatological structure, self-deconstructing as they continue themselves" (Spivak qtd. in Rolfe 274).

Derrida has developed another conceptual term— "Differance" which he holds neither a word nor a concept. Derrida himself has understood it as:

> The verb "to differ" seems to differ from itself. On the one hand, it indicates difference as distinction, inequality, or decernibility; on the other it expresses the interposition of delay, the interval of a *spacing* and *temporalizing* that puts off until "later" what is presently denied, the possible that is presently impossible. (Derrida 73)

It means that the word "differance" consists of "deferral" and "difference". Actually, Derrida has pointed out the inconsistencies of meanings of words, which puts signified in perpetual deferral. In this regard, Derrida has critiqued "metaphysics of presence" in that sometimes it seems that the signified is present and the very next moment one is disillusioned knowing that the signified had only metaphysical presence. Western Philosophy endorses presence over absence but Derrida stands against it and said that absence needs to be taken into cognizance. Words are signs of different meanings. Though one tries hard to reach the signified following the signs, he gets lost in the process of deferral perpetually. Lois Tyson has pertinently commented, "[. . .] according to Derrida, language is not the reliable tool of communication we believe it to be, but rather a fluid, ambiguous domain of complex experience . . ." (Tyson 249). Derrida has proposed the notion of "binary opposition" which he borrows from Structuralism and explained it in this way that in "binary opposition" one of the pair is to be privileged to the other. In other words, a more privileged thought is to be pitted against a less privileged one in a given context. What comes out of it is that Derrida raises the importance of the text and context. Derrida has coined a new term, that is, "aporia" which carries forward the suggestion of "undecidability". It means

that in the process of deferral the "gap" or "lacuna" between "what a text means to say and what it is constrained to mean" (Cuddon 50).

IV

Now, one may plausibly argue that the conceptual strands of Derridean Deconstructionism were adumbrated by Ānandavardhana while refashioning *Dhvani* theory in an iconoclastic way. Though Derrida has developed and stretched some conceptual notions of Deconstructionism, in his time, the point is that Derrida is not absolutely innovative and creative in the sense that the conceptual notion comprising Deconstructionism were much before presumed by Ānandavardhana while substantiating the concept of *Dhvani* to be the crux of any poetic work of any origin. Derrida argues that it is because of the inconsistencies of meanings of words, one can hardly reach the signified though it seems sometimes that he has reached. Derrida opines that anybody is bound to get lost in the play of signifiers while pursuing them inasmuch as language is elusive in nature. Apparently it seems that signifiers are enough to help one reach the signified but Derrida argues that signified is an unattainable thing and is perpetually deferred in the play of signifiers. Ānandavardhana too thought of these concepts in his own way long before Derrida. He said in *Dhvanyāloka* that words are signs indeed because these are used to refer to objects. Words have two more meanings other than denotative meaning—connotative meaning and suggestive meaning. He thinks that suggestive meaning presupposes the existence of other two types of meaning in that a connoisseur can reach suggestive meaning of a word only by pursuing other two meanings. When *abhidhā* fails to lay bare the complete meaning of the word, connoisseurs reckon on the connotative meaning and finally proceed to experience the suggested meaning. The point is that Ānandavardhana thought of the existence of layers of meaning of a word long before Derrida when notion of Deconstructionism was not in vogue. Though he could not talk about deferral, he could think that mere denotative meaning cannot help one decipher the meaning of a word. Ānandavardhana, too, thinks that meaning is contextual and therefore is subject to subversion. Though Ānandavadhana has not used the phrase "binary opposition" anywhere in *Dhvanyāloka*, he has insisted readers to posit *abhidhā*, *lakṣaṇā* and vyañjanā in contrast with each other for the sake of better comprehension of the aesthetic implications of a word. Though Ānandavardhana has not uttered the term "aporia", he is of this opinion that suggested meaning is inexplicable inasmuch as the realization of it cannot be explained in words and can only be equated to a state of ecstasy, as it were. It means that Ānandavardhana too moves away from 'logocentrism' and tends to arrive at that words do not always come handy to connoisseurs to explain the signified, that is, the suggested meaning. So, he implicitly and indirectly admits the elusive nature of language. Ānandavardhana had not overtly spoken up against "metaphysics of presence" anywhere in *Dhvanyāloka*, his prioritization of suggested meaning over the rest two meanings implies that he had predilection for absence over presence primarily because he was keen to grasp suggested meaning to rejoice in aesthetic pleasure. One cannot forget that he had aesthetic sensibility in him, and thus can deduce that it facilitated him to think of absence before presence.

In this regard, one may be reminded of Dr. C. Rajendra's emphatic assertion in *Studies in Comparative Poetics*:

> However, Ānandavardhana seems to anticipate Derrida in postulating the indefinite suggested sense over and above the expressed literal meaning though the admission of any definitite literal meaning itself goes against the deconstructive approach. (Rajendra 133)

This observation does not stand to reason in that Ānandavardhana has not said anywhere in the text that to know about either of *abhidhā* or *lakṣanā* of a word does not mean that one knows aesthetic suggestion of the word. He has not drawn any conclusive remark on either of them, and instead of it, has said that both *abhidhā* and *lakṣaṇā* are subject to modifications and alterations inasmuch as the incompleteness of *abhidhā* leads one to look up for *lakṣaṇā* so far aesthetic quest of connoisseurs for Poetic Truth is concerned. Apparently, it seems that *abhidhā* is the only meaning that a word has but Ānandavardhana has explicitly shown that when a connoisseur cannot find correspondence between a word, that is, a signifier and its immediate meaning, that is, the signified, he takes recourse to connotation to reach the signified so far the realization of suggested meaning is concerned. And in this way he pursues the perpetual deferral of meaning. One may argue that Ānandavardhana has said that suggestive meaning is the essence of a poetic work. Thus the realization of suggested meaning hints at the end of the aesthetic journey. It can be contested by arguing that Ānandavardhana has not claimed that suggestive meaning has a definite ending in itself. Rather it will keep connoisseurs engaged in that aesthetic journey perpetually. Again one may argue that if it happens then suggested meaning will remain unattainable to connoisseurs and they will not be able to gain aesthetic pleasure. It can also be confused by claiming that knowing it fully well that suggested meaning is a perpetually deferred signified, connoisseurs take up aesthetic journeys towards suggested meaning and in course of it, they derive aesthetic pleasure. In addition with it, they exact pleasure out of their subjective understanding of suggested meaning in tits and bits. The point is that one's realization of suggested meaning is bound to be different from that of the rest. It can be tenably mooted that suggested meaning has a number of identities in itself and thus, it appears to connoisseurs in different ways.

V

In a nutshell, one may argue that Ānandavardhana's iconoclasm as a theoretician can hardly be denied. His aesthetic dissension led him to foreground *Dhvani* as a separate theory like *Rasa* theory. Had he not expressed dissents on prevailing trends of his time, he would not have worked out the notion of *Dhvani*. He is still recalled not only because of his telling contribution to Indian Aesthetics in particular but also because of his aesthetic inquisitiveness and intuitiveness that led him to go ahead of his time through buttressing the concept of *Dhvani* as an alternative approach to Poetic Truth.

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