

On the Sublime (and) Beautiful in *Raghuvamśa*. Edmund Burke Reads Kālidāsa

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Abstract

In his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, the 18th century Irish thinker, Edmund Burke, conceives the notion of the sublime in terms characteristic of liminality. He defines it as an aesthetic category derived from an ambiguous, primal sensation of ‘delightful horror’ and as a conceptual opposite of beauty. While his sublime, expressed through indefiniteness or excess, dominates over the experiencing subject, his beauty, expressed through definiteness and restraint, is fully dominated by the subject. The aim of this study is to compare the Burkean sublime with the Sanskrit *mahākāvya* work, *Raghuvamśa* by Kālidāsa (5th century CE). In the first place, it proves that many elements recognised by Edmund Burke as the sources of the sublime may be traced in Kālidāsa’s language of hyperbolic affirmation based on natural imagery. In the second place, it shows the merging of Burkean dualities of the sublime and beautiful, man and Nature within the *mahākāvya* aesthetics of *Raghuvamśa*, and, accordingly, reappraises his account of sublimity conceived in liminal terms.

Keywords: aesthetics, Burkean sublime, the beautiful, *kāvya*, Kālidāsa’s *Raghuvamśa*.

1. *Introduction: the Sublime Liminality*

The concept of liminality as conceived by Arnold van Gennep and furthered by Victor Turner significantly overlaps with the concept of the sublime constructed within the Western philosophical discourse. Both of them connote a kind of “surplus”, a threat to the self, something that escapes definition, transcending the

experienced reality or imaginable forms, something “else” that may create a feeling of dread, amazement, or a deep, reverential awe. Moreover, both the sublime and liminality are underlain by duality or ambivalence. In this sense, liminality, as a culturally inclusive category characterizing a common social phenomenon observable in a variety of cultures, may be regarded as an anthropological counterpart of the philosophical category of the sublime, which was constructed by a number of Western thinkers within their own cultural contexts.

This study is intended as a task in applied comparative cultural aesthetics that prepares the ground for further enquiry into the possibility of recognizing the sublime as a culturally inclusive category that may be integrated with the corresponding concepts of the Sanskrit aesthetics and literary theory. The cognitive approach to literary aesthetics pursued here aims to foster a comprehensive reception of the Sanskrit *mahākāvya*, here represented by a work of Kālidāsa, and open a new intercultural perspective for the study of this genre.

1.1. *Edmund Burke and Indian Aesthetics*

The common duality shared by sublime and liminality is clearly visible in the theory of the sublime presented in the *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1754) by Edmund Burke (1729–1797), where the sublime is imagined as a quality creating an ambivalent feeling of pleasure and pain, defined through its dual opposition to beauty. Many of the phenomena identified here as the sources of the sublime, such as “terror”, “obscurity”, “privation”, “intermission”, “silence”, “infinity” fall within the scope of liminality¹.

This 18th century Anglo-Irish statesman and philosopher, widely recognised for his life-long campaign against the injustices of British rule in India and the impeachment of Warren Hastings, is an often-overlooked founding father of the modern notion of the sublime. Contrary to his German successor, Immanuel Kant, who turned the sublime into an arithmetical abstraction of the mind, Burke concentrates on the empirical experience, the psychological reactions on the side of the subject and the physical objects that provoke them. Since he defines the sublime and beautiful through particular instances and values depiction above theoretical accuracy, his account of these aesthetic categories is marked by open complexity. This is one of the reasons why it appears to be much more conversant with the Indian literary-aesthetic tradition than the Kantian sublime adopted by Jean-

1. Burke 1823, 76-85; 96; 99; 106; 117.

François Lyotard in the 20th century. Since Burke's discourse is based on emotional states and their tangible sources, it is reminiscent of a central paradigm in Sanskrit aesthetics and poetics, namely *rasa* theory. Moreover, as will be noted below, several sources of the sublime recognised in Burke's treatise either correspond to conventional motifs employed in Sanskrit *kāvya* literature or serve as adequate points of reference for a contrastive analysis.

The physiological aesthetics² of the *Philosophical Enquiry* are founded on pre-psychological principles. The author commences by recognising "reason" and "taste" as universally human faculties that enable empirical data to be assigned to theoretical patterns such as beauty and sublimity. Although, in the light of the current state of knowledge regarding human culture, the statement on which Burke founds his enquiry: «The standard both of reason and taste is the same in all human creatures»³, appears dangerously absolute, it also shows a biological approach to aesthetics, which, from the perspective of time, proves to be progressive. This is so because since Immanuel Kant, Western philosophical aesthetics was largely dominated by German idealism, which detached itself from the bio-psychological aspect of human apprehension and from Nature in general. It was not until the rise of cognitive studies in the late 20th century that this bio-psychological perspective, which is highly compatible with the Indian tradition, was reintroduced into the Western intellectual discourse including aesthetics and literary studies⁴. It may currently prove valuable in interpreting cultural texts through the comparison of regional conceptualisations of most general ideas, such as beauty, sublimity, or greatness, based on likely universal human experience.

1.2. *Pain and Pleasure*

In a similar way to the author of *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Burke occupies himself with recognising several types of human emotions, whose broad spectre he divides into negative pleasure, designated as "delight", generated by the sublime, and positive

2. Ryan 2001.

3. Burke 1823, 1.

4. *Ibid.*, 23: «On the whole, it appears to me, that what is called taste, in its most general acceptance, is not a simple idea, but is partly made up of a perception of the primary pleasures of sense, of the secondary pleasures of the imagination, and of the conclusions of the reasoning faculty, concerning the various relations of these, and concerning the human passions, manner and actions».

pleasure, generated by the beautiful. Within his treatise human beings appear as mainly biological organisms ruled by their sensations of pain and pleasure. By “negative pleasure” Burke means the strongest possible feeling rooted in the human instinct of self-preservation. It arises from witnessing something dangerous or uncontrollable from a safe distance which allows one to reflect on one’s natural reactions. What differentiates negative pleasure from a basic fear is the exaltedness and admirableness of the sublime behind it, which may be exemplified by emotions typically aroused by great natural or cosmic objects, such as mountains, oceans, rivers, the sky, or the luminaries. Another important aspect of the sublime experience mentioned by Burke is its disinterestedness, as it leads to a simulated detachment from the basic instinct of self-preservation by which it is induced:

[The sublime] [...] comes upon us in the gloomy forest, and in the howling wilderness, in the form of the lion, the tyger, the panther, or rhinoceros. Whenever strength is only useful, and employed for our benefit or our pleasure, then it is never sublime; for nothing can act agreeably to us, that does not act in conformity to our will. (Burke 1823, 88)

Contrariwise, by positive pleasure Burke means an emotion comparable to “love” underlain by a sense of safety and domination induced by the fully controllable beauty of an object perceived⁵. Accordingly, within the polarised aesthetics, strongly determined by the author’s gender, natural environment, culture, and time of life, sublime objects are specified as great, vast, massive, rough, dark, obscure, and associated with pain, while beautiful objects are small, light, smooth, polished, clear, bright, and delicate. The sublime may combine with the beautiful in the same way as white mixes with black. When they combine a softened version of the sublime or an intensified version of the beautiful appears. Nonetheless, they make the strongest impression as separate colours⁶.

As befits a representative of British empiricism, Burke defines the sublime and the beautiful through ostension, or, in other words, through examples. The larger part of his treatise may be characterised as a catalogue of objects, qualities and ideas recognised as sources of the sublime and beautiful.

5. *Ibid.*, 125; 162-163.

6. *Ibid.*, 183.

1.3. *Sources of the Sublime*

The empirical style of Burke's discourse results in a very strong contextualisation of his notion of the sublime. It is marked by a dualistic understanding of the relation between man and nature, determined both by the cold, oppressive, often overwhelming natural environment of the 19th century British Isles and the anthropocentric Western intellectual tradition. However, what makes his theory less timeless and seemingly less universal than the abstract Kantian sublime adopted by Lyotard, paradoxically, offers more solid grounds for intercultural studies conducted from a bio-psychological or cognitive perspective, which may foster a deeper understanding of Sanskrit aesthetics.

Among the sources of the sublime Burke mentions "terror", identifying it as the strongest, most perplexing emotion, and, accordingly, the ruling principle of the sublime⁷. He associates terror with: «Contemptible or dangerous objects or beings like snakes and other poisonous animals and things of great dimensions», best represented by the ocean, all of which pose a threat to the human sense of security, ego, or imagination⁸. This emotion is closely associated with another source of the sublime, which is 'obscurity' that induces fear of the unknown. He observes that imagination intensifies a sense of dread when the full extent of danger is unknown⁹.

Obscurity along with other mentioned sources, including "privation", "vastness", "succession and uniformity", "magnificence", is related with a broader notion of "infinity"¹⁰. Infinity, conceived as a challenge to the imagination that produces venerable fear underlain with amazement, or a mixed feeling of pleasure and pain, should be regarded as a key characteristic of Burkean sublime. As a promise "of something more", infinity traced in phenomena such as changing seasons or young animals, is found as a generally pleasurable concept¹¹. Nevertheless, the most important aspect connecting it with the sublime is the challenge it gives to the idea of form. While in its boundlessness infinity diverts from Burke's idea of beauty, it cannot also be classified as "ugly", as it does not connote "deformation", but rather "formlessness", which just like "intermission" or "chasm", which are also listed as sources of the sublime, provokes awe leading to a suspension of

7. *Ibid.*, 74.

8. *Ibid.*, 74-75.

9. *Ibid.*, 76-77.

10. *Ibid.*, 96-99; 101-110.

11. *Ibid.*, 106.

judgement. Burke illustrates this with a passage from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, depicting Death:

The other shape.
If shape it might be call'd, that shape had none [...]
(John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, II. 666–667)¹².

Another principal source of Burkean sublime is “power”, whose appeal is based on terror mixed with reverential awe. Burke associates it with a superior, uncontrollable, external force exemplified by a figure of sovereignty, a deity, gloomy isolated landscapes or wild and dangerous animals¹³. Among the criteria enabling a given phenomenon to be identified as powerful in a way that is conducive to the sublime, he mentions an absence of their practical utility, which differentiates the strength or size of a creature or object from its power, supposed to dominate over human ego¹⁴. Whatever is subject to our will «can never be a cause of grand and commanding conception»¹⁵.

In his use of the term “grand” as a synonym of the sublime, Burke clearly follows the earlier discourse of the term which since Classical Antiquity had been developed within the literary-rhetorical context¹⁶. He also uses this word in definitions of other sources of the sublime, such as “difficulty”, by which he means a great struggle or effort indicating a grand idea behind it, and “magnificence”, explained as: «A great profusion of things, which are splendid or valuable in themselves»¹⁷. Burke adds here that the disorder of profuse elements may intensify a sense of infinity indicative of the sublime. As examples of such a kind of profusion he mentions a starry sky, fireworks, and literary descriptions rich in profuse images (motifs), or epithets characteristic of panegyrics¹⁸. Burke adds here that the disorder of profuse elements may intensify a sense of infinity indicative of the sublime.

Among other sources of the sublime that may prove relevant to the aesthetics underlying Sanskrit *kāvya* literature, “light”, “sound”, and “colour” should be

12. *Ibid.*, 77.

13. *Ibid.*, 85–96.

14. *Ibid.*, 88–89.

15. *Ibid.*, 88.

16. Represented by several Classical authors, the most influential of whom is the anonymous author of *Peri Hypsous* (1st century CE) referred to as Pseudo-Longinus, and Early Modern authors, such as Nicolas Boileau (1636–1711) and John Dennis (1658–1734).

17. *Ibid.*, 107.

18. *Ibid.*, 107–110.

mentioned. Light should be possibly most intense, blinding, preferably emanating directly from the sun, emerging from deep darkness, passing into, or contrasting with it. In the same way, excessive sound, ideally created by massive natural phenomena like thunder, is considered as conducive to the sublime, since it creates a most extreme sensation¹⁹. Burke distinguishes the cries of wild animals as a separate source of the sublime, which he regards as an alien, external, and intense interruption in a familiar, safe fabric of reality²⁰. He associates the sublime with dark gloomy colours, excluding from its scope any bright, “cheerful” hues like the blue of clear skies²¹.

2. *Burke’s Aesthetics Applied to Kālidāsa’s Raghuvamśa*

As the most prestigious genre of Sanskrit *kāvya* literature, whose heroic narrative frame, normative function, eulogistic character, and close connection with the royal power suggests its classification as an Indian example of grand narrative, *mahākāvya* appears as one of the most accurate examples of Sanskrit classical literature to be compared with Burke’s account of the sublime. Owing to the common aesthetics underlying the *mahākāvya* convention, observations regarding the “sublimity” of its grand narrative poetics made on the basis of one work generally apply to other stylistically different compositions. The above presented analysis focuses on Kālidāsa’s *Raghuvamśa* (5th century CE), which is one of the earliest and most celebrated works of the genre.

The second stanza of Kālidāsa’s *mahākāvya* already contains several Burkean sources of the sublime whose presence pervades the entire work. It mentions the solar origin of the dynasty, which alludes to the senses through the image of the celestial body and its blinding brightness. The greatness of the dynasty is further emphasised through the comparison to the unnavigable ocean, indicating the vastness, obscurity, possible danger, and great difficulty faced by a solitary poet. Accordingly, it includes the following sources: “light”, “terror”, “obscurity”, “privation”, “vastness”, “infinity”, “difficulty”:

kva sūryaprabhavo vaṃśaḥ kva cālpaviṣayā matiḥ /
titīṣṣur dustaram mohād uḍupenāsmi sāgaram // Ragh 1. 2 //

19. *Ibid.*, 115-116.

20. *Ibid.*, 118-119.

21. *Ibid.*, 114.

Where is this Sun-born dynasty and where is my limited mind? Tempted by my own foolishness, I am eager to cross the unnavigable ocean on a raft²².

The affective potential of Kālidāsa's *Raghuvamśa* is built upon the material sublime, or in other words, the variety of the sublime that affects listeners through the presentable, palpable greatness of Nature and the Cosmos present in Burke's aesthetics. Within particular eulogies that are shared by the entire grand narrative of Raghu's dynasty, several monarchs are either identified with or compared to the sun: Ragh 3. 30; 5. 13; 8. 15; 8. 29–30; 11. 24; 11. 64; 11. 82; or to the moon: Ragh 3. 22; 4. 18; 8. 15; 11. 24; 11. 64; 11. 82. For example:

*dhiyaḥ samagraiḥ sa guṇair udāradhiḥ kramāc catasraś caturarṇavopamāḥ /
tatāra vidyāḥ pavanātīpātibhir diśo haridbhir haritām iveśvaraḥ // Ragh 3. 30 //*

The one sublime of mind, endowed with all intellectual merits, has crossed the four branches of knowledge, comparable to the four oceans, just like the Lord of Sky Quarters (the Sun) crossed the [four] directions with his horses (sunrays) swift as the wind.

As befits the epic chronicle of the solar dynasty, *Raghuvamśa* is full of blinding light expressing the grandeur of royal power:

*sa rājyaṃ guruṇā dattaṃ pratipadyādhikaṃ babhau /
dinānte nihitaṃ tejaḥ savitreva hutāśanaḥ // Ragh 4. 1 //*

On receiving the sovereignty from his elder he became exceedingly bright, just like fire receiving light from the sun at the end of day.

Other celestial objects, both mythical and observable, serve as objects of comparison in numerous similes: e.g. Ragh 1. 46 (star Chitra and the moon); Ragh 2. 39; 8. 37 (Rāhu); Ragh 2. 75 (celestial Ganges).

Moreover, the royal grandeur is also expressed through comparisons to mountains and oceans, which constitute larger themes within the narrative:

*sarvātiritasāreṇa sarvatejo 'bhibhāvinā /
sthitaḥ sarvonnatenorvīm krāntvā merur ivātmanā // Ragh 1. 14 //*

22. Unless otherwise stated, the translations are all mine.

Transcending the Earth, raised high above all in the likeness of Mt. Meru, exceeding all in energy, surpassing all in splendour.

*bhīmakāntair nṛpaṇaiḥ sa bhabhūvopajīvinām /
adhr̥ṣyaś cābhi gamyaś ca yādhoratnair ivārṇavaḥ // Ragh 1. 16 //*

Just like the ocean endowed with sea monsters coupled with gems, with his kingly traits [both] dreadful and lovable, he was [both] accessible and inaccessible to his subjects.

The elaborate descriptions used to portray mountain and ocean themes are additionally underlain with the Burkean category of “magnificence”, which is alluded to through the profusion of valuable objects canonically assigned to each landscape²³.

Kālidāsa also translates the idea of royal power through animals which, as noted by Burke, exemplify power through their physical traits paired with an uncontrollable force. Here temporin-filled, open temples of an elephant during the period of musth along with fire fanned by the wind and the sun in the cloudless sky exemplify royal power in its fierce, unrestrained aspect:

*vibhāvasuḥ sārathineva vāyunā ghanavyapāyena gabhastimān iva /
babhūva tenātitarāṃ suduḥsahaḥ kaṭaprabhedena karīva pārthivaḥ //
Ragh 3. 37 //*

In his [Raghu’s] company the king [Dilīpa] became practically invincible. They were like fire coupled with wind, like the sun coupled with the cloudless sky, or like an elephant coupled with open temples.

Nonetheless, in some other stanzas he expresses material grandeur only to show that the sublimity of royal power transcends it, approaching the state of infinity:

*ārūḍham adrīn udadhīn vitīrṇaṃ bhujamgamānāṃ vasatiṃ praviṣṭam /
ūrdhvaṃ gataṃ yasya na cānubandhi yaśaḥ paricchettum iyattayālam //
Ragh 6. 77 //*

It is impossible to measure his lasting fame that ascended mountain tops, penetrated the oceans, entered the underworld, and raised up high [to the sky].

23. Matyszkiewicz 2018, 55-76.

In a similar way, indicative of the Burkean idea of infinity as one of the key underlying features of sublimity, the poet imagines the nature of god Viṣṇu, praised in the tenth chapter of *Raghuvamśa*:

*ameyo mitalokas tvam anarthī prārthanāvahāḥ /
ajito jiṣṇur atyantam avyakto vyaktakāraṇam // Ragh 10. 18 //*

You are the immeasurable measure of the world, the desireless source of desire, the unconquerable conqueror, an endless, unmanifest source of manifestations.

3. Conclusions

The main point of difference between Edmund Burke and Kālidāsa may be determined by their approach to Nature. Although he traces sublimity in the sensuousness of springtime, associated with the idea of infinity, Burke conceives Nature mainly as an oppressive, uncontrollable force that poses a threat to human subjectivity. Therefore, in his account, the sublimity of great natural phenomena is based on awe and fearful reverence. Sublime Nature is gloomy, dark in colour, unmelodious in sound, filled with gaps and threatening extremities. It dominates over the sentient subject by mere, primitive power further exemplified by the figure of a sovereign and a deity. *Raghuvamśa* also contains passages in which sublimity is derived from fear of the threatening force of Nature. For example, those that describe the omens witnessed by king Daśaratha on his journey, such as adverse winds, howling jackals, the sun encircled with a frightening halo (Ragh 11. 58-11. 62), or depictions of a bloodred sun, columns of smoke and dust covering the sky during the battle in the seventh chapter. Nonetheless, these are just a few stanzas of the entire work. The poem itself shows no tension between Nature and human ego, which are generally imagined here as interconnected²⁴:

*viṣṣṭapārśvānucarasya tasya pārśvadrumāḥ pāśabhṛtā samasya /
udīrayām āsur ivonmadānām ālokaśabdaṃ vayasāṃ virāvaiḥ // Ragh 2. 9 //*

The roadside trees praised with ecstatic sounds of birds Varuṇa's equal, who has expelled his flatterers.

24. Rajendran 2005, 21; 25.

Moreover, the imagery of Kālidāsa's work corresponds rather with what Burke identifies as a mixture of sharply outlined, contrasting categories of the sublime and beautiful.

For instance, the extreme brightness, identified by Burke as the source of the sublime, within *Raghuvamśa* definitely serves the strongly persuasive function associated with this category, at the same time merging with the quality of "whiteness", which for both Burke and Kālidāsa exemplifies the category of beauty:

*pāṇḍyo 'yam aṁsārpitalambahāraḥ kṛptāṅgarāgo haricandanena /
ābhāti bālātaparakṣasānuḥ sanirjharodgāra ivādrirājaḥ // Ragh 6. 60 //*

With a [white] garland of pearls dangling on his shoulders and body smeared with [red] sandalwood ointment he shone like the Mountain king (Himalaya) with its rumbling waterfalls and summits reddened by the morning sunbeams.

The sublimity of Nature and Cosmos, inscribed in great depths, heights, or amounts, appears here as an intensifier of beauty or the other way round: beauty seems to tame the sublime through sensuality²⁵. This is clearly visible in the thirteenth chapter of *Raghuvamśa* where Rāma presents his consort Sītā with the touchstones of the landscape beneath their feet as they travel through the sky on *vimāna*:

*velāṇilāya prasṛtā bhujamgā mahormiṣphūrjathunirviśeṣāḥ /
sūryāṁśusamṛparkasamṛddharāgair vyajyanta ete maṇibhiḥ phaṇasthaiḥ //*
Ragh 13. 12 //

Snakes stretched out for the coast wind are hard to distinguish from the massive, roaring waves, becoming noticeable only through the hue of jewels in their hoods intensified by sunrays.

*tavādharasparadhiṣu vidrumeṣu paryastam etat sahasormivegāt /
ūrdhvāṅkuraprotamukhaṁ kathaṁcit kleśad apakrāmati śaṅkhaṇḍam //*
Ragh 13. 13 //

25. Matyszkiewicz 2018.

The collection of shells, scattered by the force of rapid waves, with their sharp, upraised tips struggles to disentangle from the corals that emulate your lips.

*velānilaḥ ketakareṇubhis te saṃbhāvayaty ānanam āyatākṣi /
mām akṣamaṃ maṇḍanakālahāner vettīva bimbāddharabaddhatṛṣṇam //*
Ragh 13. 16 //

Oh, long-eyed lady! As if having noticed my urgent desire for your round lips, the sea breeze honours your face with Ketaka pollen.

In these examples one can clearly see how the ocean with its primal dread is turned into a lover's playground. Its venomous snakes are characterised as jewels, corals and shells are likened to female lips. Therefore, the sublimity, inherent to the ocean as such, is sensualised, or turned into an enhancement of erotic pleasure, assigned by Burke to the domain of beauty. In this chapter of *Raghuvamśa*, the grand elements of Nature such as the ocean, mountains, of great rivers, which as bare concepts may be overwhelming in their excess, unfamiliarity, obscurity, otherworldliness, or sense of danger, are brought into a state of familiarity and submission. It is the king, a personification of power, who is in charge of the familiarised objects, not the other way round. Nature is imagined rather as a valuable extension of the personalised power, than as a serious obstacle. Moreover, the royal power itself does not rely here on mere terror, as would be imagined by Burke, but rather on sublimity refined into a magnified splendour. Accordingly, the grand narrative poetics of *Raghuvamśa* appeal through images of earthly opulence expressed through celestial brightness, precious stones, lofty thrones, mountains, or impenetrable depths.

To conclude, in spite of cultural, temporal, and environmental differences between the authors, the majority of the sources of the sublime recognised by Burke can be traced in the grand narrative poetics of Kālidāsa's poem. Nevertheless, the Sanskrit author presents a significantly different cultural reworking of these sources, which makes the Burkean sublime derived from the instinct of self-preservation appear as an intensifier, or a hyperbole of pleasurable beauty that serves eulogistic purposes. In this sense, *mahākāvya* aesthetics represented by *Raghuvamśa* may be interpreted as a form of overcoming the tension of liminality understood in terms of the Burkean sublime.

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