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Rasa and *Wabi-Sabi*: Two Eastern Aesthetics for Everyday Living

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Abstract: While Western philosophical traditions have developed clear-cut divisions among established areas of study, this has rarely been done in the East, if at all. Although contemporary scholarship in Eastern Philosophies identify areas of study, they are hardly separate from one another. This is because philosophy in the East has mostly been a practice of *life* rather than just of the mind. With this premise, this paper ventures into a preliminary exploration of two Eastern Aesthetics, the Indian school(s) of *Rasa* and the Japanese school of *Wabi-Sabi*. Both aesthetic theories are rooted in spirituality: the former, in Vedantic spiritual philosophy, and the latter in Buddhism. As a study in Comparative Philosophy, this paper briefly describes the origins of the said aesthetic theories, examines their respective principles and ideas on the aesthetic experience, and reflects on their implications on everyday living. It shows that although these two aesthetic theories may not be considered commensurable by reason of their being mainly applied to different forms of art, there are points of agreement, especially in what they understand to be the objective of art, which is spiritual enlightenment. Coming from different spiritual traditions, however, with what may be considered opposed in their metaphysical foundations, they have different views on what sort of enlightenment must be achieved through art. Despite these differences, both aesthetic theories serve as examples of a more integrated, and hopefully, more meaningful life. Understanding them promotes the value of art in everyday life.

Key Words: Wabi-Sabi; Rasa; Indian Aesthetics; Japanese Aesthetics

INTRODUCTION : ART AND LIFE

Unlike Western philosophical traditions, varying Eastern philosophies do not tend to set boundaries between areas of study. Generally, each of these areas are a focused way to reach the same goal, which is *spiritual enlightenment.* It is this characteristic that makes scholars believe that on the whole, Eastern thinking does not dichotomize between the life of the mind and practical life (Quito 1991, 5-7). There is, in it, a prevalent 'emphasis upon the close relationship of philosophy and life in the sense that, as Radhakrishnan says,

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"Every doctrine has been turned into a passionate conviction, stirring the hearts of man and quickening his breath and completely transforming his nature." (Moore 1967) It is with this view that this paper makes a preliminary comparative study of the general outlines of two Eastern Aesthetics, the Indian theory of *Rasa* and the Japanese *Wabi-Sabi* worldview. Both Aesthetics are based on spiritual philosophical traditions: the former is rooted in Vedantic philosophy, while the latter has been heavily influenced by the basic tenets of Buddhism, also Indian in origin, but especially in its Japanese form, Zen.

While there are many interpretations of the Indian *Rasa,* this paper takes the more general view as expounded by M. Hirinayana for the purposes of this preliminary study. On the other hand, while there are several aesthetic schools of thought in Japan, *Wabi-Sabi* stands out as one of those having a direct link to Zen Buddhist teachings. This paper aims to simply compare the very general views of the two aesthetics, reflecting on their respective ideas on the aesthetic experience, here simplified to mean the experience that happens when one is presented with an aesthetic object or artworks. Admittedly, exact and universal definition of the terms "art" and "artworks" remain largely elusive and the subject of many debates in the field of Aesthetics. Just as in-depth and detailed discussion of these two aesthetics, this, too, is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it considers the three major normative (rather than descriptive) theories of art—Hedonist, Expressivist and Cognitivist[1] (Graham 2009)—for evaluative purposes.

Although there are now many literature on *Wabi-Sabi* and its stark difference from the typical Western obsession with perfection and the separation of art and life much discussed, it has hardly been compared with other non-Western aesthetic views. Likewise, studies on *Rasa* are mostly concerned with interpretations of the different Indian aesthetic schools, and are rarely exhaustive in nature given the voluminous primary sources involved, including studies on the Vedas. One might even pose the question of commensurability in comparing these two aesthetic theories because they are generally applied to different art forms. The theory of *Rasa* is basically used in criticisms of (epic) poetry and the performance arts (Sankaran, 1973), while Wabi-Sabi has been adopted by artists and designers in creating visual forms of art and functional art works such as pottery, furniture and garden design (Juniper 2003). However, *Wabi-Sabi* principles have also been embodied in Japanese poetry, especially the *haiku* (Juniper 2003), and part of the evaluation of a piece's *rasa*, especially in the dramatic arts, is the design of the stage, developing a *rasa* aesthetic of architecture and sculpture. Nevertheless, the purpose of this study is to explore points of agreement, if any, among the principles of *Wabi-Sabi* on the one hand, and the general view of *Rasa,* on the other. As aesthetic theories, they are both concerned with what constitutes an aesthetic experience. In addition to this, these two theories originate from Eastern traditions which, assumed to be different from the concerns of Western philosophy, requires differentiation from one another as well. In spite of this, however, this paper aims to show that the two views, although based on different backgrounds, offer an integration of art and life, promoting a more meaningful way of living, aimed at spiritual forms of enlightenment.

FROM LIFE TO AESTHETICS

Wabi-Sabi: art of everyday life. The Japenese characters "Wabi" and "Sabi" are said to have been in existence for over 3,000 years. "Wabi" refers to something that gives the feeling of simplicity, emptiness or loneliness. "Sabi," on the other hand,

[1] More commonly, this third one is called "communicative," referring to art that communicates an idea. I am adopting Gordon Graham's term, "cognitivisit" as it expands the idea of communication to include understanding on the part of the spectator or both the artist and the spectator.

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refers to something that is old, well-worn out, or decayed. The two terms, now hyphenated, is said to have described the often difficult and unpleasant life the Japanese experienced throughout their history. (Gold 2004) Koren (2008) suggests "rustic" as the closest translation of the term in English; *Wabi* connoting a more internal or subjective feeling of "a way of life" or a "spritiual path" while *sabi* is more associated with things external to the self, like material objects. He also points out that it has always been associated with Zen Buddhism, especially the ritual of the tea that the poor monks practised. Juniper (2008) says of the tea ceremony that it is "where the art and philosophy of wabi sabi cemented its foundations." He says further,

> The tea ceremony, which is usually held in a secluded and intimate tearoom, has been one of the focal points for advocates of wabi sabi. It was through this semireligious ritual that the tea masters, well versed in the philosophy of Zen, gave full voice to their love of art rich in wabi sabi expression.

Basic to Zen Buddhism is the idea of Emptiness which can be explained by way of the three Dharma Seals: 1) "All phenomena are impermanent;" 2) "All phenomena do not have a substantial existence;" and that 3) "Nirvana is perfect tranquility." (Hsing Yun 2006) Understanding these basic truths allow for the understanding of the truth of Emptiness and leads to freedom from suffering. Conversely, suffering is caused by the ignorance of these truths of impermanence, the absence of substantial existence, and the nature of Nirvana. According to the Arthaviniscaya Sutra (Samtani 2006) "….Having heard the characteristics of the truth of suffering—-impermanence, suffering, emptiness and absence of self—and not understanding them [causes other kinds of ignorance to arise."

Everything in this world is always in the process of change. Thus, *nothing is permanent,* as it is claimed in the first Dharma Seal. As soon as something is born, it immediately starts the process of decay. To begin with, things begin to exist only because of the coming together of causes and conditions that allow for these things to arise. And since these conditions are always changing, nothing really exists on it own. Everything is dependent on a host of other things that are also dependent on other things. This is what is meant by the second Dharma Seal: things have no real substantial existence and any idea of a "self" that exists independently of other things is a mere illusion. In other words, everything is *empty or* nonsubstantial. There is, however, this tendency to cling to the illusion of substantiality and permanence of things. But since things behave differently from what is expected, this attachment leads to suffering.

> Birth is suffering, old age is suffering, disease is suffering, death is suffering, separation from what is pleasant is suffering, association with what is unpleasant is suffering What one desires and searches for, if it is not obtained, is also suffering. In brief, all the aggregates of clinging are suffering. This is the Noble Truth of Suffering. (Arthaviniscaya Sutra VI, Samtani 2002)

To eliminate suffering, there is a need to understand and accept the truth of impermanence and nonsubstantiality. Once this is achieved, Nirvana or spiritual release, is achieved. The third Dharma Seal says that Nirvana is tranquility. Once all attachments are removed, there is peace in the here and now.

The Zen monks in Japan expressed these teachings in their way of life, later identified as *Wabi-Sabi.* (Juniper 2003) The celebrated tea ceremony[2] espoused simplicity, preferring old, rough, chipped and tarnished tea utensils for use in the ritual. These, for them, have more beauty than the high polished porcelain of fine white china. The monks decorated the almost bare tearoom with objects found in their surrounding nature, allowing them to contemplate on the true nature of things. These objects where never perfect, and displays the weathering of time—what most would consider ugly. Their slow decay demonstrates for the sincere meditator the truth of impermanence and nonsubstantiality of things, thereby helping them practice detachment and achieve tranquility.

[2] After the Zen monk, Ikkyu (1394-1481) got rid of the formalities and the expense of popular tea ceremony of this time, and opted for more rustic utensils and simpler surroundings. (Juniper 2003)

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(Yanagi 1989) This is what constitutes a *Wabi-Sabi* aesthetic experience.

With this background, the *Wabi-Sabi* design principles developed along the same lines, emphasizing the *empty* nature of things and their resulting impermanence. Eight principles summarize the aesthetics of *Wabi-Sabi.* The object has to be organic, freeform, textured, defies the binary between ugliness and beauty, subdued in color, simple, preserves space, promotes sobriety. (Juniper 2003) Given these, *Wabi-Sabi* objects always come from nature. They are what might be considered the "garbage" or nature, like a rotting driftwood, a broken bamboo or pebbles polished by the river. Although they may be picked out by the aesthetic eye of the artist or *Wabi-Sabi* practitioner, they are formed by nature itself. They are often rough in texture, weathered by time and the workings of nature. As such, they tend to dissolve the boundary between what is ugly and what is beautiful, or they "coax beauty out of ugliness" (Juniper 2003). Having come from natural environments, they are often of earthy, subdued colors. They are simple and tend to dissolve into the background of their surroundings, alluding to the absence of anything that can be asserted above everything else. They are therefore never imposing, and never occupies too much space (reminding one of the minimalism of Zen). Finally, as they serve as the reminders of impermanence and non-substantiality of things, they keep contemplators "sober" in the sense that they do not get drunk with the illusion of existence (substantiality).

From the foregoing, one understands that the aesthetics of *Wabi-Sabi* goes beyond the usual experience of visiting a museum to be confronted with so-called "great works of art." It is found in the simple, everyday things that surround day to day living. Rather than an abstract theory, it is more a way of life that is contemplative or reflective in nature. It is possible only in a concrete context that has to be *lived and realized.*

Rasa: reaching the universal. Rasa theory is often attributed to Bharata Muni (2nd century BCE) author of the *Natyashastra,* and who, in Chapter 6 of the said work, developed the theory of *Rasa.* There are several commentators that worked on Bharata's text but Abhinavagupta's (late 10 or early 11th CE) commentary on it in the *Abinavabharati* gave it full development as applied to Indian dramatic arts. This does not mean, however, that the idea of *rasa*, started with the sage Bharata. *"Rasa"* was already mentioned in the *Rgveda,* the oldest of the *vedas*, the sacred books of Hinduism. There the term referred to "juice," like the one taken from the soma plant and which the priests took during rituals. It was also in the *Atharva Veda,* taking on the meaning of "milk," or something that is "sweet-flavored." Later on, the term also took on the meanings "taste" and "flavor" or "savor," something to be relished. (Sankaran 1973)

The roots of *Rasa* can therefore be found in Vedantic philosophy. Although there are three major commentators of the *Vedanta*, the *Advaita* view of Sankara is deemed the most appropriate background for the explication of *rasa.* Orthodox Indian philosophy is founded on the belief that there is an Absolute Reality that forms the substrate of the universe. This is *Brahman,* the "subtle essence" that pervades the whole universe and is realized as the *self* or *atman.* In the *Chandogya Upanishad*, it is clearly stated, "That art thou." The *self* and this Essence of the universe are one and the same. (Prabhananda and Manchester, 2002) This oneness, however, is not evident in ordinary life, since ignorance of the truth gets in the way of realization. The self as an ego—an individual—is seen as separate from everything else. This state of ignorance causes suffering. As a consequence, the *atman* journeys lifetime after lifetime through a series of rebirths until it achieves realization of its divine nature. When this happens, *moksa* or spiritual release is achieved. This experience is one of eternal bliss, where the egoistic self is shed and the real *Self* is realized. (Radhakrishnan and Moore, 1967; Hiriyanna 2017)

Bharata claims that what an artwork needs to convey is the *sentiment* or the emotional flavor—*rasa*—that is woven into the work and is felt by the spectator. There are, traditionally, eight such sentiments: fear, joy, anger, wonderment, disgust, love, heroism, and compassion. A ninth rasa,

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tranquility, was later added by commentators. (Sankaran 1973) Such sentiments in a work of art reach the spectator because there are latent emotions in everyone that are triggered by emotions represented in an artwork. When any of these emotions are triggered, however, they are felt in a way that is different from ordinary personal experiences of such emotions. The experience is more generalized; they relate to something universal. This, in turn, is only possible if the person experiencing the generalized emotion becomes so involved in the experience such that she loses her ordinary selfhood (the ego) and moves to her "higher" or "deeper" self, *atman. Rasa* then becomes a spiritual experience, transcending all ordinary experiences.

> Rasa is realized when an emotion is awakened in the mind in such a manner that it has none of its usual conative tendencies and is experienced in an impersonal, contemplative mood. An emotion in this peculiar manner is caused by repre- sentations in art of those objects which excite it in nature, such as natural situ- ations, persons of known characters, their actions and physical expressions of emotions (e.g. trembling, smiling, scowling, etc.). These representations, through words in case of poetry and through both words and concrete presentations in case of drama, are generalized and so idealized aspects of objects masquerading as particulars. (Chaudhury, 1965)

Hiriyanna (2017) also writes,

> …the contemplation of a work of art leads to an attitude of mind which is quite impersonal. Whatever strain of conscious effort may be required for getting into that attitude, when once it is attained man forgets himself altogether; and he will be aware then of nothing beyond the object or the situation portrayed by the artist…and probably as a consequence of such self-forgetfulness, the contemplation of art yields a kind of spontaneous joy.

In an artwork, *rasa* is brought about by a combination of trigger-, consequent- and transitional emotions caused by words, gestures, props, and other elements in the artwork. (Sunil 2005) For instance, love involves other emotions such as happiness, sadness, jealousy, impatience and anger, all of which can deepen or enhance the dominant emotion of love. The more enhancers of the main emotion there are in an artwork, the greater its *rasa* is. (Chaudhury 1965)

Unlike *Wabi-Sabi, Rasa* aesthetic more readily lends itself to traditional artforms and can easily be applied to "museum art." Despite its more conventional feel, however, *Rasa* goes beyond the mere practice of presenting a viewer with an art form. It appeals to the inherent *affinity* between artist and spectator on a transcendental level. The aesthetic experience calls the *atman* to the Ultimate *Self, Brahman,* allowing it a glimpse of the state of bliss such a spiritual union could afford.

Life and Aesthetics. *Wabi-Sabi* and *Rasa* aesthetics are founded on different spiritual traditions. *Rasa* theory has been traced back to the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads,* sacred writings that form the foundation of Hindu spirituality. This tradition is anchored on the belief in the all-encompassing substrate of the universe, called *Brahman*, and its identification with the self or *Atman.* This self-endures, from lifetime to lifetime, until it achieves *moksa*, or spiritual liberation, and released into the state of Nirvana, an experience of oneness with the ultimate reality, *Brahman.* An artwork's *rasa* aims to produce this experience of bliss at being one with all.

In contrast to this, *Wabi-Sabi* aesthetics is founded on Buddhist teachings, basically a tradition developed as a critique of Hinduism. Instead of the emphasis on the *Atman* that identifies with *Brahman,* the Buddha's teachings put forward *Anatman* (*Anatta)* or the absence of self, claiming that the belief in the illusion of the self is what causes an individual to suffer. Instead of an ultimate reality, it advocates the truth of *Emptiness*, emphasizing the non-substantiality of things and, therefore, the impermanent nature of the world. *Wabi-sabi* lifestyle aims to maintain the reflective understanding of this empty nature of

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reality to avoid attachments that cause suffering and promote a tranquil mind.

It can seen from the foregoing that these two aesthetics are different responses to some ultimate concerns in life. In spite of their development into philosophical theories, they are still closely applied to daily living, and ultimately, about deliverance from ignorance that cause suffering in life. Although *Rasa* is very much aligned with the Hindu philosophy of *atman/Brahman* and *Wabi-Sabi* with the Buddhist philosophy of *anatta or anatman*, both agree that enlightenment requires the elimination of the individualistic ego. Aesthetic experience for both views bring about an experience of selflessness, albeit, in different senses.

DIFFERENT "*RASAS*"

There are three major normative theories of art, answering the question, "What is art for?" The first and most popular one came to be known as the Hedonist theory, as it claims that art is engaged in for the purpose of being entertained or to get a pleasurable experience from it. However, the existence of artworks that are obviously not pleasurable—tragedies, for instance, or paintings , the meanings of which are not apparent and requires much unpleasant thinking and thus, unsatisfying results—gives way to the theory that art is not purely for pleasure. The Expressivist theory claims that the reason that non-amusing artworks are still aesthetic is that they are expressive of emotions that are universal in nature. Spectators are therefore able to relate to what the artwork is expressive of while artists are able to express an emotion that, if left inside, create disturbances in the psyche. On the other hand, it is also the case that art communicates an idea. But more than this, it can contribute to one's understanding of experience and of the world. This does not mean that a work of art has to do just one or the other. An artwork could be beautiful and pleasurable, expressive of emotions, and at the same time, communicates an idea that helps one understand the world and herself better. This means, however, that the value of art increases as it does more of the functions available for it to do. (Graham 2009)

Considering that the term "*rasa"* mostly means "taste" or "flavor," it is natural to expect the aesthetics of *Rasa* to demand that an artwork be pleasurable. But *rasa* is also held to be an expression of such a pleasure experienced by the artist as creator. However, it has been emphasized by commentators that the primary goal of *rasa* is to bring the spectator closer to the experience of bliss in an enlightened state. On different levels, therefore, the *Rasa* theory can be said to subscribe to the three major theories of art. On a superficial level, since it aims to produce pleasure or, at least, entertainment or amusement, in the audience, it treats art in the Hedonist sense. From the point of view of the poet or actor, on the other hand, who strives to write or act in a way that is expressive of emotions, it subscribes to the Expressivist theory of art. But in the deeper level, since the ultimate goal of *rasa* is spiritual bliss, it can be interpreted as communicating an ideal, the union of *Atman* and *Brahman,* to the spectator. In this case, it can be said to subscribe to the Cognitivist theory of art whose main goal, as the sages say, is to bring an individual closer to the ultimate goal of spiritual release and bliss.

Wabi-Sabi aesthetics, focusing more on the ordinary, day to day surroundings rather than performances and other kinds of production that are further removed from daily existence may also be said to accommodate all normative theories of art. Although it is, perhaps strange to use the term "hedonist" in this context, it does not mean that *Wabi-Sabi* experience is not pleasurable. The recent rave on minimalism proves that there is joy in keeping to the lean and simple. Having more space than clutter, for instance, is definitely pleasurable for most people. But just as with *Rasa* theory, this view of *Wabi-Sabi* is a little too superficial. The fact that the terms "*wabi*" and "*sabi*" refer to an atmosphere of loneliness, being worn out and old, already reveals that to some extent, it artworks of this style must express or be expressive of these and related emotions. This is not to say that *Wabi-Sabi* espouses sadness or depression. A haiku, such as that of Basho's leaping frog, for instance, can be expressive of joy at being completely *present* at a given moment. But, perhaps, the greatest value that can be taken from living *Wabi-Sabi* is the element of *sobriety: Wabi-Sabi* serves as a reminder to practitioners and spectators of the nature of things—non-

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substantiality and impermanence. This way, they can avoid the all too strong pull of attachments to things that never ever stay the same and only cause suffering. In this sense, *Wabi-Sabi ican* be said to subscribe to the Cognitivist theory of Normative Aesthetics.

In both cases, however, a question might be posed regarding the way of "understanding the world" since both aesthetics require an elimination of the egoistic self in their respective aesthetic experience. The impersonal nature of the experience of *rasa* and the realization of non-self in *wabi-sabi* might mean that even cognitivist views of these aesthetics fall short of explaining the real nature of aesthetic experience, and more theorizing is required. This might be another of the differences between Eastern and Western thought, as the former seems to view the experience of art in more mystical rather than practical terms.

AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE AS A WAY TO ENLIGHTENMENT

This short study has compared the general outlines and main elements of two Eastern aesthetic schools, the Indian *Rasa* and the Japanese *Wabi-Sabi.* It has been shown that both aesthetics stem from spiritual philosophies, the former belongs to the Vedantic tradition of India, while the latter has been heavily influenced by the teachings of Zen Buddhism, a philosophy that also has its roots in India, in the original form of Buddhism that started with Siddhartha Gautama. However, since Buddhism has developed apart from the orthodox schools of thought in India, it has established a different spiritual foundation. Instead of giving value to the eternally enduring *self* or *atman,* so basic in Hindu thought, it denies this *self* by considering it illusory, arising only because of ignorance and the resulting attachments to a seemingly permanent world. *Wabi-Sabi* aesthetics is built on this idea and aims to represent the true impermanent, non-substantial nature of the world. Its principles, therefore, make its artworks simple, subdued, receding into the background, reminding one that in reality, there is only *nothing.* Everything is *empty. Rasa* aesthetics, on the other hand, does not favor the lean and simple. Its theory has only been briefly outlined in this study, but its requirements of trigger-, consequent- and transitional emotions, for a more profound *rasa* reveals the complex workings of its elements to produce the idea aesthetic experience. In contrast to *Wabi-Sabi,* its goal is grandiose: it is nothing less than a glimpse at the ultimate release from the endless cycle of rebirth, through a union of the eternal *self, atman,* with *Brahman.*

Although the two aesthetics examined here are quite different from one another, they have been shown to be similar not only in their association with philosophical traditions but also in their refusal to remove art from its context in life. By this, however, they go beyond what is normally considered "life" as both aesthetics point to the ultimate goal of enlightenment. *Rasa* speaks of having a glimpse of the ultimate spiritual release when one loses one's egoistic "self" to realize the *self* that is one with *Brahman. Wabi-Sabi,* on the other hand, strives to be a constant reminder of the original *empty* nature of the world, including the "self" that is not there to begin with. Beyond hedonist, expressivist and cognitivist views of aesthetics, these two clearly see art as a means to spiritual enlightenment.

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