

## Colour Symbolism in the Classical Theatre of India, China and Japan

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Certain characteristics such as the painting of the face and body of the actors performing certain roles on the stage are peculiar to the Oriental theatre. There is enough evidence to show that this art had been known in the Orient from very ancient times. A highly advanced technique of make-up is still practised in certain classical theatrical forms of India, China and Japan.

An account of the make-up of the classical India (Sanskrit) theatre is found in Bharata Muni's *Natyasastra* (circa 200 A.D.), the oldest treatise on dramaturgy in Oriental literature. According to this description many colours were used to paint the face and body of the actors. *Natyasastra* has recommended different colours for different characters. Gold, white, red, yellow, reddish yellow and dark blue are the colours appropriate for actors representing gods on the stage. The demi-gods are painted in dark blue. The colours for human beings of different regions are white, gold, burnished gold and reddish yellow. Demons and dwarfs with faces such as those of buffaloes and deer are painted in various colours. The following colours are used for different types of people: dark blue, reddish yellow and lotus colour for kings, reddish yellow for happy persons, brown for those who are engaged in cruel activities and plum colour for sages. The people belonging to different tribes are also distinguished by the colour scheme. The tribes of the South are painted in brown and those of the North in reddish yellow, while the tribes of certain other regions are presented in dark or deep blue. Different colours are also recommended for different castes. Red or reddish blue is selected for Brahmins and Ksatriyas and dark or deep blue for Vaisyas and Sudras. The actresses playing the roles of ogresses should have their teeth painted white<sup>1</sup>.

The primary function of Sanskrit drama is the delineation of aesthetic sentiment or emotion, which is known as *rasa*, for the purpose of creating it in the minds of the spectators. According to the *Natyasastra* there are eight principal aesthetic sentiments or emotions. They are the erotic sentiment (*srngara rasa*), the comic sentiment (*hasya rasa*), the pathetic sentiment (*karuna rasa*), the furious sentiment (*raudra rasa*), the heroic sentiment (*vira rasa*), the fearful sentiment (*bhayanaka rasa*), the odious sentiment (*bibhatsa rasa*) and the sentiment of wonder (*adbhuta rasa*). In the *Natyasastra* particular sentiments or emotions are coupled with particular colours. The erotic sentiment is associated with light green, the comic sentiment with white, the pathetic sentiment with ash colour, the furious sentiment

with red, the heroic sentiment with light orange, the fearful sentiment with black, the odious sentiment with blue and the sentiment of wonder with yellow<sup>2</sup>. However, from the account in the *Natyasastra* it is difficult to form an idea of the manner in which the actors are made up for the stage, because it does not state whether the face and body are simply painted or are decorated with designs as in the Kathakali, Peking Opera and Kabuki.

The use of colour in the Sanskrit theatre "as the language of symbolism" is not confined to the anga-racana (painting the limbs). Beards, head-dresses and costumes in various colours are also worn by the actors to represent different characters and emotions. It is stated in the *Natyasastra* that the persons who are unhappy because they cannot fulfil their promises and those who are in adverse circumstances wear black beards on the stage. Brown hair is especially used for the crowns of demons and other similar characters.

Women are distinguished from each other mainly by the nature and the colour of their garments. The Vidyadhara women wear white clothes on the stage. The white dress of a woman sometimes indicates that she is separated from her husband. Orange coloured clothes are worn by the Gandharva women. The attire of the ogresses is black in colour. The Siddha women are provided with yellow clothes. Green is associated with divine women. The actresses performing the roles of female monkeys are dressed in blue. Heavenly women in love also wear blue clothes on the stage.

The *Natyasastra* has prescribed only two colours for male attire. They are white and red. The former is the colour suitable for men visiting temples, attending marriage ceremonies and performing religious rites. The attire of those who are playing the roles of kings' officials, ministers, army commanders and merchants is also white. Red is associated with ascetics and sages and dark red with harem guards<sup>3</sup>. According to the account in the *Natyasastra*, colour in the Sanskrit theatre expresses not only the inner qualities of the character but also the emotion, country, tribe, class, position, age and place and time of action. It is clear from this work that colour symbolism has played an important role in the ancient theatre of India.

The earliest Sanskrit play available was written some time in the first century A.D., about three hundred years before Kalidasa, the foremost dramatist of ancient India. The first ten centuries of the Christian era can be generally regarded as the most active period of Sanskrit drama and theatre. Most probably the plays belonging to this period were written for performance on the stage. From the prevailing records it is reasonable to conclude that India had a highly developed tradition of staging plays. However, our present knowledge does not permit us to express any definite views regarding this aspect of Sanskrit drama.

Kathakali is another classical theatrical form which still exists in India. It took its present form after the sixteenth century. It is difficult to connect the origin of Kathakali with Sanskrit drama which is very much older than and fundamentally different from the other. The Kathakali actors, unlike their counterparts in the Sanskrit theatre, never use the spoken word on the stage. The Kathakali is a dance

drama while the Sanskrit drama is primarily a dialogue drama.

The roles in Kathakali are broadly divided into three types according to the inner qualities of the character. They may be virtuous (*Satvik*) or vicious (*Rajasik*) or destructive (*Tamasik*). Characters, such as the gods, goddesses and saints belong to the first group. The evildoers, demons and other bad spirits belong to the second group.

The characters who engage in terrifying and destructive activities fall into the third group. In addition to these basic categories there are other intermediary ones. The characters of different types are presented on the stage in the form of five classes. They are Green (*Pacca*), Knife (*Katti*), Beard (*Tati*), Black (*Kari*) and Polished (*Minukku*). In Kathakali, designs in different colours are executed on the faces so as to express the nature of the character. The characters are distinguished mainly by differences in the colour scheme. On the Kathakali stage green is used to represent a virtuous nature, red a vicious nature, black a destructive nature, yellow for virtuous and vicious natures combined and white for a superior nature.

The beards, costumes and head-dresses also have a symbolic function. The following colours are used for the beards: red, white and black. The red-beard characters wear a large fur coat in red, the symbol of a vicious nature. The white-beard characters wear a big white fur coat, the symbol of a superior nature. The black-beard characters, such as aborigines, wear a black costume, the symbol of an evil nature<sup>4</sup>. Colour in Kathakali indicates not only character but also birth, class, age and emotion.

The primary function of the Kathakali is very similar to that of the Sanskrit drama. Both these classical theatrical forms of India aim at creating *rasa* (aesthetic sentiment or emotion) in the mind of the *rasika* (one who has the capacity to enjoy *rasa*). As mentioned earlier, there are similarities as well as differences between Sanskrit drama and Kathakali. Unlike the former which is secular in outlook, the latter is religious and sacred.

The Chinese classical theatre *ching hsi*, or Peking drama, is commonly known as Peking or Beijing Opera. This theatrical form like Kathakali appeared only after the sixteenth century, although some of its characteristics can be traced back to Tang times (618-906 A.D.) through the Ming (1368-1644 A.D.) and Yuan (1280-1368 A.D.) dynasties. The Chinese actors, especially those who appear in *ching roles*, have their faces painted with elaborate designs of various colours. Here colour is employed for the purpose of denoting a certain type of character. Although sometimes colours are also used for stage effects and to present shapes of beasts, demons and gods, their main function is to symbolize the inner qualities of the characters represented on the stage.

The colours used for facial make-up in the Chinese theatre are red, blue, black, yellow, purple, white, gold and green. Red indicates loyal, honourable, brave, courageous and generous persons, emperors, heroes and high military officials. Although blue denotes roughness it also expresses loyalty and courage. Black conveys the idea of an honest and a vehement nature. Yellow represents clever but reserved persons. It is also used for gods and goddesses. Purple indicates loyalty

and filial piety. White is used for treacherous characters. It can also mean dignity and straightforwardness. A white patch on the nose is a characteristic of the comic role. This make-up is used for servants and other minor characters, too. Gold is seen on the faces of gods and other supernatural beings. Evil spirits, like devils and demons, are painted in green.

Chinese actors wear beards of different shapes for certain roles on the stage. The following colours are used for the beards: black, white, red and grey. The colour of the beard sometimes has a symbolic meaning. A long full beard in black, grey or white worn by certain characters symbolizes a powerful personage. In some cases old age is indicated by a white beard. The colour of the head-dresses of the actors sometimes performs the function of symbolizing the character on the stage.

Colour plays a very important role in the costumes of the Chinese actor. Here, as elsewhere, colour is a symbol of character. Red garments are worn by good persons: faithful ministers, army commanders and their wives and daughters, young people attending ceremonies, emperors and their concubines, etc. Red in certain situations indicates death. Green attire is worn by statesmen, generals, warriors and other military officials of virtuous nature. The beggar's dress is also green in colour. Yellow garments are worn on the stage by emperors and their relatives, empresses and princes. White is the colour of mourning. It is worn by very young and also by very old people. Black denotes violent and hostile characteristics in high-born men. Purple is used for scholars, and blue for dishonest statesmen. Ordinary people wear light blue garments. Pink represents youth. Turquoise blue is worn by old generals. Barbarian emperors and generals wear clothes of dark crimson<sup>5</sup>. Colour in the Chinese theatre expresses not only character but also emotion, birth, age, rank, status, class and place of action.

Kabuki is the most popular form of classical theatre in Japan. This theatre like the Kathakali and the Peking Opera came into existence only after the sixteenth century. Here, too, colour has meaning, as in the other three theatrical forms.

Kabuki has a make-up tradition which is similar in some respects to that of the Chinese theatre. The faces of actors performing certain Kabuki roles are painted with designs where colour has the important function of expressing the inner qualities of the character. White is the colour of the facial make-up used for ladies and handsome young men. Child actors are also painted in this colour. Generally speaking, white is associated with gentleness in the facial make-up of the Kabuki actor. Red denotes brave and choleric characters. Green is used for ghosts and other evil spirits. Grey stands for melancholy. Black and indigo are worn by vile and wicked characters. Black is used to stain the teeth of married women. This characteristic of colouring the teeth is common to both Sanskrit drama and Kabuki theatre. As mentioned before, the teeth of ogresses are painted white in the former type of theatre. On the Kabuki stage persons of noble birth are indicated by purple, which is also a symbol of pride, dignity and arrogance. Selfishness is expressed by dark brown.

Colour in the facial make-up of the Kabuki theatre is expressive of the character, emotion, age, birth and social position of its wearer. The colour of the costume of

the Kabuki actor is no exception to this rule. Dark grey and brown garments are worn by elderly men and women. The costumes of courtesans are red, orange, pink and purple in colour. Blue and green clothes are worn by fashionable youth. White, the colour of mourning sometimes symbolizes death<sup>6</sup>.

A wide range of colours are employed in the Oriental theatre. In the Sanskrit theatre, black, blue, yellow and red are primary colours; yellowish white (white and yellow mixed), pigeon (white and blue mixed), lotus (white and red mixed), green (yellow and blue mixed), dark red (blue and red mixed) and pale red (red and yellow mixed) are secondary colours. The colours of the Kathakali theatre are white, green, red, black and yellow. In the Chinese theatre, red, blue, black, yellow, purple, white, gold and green are used for painting faces; black, white, red and grey for beards. The colours of the costumes worn by the Chinese actors belong to one of two groups. Red, green, yellow, white and black are the primary colours; purple, blue, pink, turquoise blue and dark crimson are the secondary colours. The following colours are found in the Kabuki theatre: white, red, green, grey, dark grey, black, indigo, purple, brown, dark brown, orange and pink.

Similarities as well as differences may be discerned in the selection of colours to symbolize the inner qualities of the character. For instance, red, which is common to all four dramatic forms, expresses the furious sentiment or emotion in the Sanskrit theatre. This colour denotes vicious and violent natures in the Kathakali. Chinese actors with faces painted red represent loyalty, bravery and generosity. In the Kabuki theatre, red is used for brave and choleric characters. Let us take another example. Black conveys the fearful sentiment in the Sanskrit theatre. This colour represents destructive nature in the Kathakali. In the Chinese theatre black suggests ferocity and honesty. This colour is used for vile and wicked characters in Kabuki. As far as these two colours are concerned there appears to be a certain amount of uniformity in the ideas they express. White has a comic element in the Sanskrit theatre and Peking Opera. In the latter, it is also the colour of mourning, as in the Kabuki. Green is the colour of evil spirits in the Peking Opera and Kabuki. In the former it also expresses a virtuous nature, as in the Kathakali. Sometimes the same colour in the same theatre conveys different meanings in make-up and in costumes.

Generally speaking the characters in the classical theatre of India, China and Japan represent types of human beings rather than individuals, various colours being employed to represent these types on the stage. The colours used in the Sanskrit theatre, Kathakali, Peking Opera and Kabuki have a common function: they symbolize the emotions and qualities seen in human nature. In the theatres mentioned above, colours are substituted for words and they are chosen "for their sensitiveness to communicate ideas". In these classical theatres, "more than elsewhere, colour exists as the language of symbolism"<sup>7</sup>. □

# NOTES

1. Manomohan Ghosh, *The Natyasastra* ascribed to Bharata Muni, chap. 23, Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta, 1951. 2. *Ibid.* chap. 6.
2. *Ibid.*, chap. 6.
3. *Ibid.*, chap. 23.
4. K. Bharatha Iyer, *Kathakali: The Sacred Dance-Drama of Malabar*, chap. 7, Luzac & Company Ltd., London, 1955; G.A.C. Pandeya, *The Art of Kathakali*, chaps. 12-14, 2nd edition, Kitabistan, Allahabad, 1961.
5. A.C. Scott, *The Classical Theatre of China*, chap. 5, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, 1957; Kalvodova-Sis-Vanis, *Chinese Theatre*, Spring House, London; L.C. Arlington and Harold Acton, *Famous Chinese Plays*, Introduction, reissued edition, Russell & Russell, Inc., York, 1963.
6. A.S. Halford and G.M. Halford, *The Kabuki Handbook*, notes, second printing, Charles E. Tuttle Company, Tokyo, 1960; A.C. Scott, *The Kabuki Theatre of Japan*, chap. 7, second impression, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, 1956.
7. The use of different colours for make-up, beards and costumes to represent different emotions is not confined to the Oriental theatre alone. This practice was known even in the Greek theatre of the fifth century B.C. Says Allardyce Nicoll: "Thus it would seem that dark or dim colours signified grief or mourning (symbolism of emotion) and that queens wore garments in which purple played a predominant part (symbolism of station). In all probability the Greek dramatists were aided in their delineation of character and of soul-state by these means". (*The Development of the Theatre*, p. 39, George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., London, 1927). Colour symbolism played a significant role in the Roman theatre, too. There again the "old men usually dressed in white, young men in purple, parasites in grey, courtesans in yellow". (*Ibid.*, p. 57). In Sergei Eisenstein's essay on "Color and Meaning", there are numerous instances from the Occident to prove the existence of "absolute" relations between particular emotions and particular colors".