

Identifying Similarities between The Eastern and The Western Aesthetics: A Study of Rabindranath Tagore's Aesthetics and Longinus' Sublime

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Abstract:

In the Western tradition, Longinus's treatise *On the Sublime* became a foundational work that explored the elevation of human spirit through artistic greatness. On the other hand, in the Eastern context, Rabindranath Tagore's aesthetic philosophy explores a deep spiritual understanding of beauty as a unifying force between the human soul and the divine consciousness. Over the years, scholars have explored both thinkers independently. Although, there are various similarities between the Eastern and the Western philosophy. Both the writers have emphasized the emotional elevation that brings together art, spirit and morality. However they are separated by centuries and civilization but come together on the ground of aesthetic experience. Tagore's thoughts perceive beauty as a manifestation of the infinite within the finite. Similarly Longinus' notion of sublime focuses on the artistic greatness in the transportation of the soul. The study will also include the diminishing spiritual and emotional essence in modern literature, where artistic expression is often overshadowed by intellectualism, as observed by Harold Bloom (1973) and Cleanth Brooks (1947).

Keywords: The Eastern and the Western Aesthetics, Longinus and Tagore, Artistic Greatness, Elevation of soul, Divinity in Art.

Introduction:

“Sublime” is the greatest possible praise for a literary work. In the Western tradition, Longinus’s treatise *On the Sublime* became a foundational work that explored the elevation of the human spirit beyond the cognitive beliefs through artistic greatness, narrowly we can say a purple patch of Horace, which leads to the transportation of the soul. On the other hand, in the Eastern context, Rabindranath Tagore’s aesthetic philosophy, which is derived from his essays, songs, and poetic reflection, explores a deep spiritual understanding of beauty as a unifying force between the human soul and the divine consciousness. Over the years, scholars have explored both thinkers independently. Even though there are various similarities between the Eastern and the Western philosophies. Whereas the thoughts of Tagore on aesthetics are rooted in Indian spirituality and humanism, which are parallel to the ancient Greek concept of the sublime that similarly emphasizes the moral elevation along with artistic genius. Both emphasize the emotional elevation that brings together aesthetics, beauty of art, spirit and morality. Despite being separated by centuries and civilization, they come together on the grounds of aesthetic experience. Tagore's thoughts perceive beauty as a manifestation of “The infinite within the finite.”(Tagore,1917) Similarly Longinus' notion of sublime focuses on the artistic greatness in the elevation and transportation of the soul. In Longinus' time poets believe that the only purpose of writing poetry is to provide delight and prose to instruct. However, Longinus denied both of them and said that the meaning of poetry and prose is to transport the soul into the realm of ecstasy.

Sublimity is always an excellence in language, and from this the great poets and writers of prose have attained the highest place as writers. Sublimity is like a lightning flash, which reveals at once the genius of the orator or a writer while also possessing the power to carry the reader to ecstasy. As he himself asserts, "Sublime pleases all and pleases always" (Longinus). According to Longinus, being great is not enough; greatness needs self-control. While writing a work of genius one must have genuine emotions. Both art and nature are essential to achieve sublimity.

On the Sublime was originally written in the Greek language, and it is widely accepted as a milestone in Western aesthetic philosophy. It is classified under the genre of classical literary criticism and rhetoric. The author of this monumental work is also known as Pseudo-Longinus because it is still not clear whether Longinus exists or not. It is written in the form of a letter to his friend Postumius Terentianus. He was

also his fellow critic and a cultured friend. Longinus says in his work that he is going to discuss "a specific and powerful quality of literature—The Sublime." (Longinus) Sublime has the ability to uplift the soul and inspire the reader. It can create emotional elevation and elevate or transport our soul beyond reason or logic. Longinus also criticized most of the rhetorical treatises of his time for being too technical and for only focusing on style and structure. They did not talk about the greatness, elevation and, transportation of the soul. Throughout the work the tone of Longinus is personal and conventional because it is written in the form of a letter for his friend Postumius Terentianus.

On the other hand, Rabindranath Tagore talks quite similarly about the aesthetics of literature that speaks of beauty, perception, and emotions. These aspects play an essential role in Indian aesthetics, along with imagination. A feeling of wholeness of soul after reading a work of art is a crucial concept of art and aesthetics. Tagore not only defines art but also connects art and aesthetics in a way that resonates with the human soul beyond cognitive power. According to Rabindranath Tagore, art is an expression of human emotion, whether written or painted, and can not be separated from each other. Rabindranath Tagore's aesthetic imagination centers on art as a spiritual experience, which is the core of Indian aesthetics. If we look at Bharatmuni's concept of "Rasa" or Anandvardhana's "Dhawani" theory, we will find that all Indian aesthetics are based on the concept of spirituality. This spiritual nature of aestheticism of India always connects it to a universal, humanistic truth through the appreciation of beauty, emotion, and imagination. Tagore believed art should be a humble and harmonious blend of the individual and the universal. In this amalgam, one can feel the connection of soul to nature. In Indian aesthetics nature plays a pivotal role as a source of inspiration and rhythm. His philosophy extended to his educational approach where he emphasized holistic development through creativity, artistic freedom, and an appreciation for art, beauty, imagination, and diverse cultures.

Rationals

This topic is chosen to bridge the philosophical gap between the Eastern and Western aesthetic systems by drawing a comparative study between Rabindranath Tagore's idea of the divine aesthetic experience and Longinus's notion of the sublime. The belief that both aesthetic theories, however originated in different cultural contexts, converge on the transcendental function of art which is to elevate the soul

beyond material limitations. The study will also include the diminishing spiritual and emotional essence in modern literature, where artistic expression is often overshadowed by intellectualism as observed by Harold Bloom (1973) and Cleanth Brooks(1947)

Objectives

- To establish a dialogue between Tagore's aesthetic philosophy and the Theory of Sublime.
- To find common approaches between Eastern and Western conceptions of beauty and transcendence.
- To examine Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence* and *The Heresy of Paraphrase* by Cleanth Brooks to reflect the loss of aesthetic essence in contemporary literature.
- To understand how the Modernist and the Post Modernist writers and their works are contrasted with their fragmentation of meaning with the spiritual unity of Tagore's and Longinus' aesthetic views

Research Questions

1. What are the central aesthetic principles of Rabindranath Tagore and Longinus, and how do they conceptualize the experience of beauty and sublimity?
2. In what ways do their ideas reflect common spiritual or emotional aspirations despite belonging to different philosophical traditions and cultures?
3. How do Tagore's aesthetic unity and Longinus's concept of elevated sublimity interact or overlap?
4. What does the comparison reveal about the universal nature of artistic experience?
5. How do modern critics like Harold Bloom and Cleanth Brooks reflect the loss of essence that contrasts with Tagore's aesthetic views and Longinus's vision of the sublime?

Methodology

This research will follow a qualitative and comparative analytical approach. It involves close textual analysis of primary sources—Longinus's *On the Sublime* and Tagore's key philosophical and literary writings such as *Sadhana: The Realisation of Life* (1913) and an essay named *What is Art*(1917)

Secondary sources include books on aesthetics, philosophy, and literary theories. Comparative aesthetics is used as the main framework to bridge the Eastern and the Western divide.

Literature Review

Longinus's *On the Sublime* is an essential magnum opus among the Western aesthetic theories. It has influenced later thinkers such as Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. His notion of the sublime as the product of grandeur in thought, passion, and diction has been studied extensively. Scholars such as Neil Hertz and Thomas Weiskel have explored its psychological and rhetorical dimensions.

In contrast, Rabindranath Tagore's aesthetics which he had expressed in works like *Sadhana*, *The Religion of Man*, and *The Philosophy of Beauty*. These works are the voices of Indian spiritual philosophy. Critics such as Krishna Kripalani(1962) and K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar (1965) has emphasized his synthesis of the individual and the infinite in art.

In her book entitled *The Language of Literature and Its Meaning: A Comparative Study of Indian and Western Aesthetics* (2019), Ashima Shrawan talks about the language of literature, structure, meaning which includes theories like Formalism, New Criticism, Statistics, Structuralism, Post Structuralism and Semiotics etc. For Indian aesthetics she talks about Rasa, Alankar, Rati and Dhavni, and so on and so forth. She particularly focused on Kuntak's theory of a vakrokti, Anand vardhan's theory of Dhavni in comparison with Russian formalism and the Deconstruction in western aspects.

On the other hand, Malcolm Heath(2012), who is a Professor of Greek Language and Literature at the University of Leeds, talks about the nature of sublime. He has given his observations and the deep understanding of Longinus sublime.

At another place Casper de Jonge(2012) who is a Professor of Greek Language and Literature at the Leiden University Centre for the Arts in Society, gives his view that *On the sublime* presents itself as a response to the work of Augustine critic Caecilius of Cateacte.

In one of her papers Suzanne Guerlac(1985) says that sublime is traditionally read as a manual of elevated style and the domain of merely rhetoric, subjective feeling and emotive structure.

In the works of aesthetics about Rabindranath Tagore, Kaushal Kishor Sharma (1988) talks about Tagore's view of aestheticism and art. Tagore has not written intentionally as a writer of aesthetics but close studies today shows that his works have the elements of aestheticism in his various writings. Kishor sharma only focuses on understanding Tagore's art and aesthetics.

Kenneth R Stunkel (2003), a Professor of History at Monmouth University, talks about the postmodern thinkers on Tagore's philosophy; he says that postmodern thinkers often separate art from real life and focus on theory. However Tagore says life and art are closely connected to each other. Although Tagore was influenced by western ideas still he never applied much theory on art. He believed that lasting meaning is necessary for life.

Vishwanath S Naravane(1960), in his studies on Tagore, talks about how aesthetics is the core of Tagore's entire philosophy. He had compared Tagore with Emmanuel Kant who placed Aesthetics as the final stage of the philosophical system. The modern critic Harold Bloom(1973) talks about the anxiety of influence in his book by the same name. His central vision focuses on the relationship between the traditional and individual aspects; he says that anxiety of influence comes out of a complex act of strong misreading, a creative interrelational. He calls it "poetic misprision."(Bloom, 1973)

Another modern critic Cleanth Brooks has given the concept of the “Heresy of paraphrase”. Theorist Mark Royden Winchell says that Brooks helped to move the study of literature away from the historical and language based approaches. And leads it towards close reading and a profound and careful analysis of the text by which one can feel the ecstasy.

After viewing various sources of literary texts, journals and critics, I have discovered that previous research had worked on Eastern and Western aesthetics as separate entities. However there is very little comparative analysis on both legends of aesthetic theory. This study identifies the gap in literature by focusing on their shared spiritual concern—the elevation of the soul through art. It will also talk about the modern critical perspectives (Bloom’s “Anxiety of influence”, Brooks’s “Heresy of

paraphrase”) to highlight how contemporary criticism departs from these transcendental ideals.

Longinus and the Western Concept of the Sublime

This great work of Western Aesthetics *On the sublime* which is originally written in Greek language. It is written in the genre of classical literary criticism and rhetoric. This work is written in the form of letters to his friend Postumius Terentianus. This work is personal and conventional. Sublime is difficult to define in definition. It is a quality and not a formula. It cannot be measured or taught like a rule. It cannot be captured by rigid logic. It is a natural excellence which appears suddenly like a flash of lightning and this causes the audience to feel elevated and inspired, forget themselves in wonder and experience a sense of divine or immortal.

Longinus has given some types of faults which pretends to be sublime but are actually flaws in disguise. These are the following called Turgidity, overheated emotions and artificial elevation. As he asserts, “A writer who forces emotions or exaggerates, loses true sublimity and falls into tasteless excess.” (Longinus) According to Longinus these faults happen when the poets are too eager to sound impressive or as a consequence of lack of restraint over their emotions. It also happens when they do not understand the true source of sublimity. A detailed explanation of the errors of writers in achieving sublimity, as elucidated by Longinus are given below:

- **Turgidity** - Turgidity of expression means confusion in imagery. It refers to a tasteless expression which should not have any place in literature. The poets who are unknowingly making this fault thinking that they are inspired but in fact they are writing like children. This fault is perhaps the most difficult to avoid.
- **Puerility**- Puerility is a pedantic conceit. It is the direct opposite of all that is great. Usually the author glides into this when they make for what is unusual, artificial above all disagreeable; as a result they write nearly nonsense and their works merely remain as a piece of affectation. It may be considered as the affectation of knowledge of a writer.
- **Parenthyruses**- It is a fault in which the writer shows passion where no passion is needed. The writer becomes unrestrained where restraint is needed. This fault occurs when someone writes in a way to show emotions out of passion.

Longinus proposes five sources of achieving sublimity. He has also given examples of how one can achieve sublime and the power of writing sublime. He says that greatness in writing comes from the natural genius, stating "Art is perfect when it seems to be nature and nature succeeds best when it is supported by art." (Longinus)

The five sources of sublimity given by Longinus are as follows.

1. The capacity of grasping great conception
2. Grandeur of passion
3. Proper handling of figures of thought and figures of speech
4. Noble phraseology
5. Dignified composition

According to Longinus the first two sources of sublime are innate means one can not acquire them from the world, rather they are inherent in nature. While the remaining three sources of sublime can be achieved through artistic expression and can be learned by practicing and experience.

Decline in genius

Longinus believes that "literary barrenness" is spreading all over the world. According to him, the cause of the decline of great literature is the moral decline of the people. As he himself notes, "corruption of the soul leads to corruption of language and imagination."

Money and worldly pleasures are the main obstacles in the growth of great literature. He believes that it is happening due to degradation of morals and ethics. Other factors of democracy and also that the people have developed a love for money which can never be satisfied, increase this gap of barrenness more and more. The love for pleasure leads us to slavery and makes us low. It creates lawlessness and so all greatness of the soul has dwindled. On the other hand, people also neglect to improve their morals.

Tagore's Aesthetic Vision

In terms of artistic expression, Art is a creation and aesthetics is a branch of philosophy of art. Art is an object whereas aesthetics is subjective in nature according to Rabindranath Tagore. The same thing which resonates with an individual can not be a source of pleasure for another because beauty lies in perception. Tagore in one of his essays titled *What is Art* (1917), explains the meaning of art in terms of individual personality especially through the relationship with the world. He says that the desires of human beings work on two levels. The first level is when they fulfill

their essential needs and then they search for the aesthetic needs. In order to fulfill the aesthetic needs human search for art and aesthetics. According to Tagore there is an inseparable connection of human beings with art and aesthetics which is precisely why art should be moral, so that it could uplift the human soul towards the ideal realm.

According to Tagore beauty, perception, emotions and wholeness are the basic concepts of art that are the core of aesthetics. They not only define art but also connect art and aesthetics into a one whole. For Tagore, art is an expression of human emotion which one can feel together with each and every aspect of life. As he asserts, "In art, man reveals himself and not his objects." (Tagore,1917) He further says that art and emotion can not be separated from each other. "The highest education is that which does not merely give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence."(Tagore, 1913)

Rabindranath Tagore's aesthetic imagination for which he is known among the greatest of writers, focuses on art as spiritual experience. This spiritual experience with art becomes a means of connecting the individual to the universal truth. It works through the appreciation of beauty, emotion and imagination. He believed that art should be created in such a way that it can make a harmonious blend of the individual and the universal. "The infinite within the finite."He further argues that nature should be a guiding source. He gives a deep reverence for nature as a source of inspiration and rhythm of emotions and wholeness. His philosophy further extended to educational approaches which deeply emphasize holistic development. According to Rabindranath Tagore this development can be possible through creativity and artistic freedom.

- Art along with spiritualism- the core of Indian aesthetics lies in spiritual elevation. Tagore says that art becomes a spiritual expression, a way to express emotions to its fullest. In this sense the emotions along with art, finds a connection with the human spirit. Beyond worldly materialism it can behold the higher truth.
- Tagore captured beauty not only with sensory pleasures and worldly perspectives but as an experience that connected the soul to a higher truth along with spirituality.

- Nature plays a pivotal role in his philosophy of aesthetics and art. Nature as a primary inspiration with the rhythm, harmony and scenic beauty provides crucial inspiration for creativity. However each and every aesthetic perception begins with sensory engagement but this engagement is only possible with the blessings of nature.
- The union of individuals with the universal only possible through artistic greatness. When a work of art pleases a person on individual ground and at the same time it provides pleasure as an universal approach, that is the beauty of art. It can be independently individual and also universal in nature.

Tagore at the same time reveals the essential value of emotions which plays a crucial part in art and aesthetics. However he has already discussed that emotions are inseparable from art. He further elaborates his views on the emotions aspect of art. He says that when the right words find their exact place then they are able to evoke the desired emotion.

Comparative Study

There are ample similarities between the aesthetic views of Rabindranath Tagore and Longinus. According to Longinus who had especially written his treatise for rhetoric however it can be applied into any work of art. His given concept the Sublime is regarded as the greatest praise for any literary work. which can transport the human soul to the realm of Beauty and higher truth. On the same grounds of Similarity, Tagore discussion is about the universality of human nature in art. According to him art should be the union of individuals to the higher truth along with the natural aspect and emotional elevation. Tagore's views on aesthetics are rooted in Indian spirituality and humanism. His core points are parallel to the ancient Greek concept of the sublime of Longinus. Both emphasize the emotional elevation that brings together art, spirit and morality. Although they are separated by centuries and civilizations still they came together on the artistic ground of aesthetic experience.

- **Elevation of the soul**

"Sublimity is the echo of a great soul"(Longinus). As Longinus has said that the aim of art is to transport the human soul into the realm of ecstasy. Where one can even for that particular time, forget the world and feel an aesthetic experience beyond ego and materialism.

In terms of Rabindranath Tagore, the essence of elevation is similar to Longinus' transportation of the soul where Tagore says that a work of art can uplift the human

soul into the realm of beauty which leads to the union with the higher truth beyond worldly concerns.

- **Divinity in Art**

For Longinus the greatness of art expresses what is already divine in our nature. He says human beings possess an inner desire to behold the great and universal truth. The similar essence we find in the words of Rabindranath Tagore when he says that beauty, art and aesthetics has a divine form in itself which leads to the universal spirit.

- **Emotional elevation**

Longinus says that the sublimity is like a "lightning effect of a thunderstorm" (Longinus). which triggers our emotions into ecstasy and transportation of the soul. On the other hand Tagore says that art has the power to evoke our emotions into the realm of ecstasy. He says that this ecstasy brings "the emotional harmony with nature". (Tagore)

- **Universality of nature**

Both the writers agree on the universality of art and nature which brings about the universal approach. For this Longinus notes that "sublime pleases all and pleases always." (Longinus,...) And Tagore has given his views that reveal the essential nature of aestheticism. He says that beauty is eternal and universal.

Modern Context and the Loss of Essence

In the modern age we find a decadence which is the moral decline in the great artistic period. As Longinus has already said in his work even at his time there was a decline of morals in literary works. Similarly that decline did not stop there but it came at a wider level in the works of modern writers. We are not able to find sublimity in their writings. In the works of modern writers there is a lack of coherence, nothing is particular. In modern views of art we find that many of the traditional elements are being pushed out of the literature.

Harold Bloom in his work *Anxiety of Influence* (1973) developed the ideas proposed by Walter Jackson Bates in *The Burden of the Past and the English Poets*. Bates says the poets inevitably feel that their precursors may have already accomplished all that can be accomplished now. Bloom discusses the way in which poets deal with this fear or 'anxiety'. He suggests that writing of all poets involves the rewriting of earlier poets. And this rewriting always and inevitably involves some form of "misprision", a kind of misreading that allows the later writer's creativity to emerge.

Cleanth Brooks in his scholarly work titled *Heresy of Paraphrase*, proposes that it is an act of heresy to paraphrase a poem because the meaning and essence which lies in the original poem, can not be accurately summarized in paraphrase. When the essence and emotions vanish from a work of art whether poem or any literary work then the transportation of soul can not be possible.

Conclusion, Findings, limitations and Recommendations

- **Conclusion**

After comparing the views of both the writers, from the Eastern to the Western, I have found there are various similarities between the two perspectives which lies at the core of aesthetics theories. When we compare these great thoughts, powerful emotions, generosity of nature, elevation of soul, achievement of higher truth, then these aspects are hard to see in modern literary works where fragmentation and distorted images often have the place of honour. My argument is also supported by modern critics such as Harold Bloom and Cleanth Brooks. The essence of literature on which both the writers, Longinus and Tagore have emphasized, is no longer seen in modern literature. This loss of essence is also captured by modern critics such as Brooks and Bloom which also strengthen my argument.

- **Findings**

In this whole work I have found with the lens of comparative method that there are some minor differences between the views of Rabindranath Tagore and Longinus which lies on the level of spirituality. However there are various points where both the Eastern and Western perspectives converge.

This study also connects the modern critical theories of Bloom and Brooks where they highlight the shift from transcendence or transportation to interpretation. It shows the process of how beauty and sublimity which were once seen as the spiritual experience are now becoming and reduced to linguistic play. Where there is no place for spiritual and moral emotions.

- **Limitations**

These have focused on a vital aspect of literature where all the essential values are required. However some critics such as Harold Bloom and Cleanth Brooks advocate the point which I am trying to make. In his work *The Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom represents this condition that art becomes an act or rivalry and misreading rather than revelation. On the other hand Cleanth Brooks' concept of *Heresy of Paraphrase* shows the narrowing of aesthetics appreciation to textual form. It denies the spiritual wholeness that both Tagore and Longinus valued. However these findings are

essential still they are very few in nature, there must be more critics who were in favour of these findings. My study has focused apparently on Similarities between the both traditional elements of literature still there are various gaps available to find in depth the reasons and suggestions for further studies.

- **Recommendations**

This work has focused on the very essential nature of literature. In this area of work my study mainly focuses on the similarities between the two literary traditions; however, there are still several gaps that need deeper exploration and findings along with the possible directions for future research. I hope more such works should be done in future.

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