

The Meaning of Love: Insights from Medieval South Asia

by Sonam Kachru

Neville, in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, ponders love with these words: "To be contracted by another person into a single being—how strange." More than a thousand years earlier, approximately in the eighth century, a playwright named Bhavabhuti gave us the opportunity of overhearing a character express his wonder at love in his celebrated play "The Last Act of Rama" (*Uttararamacaritam*):



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The state where there is no twoness in response of joy or sorrow,/ Where the heart finds rest, where feeling does not dry with age,/ Where concealments fall away in time and the essential love is ripened—/ Blessed is this state of human fulfillment, which we find once if ever. [1]

Bhavabhuti's hero, none other than the divine Rama, is more careful than Neville in wondering not at the contraction in love into a single being, but something more delicate still: "the state where there is no twoness..." That line begins a walk across a tight-rope to a wondrous and wondering close.

More than a definition of love, or a simple utterance of a feeling, Bhavabhuti gives us a person thinking through a feeling, feeling the texture of his own thoughts. It is precisely in moments like these that the historian of emotions can find new insights to approach the meaning of past experiences.

Here Rama speaks, wondering at love as his wife lies sleeping in his lap. Love is here not so much a state of desire for what is absent, or a state registering the overpowering presence of the other. He is not alone. But however present, his wife is yet distant, reliving in sleep the horrors of her past when she was lost to her husband, and fearing for their future. She shakes, utters sounds that are unintelligible to him, fearfully dreaming. In this, the last moment they will share together before he is tragically constrained to banish her, he is moved to ponder love at the semi-transparent boundaries between people.

Rama's last words are important: "...which we find once if ever." [2] More literally, this is a state "somehow" acquired, and "somehow" is a poet's use of a philosopher's judgment that love is spontaneous, a state not to be acquired through discipline, goal-oriented action, or thought of as a predictable outcome of a series of causes one can manipulate. "You cannot speak of love and causes in the same breath"—so Bhavabhuti tells us again and again in his plays, intending to include not only romantic love, but the love between parents and children, and the love of siblings as well. [3] Almost a gift, love so understood is not merely one among a number of events, but rather something more like a condition for the sequences of events in our lives acquiring meaningful shape.

Love like this seems to be invisible in reports on the emotions in medieval South Asia. From the existing literature, such as it is, you might believe that love is a concept exhausted by varieties of one of the two following categories: from at least the fourth century of the common era onwards, there is love as continuous with *kama*, desire, passion and sexual delight, part of the urbane (and courtly) disciplines and cultures of pleasure; [4] and increasingly from the seventh century onwards, there is love as *bhakti*, the cultivation of, or the spontaneous gift of, the grace of devoted service and the experience of heightened states of affection consequent to one's connection to God. [5] These two overarching forms of love have, among other things, this in common: they are not valorized by pre-modern or modern commentators primarily for the epistemological content or salience of the cognitive dimensions of the emotion. [6] Rama's verse shows us that there is more to be said for the meanings of love.

Take the phrase "no twoness" which translates the word *advaita*. This is impossible to present in translation as the event of consequence that it is, though a comparison can help. It was a matter of no little significance, for example, when Shakespeare could use "religious" as an adjective hot on the heels of the word "love" without a suitably exalted object of such emotion. Speaking of secular love in theological terms has a not incomparable charge as the aesthetic provocation of "not two" here. [7] For the adjective "not two" in South Asia is more often than not a theologian's adjective to describe what is most real, or perhaps a criterion for

describing an ascetic's success in achieving a normatively valued state of mind, even as the phrase in the verse quoted above: "no-twoness", or non-difference "in joy and sorrow", leans on a long history of the way in which ideals of self-cultivation enjoined in practices of the self are described. In love, Rama is finding a state as normatively valuable as the highest ideals of his culture.

Whereas in practices of the self a single person was said to be indifferent to the contraries of joy and sorrow,[8] we are now told there is a way of bringing two people into view, where we cannot distinguish them, at least not in their receptivity and response to the world. But they are not, for that, one person, a single being. It is worth saying here that to speak of love like this in a theological idiom is not simply to promote the longstanding metaphorical image in South Asia that draws a comparison between the release of sexual climax and the release experienced in freedom from suffering and ignorance, both of which are often glossed by the same word in Sanskrit, *moksa*, "release". The philosopher Yajnavalkya once famously compared the loss of individuality when knowledge of the self is acquired to the oblivion of release found in a lover's arms.[9] But Bhavabhuti's implicit analogy works in the other direction, as it were, using theology as the source of the resonance of a secular experience; and this is not the "bliss" of union, which in Yajnavalkya's metaphor, promotes an inability to keep either person in view. Yajnavalkya thought in such states there was no "second" item for us to be aware of, just the experience of bliss.[10] Bhavabhuti's "not two" is quite different.

T. S. Eliot, true to form, sternly insisted that one could not look for the absolute in sensual love. Perhaps Bhavabhuti would not find the implicit contrast Eliot works with meaningful. In claiming that receptivity to sensual experience in love does not lie in an individual alone, he is also presenting love as the realization of an epistemic perspective that is quite profoundly new: *the fulfillment of being human*, which does not require him to renounce the affective richness of love as embodied.[11] Bhavabhuti's grammar is nicely weighted here to express the bold thought: that being human, an intrinsically temporal mode of being, can be a horizon for absolute felicities. There is a history to "being human", or "human-ness", serving to orient one's moral concern. Some, like the divinity Krishna, thought this could be pathological; others, like the Buddhist Candragomin, thought that such an orientation, linked to the fulfillment of happiness as a goal, ought to be encouraged.[12] No one I know has expressed the intrinsic felicity of being human as starkly as Bhavabhuti does here. His phrasing promotes a conceptual reorientation worthy of the aesthetic shock of speaking of "no twoness" in the context of love.

The verse, in another translation, more perspicuously enacts what it seeks to say: it moves from a consideration of the state - "*what love is...*" - to considering the emotion as a locus, "*that in which...*":

That state when two become one/ in joy as in sorrow,/ where you find rest together/ and feelings never age/ but deepen and ripen as you move/ through the layers of time...[13]

The shift is appropriate to bring love into focus as a peculiarly rich experience of time, meaning both that it is a temporal experience, but also one in which time itself seems to become manifest. Yet here time is no obstacle, no threat, no limitation, as it may be in any theology which valorizes non-temporal conceptions of what is most real. Notice *how* the verse says what it says: "where there is rest, a coming to a stop..." That seems as if it were along the lines of a valorization of endings, as if we are being asked to look beyond time for our source of felicity: as if time itself threatens any stable experience of happiness. Yet the next thought repudiates this: this form of being in time is that "in which, or that whose intrinsic savor, experiential flavor or mood (*rasa*)" is something that change in time, or old age, "cannot seize".[14]

The elusive word *rasa* for Bhavabhuti names the internal experiential correlate of the coherence a narrative description confers on a life when a sequence of events is brought under an aesthetically unified description.[15] It names what it is like for time to be experienced as meaningful, and not as a mindless sequence.

Unlike ordinary experiences, or emotional states, love is a temporal condition in which time is an instrument of felicity, of disclosure: love, to paraphrase our verse, is precisely that "which abides, which is present (*sthitam*), after time removes all veils, or as the layers of time fall away, when pure affection and love matures and ripens..." Love in time is not experiencing more of the same, nor does being in time imply only the suffering of loss. Time is a condition for epistemic disclosure and thus also possible concealment.

The term *avarana*[16], meaning something which conceals, like a cloth, has a specific technical resonance for certain philosophers in South Asia, naming the structures of experience, both cognitive and affective, that account for our phenomenological possibilities as beings in time, but which serve thereby to occlude what is most real. Love is a felicity not to be had by turning away from time, but by living with and through time. It is a wonder that transforms time itself.

I hope this gives the reader some sense of the kind of shift I find striking here. I have stressed above that Bhavabhuti does not say that "two become one". When T. S. Eliot read John Donne's striking phrase: "Our two soules therefore, which are one" he thought that we had here one of the chief innovations of Donne and a candidate for a revolution in conceptions of human emotional states: the union, the fusion and identification of souls in sexual love.[17] But we might ask the kind of question Eliot did of Donne: what is the background belief against which Bhavabhuti's equally revolutionary thoughts may be measured, if it is not courtly love - the aesthetics and practical cultivation of sexual fulfillment - nor a simple-minded secularization

of theological ideals?

Rama and Sita are married, not young lovers seeking union. And that makes a difference for the dynamics of this verse. In the theology of everyday life as imagined in Brahmanical theory of a ritually organized life,[18] a man who takes up a social role as the head of a household (unlike an ascetic, or indeed a celibate student) is not a unit sufficient unto himself.[19] He is missing, as Yajñavalkya would put it, "half of one's self", that is, his wife.[20] But while we often find statements asserting that the agent of a domestic ritual is not a discrete individual but a couple, what we miss in such normative literature is a sense of the *significance* of this - of the emotions that are correlated with it, of the phenomenological texture of what is schematically expressed by the norms that guide domestic life. What is it like to be half of a way of being fully human?

What Bhavabhūti shows us in a single verse and in the narrative of which it is a part, I would suggest, is an intensification of the normative weight of such explorations in literature and in the ubiquitous mythologies where happiness is centered in divine couples. If love in sexual pleasure is the emotion of coincidence, of consummation, and love as desire the exploration of palpable absence, then love for Bhavabhūti is a state in which recognition explores its limits at the horizon of reciprocity. It is intrinsically temporal, as you will recall: a peculiar state in which time reveals itself as the ultimate locus not of loss through change, but of felicity through consonance when change is not diminishment and loss, but fulfillment, a "coming into completion" in time. And through this, Bhavabhūti remarked, lovers' responses through love to changing circumstances keep up with one another, being as intimate with one another as skin to bone - an implication of the word *anugata*, translated weakly as "consonance".

But such felicity, as Bhavabhūti's play demonstrates, involves no secure passage through time; rather, it is a labor of keeping up with what love does to us. Indeed, it is a labor of keeping up with what love does to the experience of time itself.

[1] *advaitam sukha-dukhayor anugatam sarvāsv avasthāsu yad/ viśrāmo hṛdayasya yatra jarasā yasminn ahāryo rasah |/ kālenāvaraṇātyayāt pariṇate yat sneha-sāre sthitaṃ/ bhadrāṃ tasya sumānuṣasya katham apy ekam hi tat prāpyate ||* (*Uttarāmacaritam*, 1:39). Translation in Michael Coulson, *Three Sanskrit Plays*, (Suffolk: Penguin Classics, 1981), 298. See Sheldon Pollock, *Rama's Last Act* (New York: Clay Sanskrit Library, New York University Press, 2007).

[2] Ibid.

[3] See Coulson, *Three Sanskrit Plays*, 318. For *Rama's Last Act*, see Pollock, *Rama's Last Act*, 329; 151.

[4] See Daud Ali, *Courtly Culture and Political Life in Early Medieval India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 209-52; Laura Desmond, "Disciplining Pleasure: The Erotic Science of the Kāmasūtra" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2011).

[5] See William M. Reddy, "The Bhakti Troubadour: Vaishnavism in Twelfth Century Bengal and Orissa," in *The Making of Romantic Love: Longing and Sexuality in Europe, South Asia and Japan, 900-1200 C. E.*, William M. Reddy, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 223-90.

[6] See Surendranath Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 350-8; see also Lee Siegel, *Sacred and Profane Dimensions of Love in Indian Traditions as Exemplified in the Gitagovinda of Jayadeva* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

[7] Owen Barfield, *History in English Words* (Hudson: Lindisfarne Press, 1967), 156; Cf. *Romeo and Juliet*, Act 1, Scene 2: 90-5.

[8] See *Bhagavadgīta* verses 2.38a; 2.48; 6.32.

[9] *Bṛhadāraṇyaka-Upaniṣad*, 4.3.21; see A. K. Ramanujan, "On Woman Saints," in *The Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan*, Vinay Dharwadker, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1999), 270-9.

[10] *Bṛhadāraṇyaka-Upaniṣad*, 4.3.23.

[11] See Coulson, *Three Sanskrit Plays*, 288-9.

[12] See the Kashmirian recension of the *Bhagavadgīta*, 2.11; see Candragomin, *Sisyalekha, Epistle to a Student*, verses 61-3, in the edition of Ivan P. Minaev, "Poslane k'ucheniku. Soch. Chandragomina," *Zapiski Vostochnago Otdelenija Russkago Archeologiceskago Obščestva* 4 (1889): 29-52.

[13] Translation by David Shulman, ed. and Velcheru Narayana Rao, trans., "Bhavabhūti on Cruelty and Compassion," in *The Wisdom of Poets: Studies in Tamil, Telugu and Sanskrit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 255-93; quot. 256.

[14] Ibid.

[15] See Pollock, *Rama's Last Act*, 43-4.

[16] Ibid.

[17] See See Ronald Shuchard, ed., *T. S. Eliot, The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1994), 54; 274.

[18] See Donald R. Davis, Jr., *The Spirit of Hindu Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1.

[19] *Apastambha Dharma Sutra*, II.6.13, 16-17; see also *Jaimini Mimamsasutra*: VI. 1. 17; quoted in P. V. Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra: Ancient and Medieval Religious and Civil Law*, vol. II, part I (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Series, Poona, 1941), 429.

[20] See *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad*: 1.4.3; see also *Satapathabrahmana*: V. 2.1, quoted in P. V. Kane, (*op. cit*), 428.

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