Emotion, Memory, and Modernity: Navarasa Theory in the Paintings of Satish Gujral

Indu
Research Scholar
Department of Fine Arts
Swami Vivekanand Subharti Univ.
NH-58, Delhi-Haridwar
Bypass Road, Meerut
Email: fineartsindu@gmail.com

Pooja Gupta
HOD
Department of Fine Arts
Swami Vivekanand Subharti Univ.
NH-58, Delhi-Haridwar
Bypass Road, Meerut

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:
Received: 01-06-26
Approved: 18-06-26

Indu
Pooja Gupta

Emotion, Memory, and Modernity: Navarasa Theory in the Paintings of Satish Gujral

Artistic Narration 2026,
Vol. XVII, No. 1,
Article No.05 Pg.038-045

Similarity Check: 15%

Online available at:
https://anubooks.com/journal-volume/artistic-narration-june-2026-vol-xvii-no1

Referred by:
DOI:*https://doi.org/10.31995/an.2026.v17i01.005*

Abstract

This article analyzes the visual depiction of Navarasa (Nine Emotions) in the artwork of Satish Gujral (1925-2020), one of the most prominent modernist painters from the subcontinent. Through close reading of selected works from his Expressionist and mural phases, and by examining these works in the context of Partition trauma, loss of hearing, and postcolonial cultural dislocation, it is argued that Gujral's canvases establish an on-going dialogue—between ancient Sanskrit aesthetic philosophies and the fractured emotional landscape of South Asia during the mid-late 20th century. Navarasa is composed of the following 'nine emotions': Shrinkara (Love); Hasya (Humour); Karuna (Pathos); Raudra (Fury); Vira (Courage); Bhayanaka (Fear); Bibhatsa (Disgust); Adbhuta (Amazement); Shanta (Peace). Contrary to being simply an antiquarian reference in his artwork, Navarasa provides the structural grammatical apparatus through which Gujral translates the untranslatable into a visual language that can be understood inter-culturally and inter-linguistically. By also placing his work within the larger theoretical context of the trans-regional transmission of Indian aesthetic traditions, this article proposes that the historical emotional modernism of Gujral provides a fruitful area of comparative inquiry for scholars of visual culture within the broader South and Southeast Asian region.

Keywords

Navarasa, Satish Gujral, Indian modernism, aesthetics, Partition, affect theory, postcolonial art

https://doi.org/10.31995/an.2026.v17i01.005

Introduction

In mid-1950s, a critic named Mulk Raj Anand came upon the early works of artist Satish Gujral. His first impression was of being struck by the "visible wounds" portrayed in Gujral's paintings; they did not depict suffering but embodied it. The audience found this immediacy remarkable compared to what they had seen before (i.e., the realism of academic painting and the abstractions of Western artists), but it had not been created merely because the artist's life had been so full of tragedy. Anand noted that while Gujral's works conveyed much about his own life, such as having survived the massacres, and having been deaf since childhood due to a serious injury, what really distinguished them was their ability to convey a message completely through the mediums of colour and form as opposed to needing to potentially rely on spoken or written language for communication between people from different cultures.

Unfortunately, viewing Gujral's work purely from a trauma biographical perspective limits the intellectual ambition of his works. The author proposes that Gujral's canvases also present philosophical propositions and can be understood as sustained interventions into the navarasa (nine basic emotion) theory of classical Indian aesthetics exemplified in Bharata Muni's Natyashastra and developed throughout the history of Sanskrit commentary from the Abhinavabharati of the tenth-century author Abhinavagupta to the rasa-dhvani synthesis of the Kashmiri school's writings of the eighth through the twelfth centuries. According to navarasa theory, the spectator does not merely observe the experience of the nine rasas (fundamental emotional essences) that compose the art work, but he/she re-creates this experience through direct visceral participation with the artwork; thus, Gujral creates a co-creative experience between the art work and its beholder that prefigures the most significant tenets of current affect theory by more than a thousand years. [1]

Navarasa Theory: Aesthetic Foundations and Conceptual Stakes

According to the Natyashastra, drama and all other forms of aesthetic performances have the potential to evoke in the refined or educated audience (known as sahridaya, or "one who shares the heart") an elevated level of feeling unlike typical feelings experienced through one's life. This elevated feeling, known as rasa, can be understood as the "flavor" or "essence" of an experience. However, the use of food as an analogy is somewhat misleading since it does not necessarily help one understand rasa very clearly.

Bharata states that rasa comes into being through the interaction of three elements: vibhava (what causes emotion), anubhava (the manifestation or showing of emotions), and vyabhichari bhava (the conditions that are temporarily present and surround the overall feeling being expressed). The Natyashastra categorization describes eight rasas: shringara (romantic), hasya (humorous), karuna (sadness), raudra (anger), vira (heroic), bhayanaka (fear), bibhatsa (disgust), adbhuta (wonder) along with a possible ninth rasa (shanta [peace]), which has been a source of debate which Abhinavagupta views as an underlying foundation or end point of the

other rasas, that from the perspective of human emotional experiences and expressions ultimately gives rise to all human emotions and ultimately, affectively returns to exist.[2]

Applying Rasa theory to the Visual Arts requires a significant amount of transposition. Bharata's structure was developed based on the context of Naatya, which integrates performance, in the form of gesture, music, costume, and poetic text, with the mechanics of Naatya creating a time-based interaction between the performer and the audience. On the other hand, a painting or sculpture is a static arrangement of forms that the onlooker must enliven using their educated imagination and aesthetics. The Chitrasutras from the Vishnudharmottara Purana, the Manasollasa of Someshvara and the Sukranitisara, provide a means of translating Spirit into Plastic Art by indicating the prescribed iconographical arrangements of each spirit expression; for example, the body position, eye direction, head position, and color schemes for each Rasa.[3]

Gujral In Context: Modernism, Partition, and Embodied Knowledge

The Formation of an Expressionist Modernism

In 1925, Satish Gujral was born in Jhelum, which is now part of the province of Punjab in Pakistan. When he was eight years old, he fell into the Jhelum River and, as a result of that fall, lost his ability to hear. Gujral's deafness was not just a part of his history but also became something that greatly affected the way he created art. Because he could no longer hear (his relationship to sound), it led to a much deeper connection to visual cues (colour), texture, and movement in relation to the human body than most people experience. As a result, his visual relationship with these three areas (colour/surface/body position) profoundly shaped how he created his art as an adult. His time spent training at the Mayo School of Art (now know as the National College of Arts) in Lahore, which introduced him to the historical tradition within the province of Bengal, would play an important foundation for his work as an adult; however, his most pivotal developmental experience was from seeing Jamini Roy (1887–1972) create a body of work that combined folk and modern artistic traditions. In addition, living in Mexico from 1952–54 was also instrumental in developing his artistic style.t

During his time in Mexico, Gujral was under the direct supervision of Diego Rivera. Rivera's large mural paintings depict political issues in relation to an indigenous aesthetic. Gujral would have seen the similarities between his desire to develop a visual language that reflects the historical trauma of indigenous people and Rivera's large-scale works of art. These relationships have impacted Gujral's compositional strategies with works of art created using both a Latino (Cuban) and indigenous Mexican aesthetic.u

When Gujral returned to India in 1954, he discovered that the visual culture was still coming to terms with the extent of the Partition that had just taken place. There was already a Progressive Artists' Group, founded in Bombay in 1947 by F.N. Souza (a.k.a. Francis Newton Souza), S.H. Raza, and M.F. Husain, which had provided a framework for

https://doi.org/10.31995/an.2026.v17i01.005

Indian modernist art based mainly upon European modernism (e.g., Cézanne's method of construction, Expressionistic use of colour, Cubist distortion of form).

The Partition Paintings and the Archaeology of Trauma

The creation of Gajural's works between the years of 1954-1962 — which led to his gaining worldwide fame as an artist — are built on the Partition experience without an easy to understand allegory of what he had to express. Each artwork is not telling a story of actual events but rather they provide a cluster of feelings that so powerful that they appear to have happened before or after what they are based on. There are no real identifiable images or people within these pieces — the images are made up of the many people suffering through their facial expressions of loss, through their distorted bodies as a result of violence and through their hands that are in gesture between them begging for help but also in a position of protest, a protest from being tired of suffering.v

The main emotion for this period is karuna (grief), as expressed through the sthayi bhava (permanent emotion) of shoka (grief) and connected with the deity – Yama, the god of death - according to Bharata in the Natyashastra. Bharata describes how the emotion of karuna should be demonstrated through several anubhavas, i.e., shaking of the lips; crying, pale colour; heaviness and feeling of not being able to lift objects. He also states that this emotion should be expressed through the use of colour, with grey and dove colours being dominant in both the anubhavas and as the colour used in the expression of karuna. Using this system, Gujral's Partition paintings show an entirely different expression of karuna by taking the same elements and expressing them in Expressionist manner. Gujral's greys are bright and loud, whereas the colours in anubhava are dull. Gujral's paintings are not symmetrical, as would be expected from the use of anubhava, but instead exhibit excessive compression of all the elements. Due to modernity, karuna has lost its classic parameters through excessive expansion into neighbouring rasas, such as raudra (fury) for those who commit violence and bhayanaka (fear) for those who have survived the scale of violence accepted in normal society (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Despair, Oil on Board, 1954 (Partition Series)

Karuna and the Grammar of Grief

Within the partition series are primarily women and children who, through their postures of collapsed bodies and exhausted positions, demonstrate the anubhava of karuna described by Bharata: their eyes have turned away from the journey, their limbs have been drawn in, and their faces are devoid of any possibility of meaningful articulation of their thoughts.w

What makes Gujral's interpretation of karuna unique when compared to its performance within classical theatre is the extreme depersonalisation of the emotion. According to the Natyashastra text, in order for the spectator to empathise with the expression of grief on stage, the director must evoke a particular vibhava (a cause or determinant of the emotion); in this instance, a common vibhava would be the loss of a loved one. Whereas Gujral's artwork only presents the cause of grief in the form of absence (i.e., no clear loss to relate to or a specific loved one); therefore, the viewer is unable to empathise with the grief as it is presented — not through a particular type of loss, but rather as a form of existence (a permanent emotional environment) experienced by all figures presented. The repositioning of karuna from a temporary emotional response to an ontological state of being is emblematic of the shift towards phenomenological perspectives of affect that have been influenced by theorists including Sara Ahmed and Lauren Berlant, both theorists view negative affective experience as existing and influencing our orientation toward the world rather than simply existing in response to an actual event (Figure 2).x

Figure 2: Desolation, Oil on Board, 1954 (Partition Series)

Raudra: Fury, Form, and the Ethics of Anger

Karuna dominated Gujral's early work, but the increasingly assertive presence of raudra (anger) characterizes his late 1950s and 1960s paintings. This is described pictorially by virtue of the different ways in which the artistic compositions of karuna and raudra are

https://doi.org/10.31995/an.2026.v17i01.005

constructed; the inward collapse and fragmentation of the artistic form that create a representation of karuna give way to an outward thrust that creates direct confrontation between the artist and the picture in raudra compositions.y

Painted in 1957, The Massacre was one of the first paintings made by Gujral that was much more experimental than anything else he had done before. In raising both arms the figure converts grief into accusation, which is evidenced by the conversion of anger expressed outwards rather than inwardly as evidenced by the dissolution of sorrow as a form of raudra as a part of the overall organisation of the composition.

There is some formal language influence in Gujral's raudra works from both El Greco's elongation and the Accurately descriptive series of etchings by Goya entitled the Disasters of War. However, the aesthetic bases of these works follow an indigenous logic. The navarasa generates a defined aesthetic quality for raudra: trembling, perspiring, reddened eyes, and the outward display of all aspects of full body movement are the characteristics of raudra. Gujral uses the vocabulary of Expressionism to depict these characteristics of raudra. However, his use of Expressionism is still grounded in the principles of Bharatanatyam; specifically, raudra, through the display of fury, will exhibit a concentrated, energised body exteriorly directed. In contrast to the loss of karuna, the karuna character will contract and descend to an inward position; the character of raudra will expand and ascend to an outward position, taking up more visual space and demanding a greater amount of visual and emotional interest from the viewer (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Untitled, Mixed media on Board, 2016

Conclusion: Aesthetic Recovery and The Contemporary Stakes

This paper has argued that Satish Gujral's paintings exhibit a continuing and systematic engagement with Navarasa theory that is neither naive traditionalism nor superficial eclecticism; rather, they are a philosophically rigorous attempt to apply the resources of classical Indian aesthetics to meet the emotional and political needs created

by the postcolonial present. The Navarasa framework in Gujral's work does not function as an ornament or a marker of culture, but rather as a structural grammar, a means of organising pictorial experience that is grounded in a specific theory of how the image operates on the viewer and what art can achieve in the world.

Satish Gujral's theory of rasa (aesthetic pleasure) exemplifies this through his life as an artist. Inherent within this theory is an answer that encompasses what it means to feel as well as what is possible in terms of using painting as a means of experiencing these feelings. When we concentrate on the quality and the meaning of our feelings—as well as on the feelings produced by art—they will transform into a type of experience (called rasa). Furthermore, when rasa is experienced, the observer will be transformed into an awakened state of consciousness that is both fluid and expansive to a level greater than their normal state. The conclusion that Satish Gujral reached during his lifetime as an artist is that rasa is the inherent value of art and generates both profound feelings of emotional engagement with the creator of the artwork and an understanding of human connectedness between the two.

References

1. Abhinavagupta. Locana. Translated by Daniel Ingalls, Jeffrey Masson, and M.V. Patwardhan. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990.
2. Acri, Andrea. 'Rasa Theory and Aesthetic Theory in the Indo-Malay World.' Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society 27, no. 3 (2017): Pg. **417–443**.
3. Ahmed, Sara. The Cultural Politics of Emotion. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004.
4. Anand, Mulk Raj. 'Satish Gujral: The Painting of Wounds.' Marg 9, no. 2 (1956): Pg. **14–21.**
5. Berlant, Lauren. Cruel Optimism. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.
6. Bharata Muni. Natyashastra. Translated by Manomohan Ghosh. 2 vols. Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1951–67.
7. Chandra, Pramod. The Sculpture of India 3000 BCE–1300 CE. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985.
8. Dalmia, Yashodhara. The Making of Modern Indian Art: The Progressives. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001.
9. Devi, Pria. Satish Gujral: Life and Art. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1993.
10. Flores, Patrick. 'Southeast Asian Art in the Global Contemporary.' In Worlds of Difference, edited by Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg, and Peter Weibel, Pg. **144–157**. Karlsruhe: ZKM, 2013.

11. Gnoli, Raniero. The Aesthetic Experience According to Abhinavagupta. Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1956.
12. Goswamy, B.N. The Essence of Indian Art. San Francisco: Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, 1986.
13. Gujral, Satish. A Brush with Life: An Autobiography. New Delhi: Viking, 1997.
14. Kapur, Geeta. When Was Modernism? Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India. New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2000.
15. Kapur, Geeta. 'Detours from the Contemporary.' In Modernism and India, edited by Tapati Guha-Thakurta, Pg. **45–68**. New Delhi: Seagull, 2011.
16. Kramrisch, Stella, trans. Vishnudharmottara Purana, Chitrasutras. Calcutta: University of Calcutta Press, 1928.
17. Krishnamoorthy, K. Studies in Indian Aesthetics and Criticism. Mysore: D.V.K. Murthy, 1979.
18. Masson, J.L. and M.V. Patwardhan. Santarasa and Abhinavagupta's Philosophy of Aesthetics. Pune: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1969.
19. Pollock, Sheldon. 'Rasa After Abhinava.' In Rasaesthetics, edited by Sheldon Pollock, Bimal Krishna Matilal, and J.L. Shaw, Pg. **1–28**. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016.
20. Sethi, Aarti. 'The Rasa of Postcolonial Grief.' Journal of Material Culture 23, no. 1 (2018): Pg. **45–64**.
21. Shapiro-Phim, Toni. 'Dance, Music, and the Sky: Cambodian Court Performance and Buddhist Cosmology.' In Oral Traditions and the Verbal Arts: A Guide to Research Practices, edited by Ruth Finnegan, Pg. **112–128**. London: Routledge, 1992.
22. Singh, Devika. 'Picturing Partition.' Third Text 29, nos. 4–5 (2015): Pg. **225–244.**
23. Soedarsono, R.M. Wayang Wong: The State Ritual Dance Drama in the Court of Yogyakarta. Yogyakarta: Gadjah Mada University Press, 1984.
24. Taylor, Nora A. and Boreth Ly, eds. Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art: An Anthology. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 2012.
25. Zarrilli, Philip, ed. Asian Martial Arts in Actor Training. Madison: Center for South Asian Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2006.