CHAPTER – III

Symbolism and Aesthetics-Literature

3.1 The Poets and their milieu – an overview

While undertaking a study of Verlaine and Changampuzha, it would only be pertinent to allude to the different art concepts prevalent during their respective life times, in order to understand the environment in which their creativity flourished. As statistics indicate, Changampuzha was born just fifteen years after the death of Verlaine. Therefore, the literary trends in Verlaine’s times could not but have influenced and even moulded the creativity of his successors in the world literary arena, eventually crossing all linguistic barriers and geographical dimensions.

By the end of the 18th century in Europe, after the rigidity of the Classical period, it was the Romantic school with its emphasis on the individual’s personal experience, that gained supreme importance. It was most strongly embodied in the visual arts, music and literature. In the words of Charles Baudelaire, “Romanticism is precisely situated neither in the choice of subject nor exact truth, but in the way of feeling.” For the first time, there was a definite shift of focus from the Cartesian stance of “cogito ergo sum” (I think, therefore I am) to “I feel, therefore I am,” of the Romanticists. Indeed the Romantic movement created a tumultuous sensation, sending ripples and waves in literary circles, the world over.

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However, the excesses of sentimentalism and subjectivity paved the way to a return of form and a certain impassivity of portrayal. Verlaine first associated himself with this school, known by the name- ‘Parnassian,’ whose function was to restore the Muses of poetry back to their lofty abode of Parnassus, from where they had been brought down by the Romanticists, to cater to the tastes of the common man.’ The poets of this school ‘chiselled’ their verses to perfection, much like the craftsmanship of a sculptor. Verlaine first showed an inclination towards Parnassianism, as manifested in his first work “Poèmes Saturniens” (Saturnien Poems1-1866). In fact, some of his poems were published in ‘Le Parnasse Contemporain’ – the mouthpiece of the school. But before long, he got fed up with the impassivity advocated and sought other means to express himself.

In the middle of the 19th century, science made new advances in the field of biology. Darwin’s theory of evolution, and Gregory Mendel’s studies in genetics showed that man was the product of heredity and environment, and could be explained in those terms. In literature, this doctrine was called Naturalism, whose pioneers were Flaubert2, Zola3 and Ibsen4. They adhered to the same principles as the Classicists, displaying precision of language, economy of form, lucidity, logic, with everything in its proper place.

In contrast, the ‘Decadent’ (Latin for ‘falling away’ and related to the decline of the Roman empire) movement laid emphasis on the autonomy of

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1 Poems written under the influence of the planet Saturn
2 Gustave Flaubert-French writer and novelist, Author of *Madame Bovary*.
3 Emile Zola-influential French writer, twice nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature.
4 Henrik Ibsen-Norwegian playwright, theatre director and poet, considered ‘Father of Naturalism’.
art, hostility of the artist to middle-class values, the superiority of artifice to nature and the search for sensual pleasures. The ‘decadents’ became known for their interest in the morbid, perverse, and the bizarre, their freedom from morals, and often sensational social behaviour, and hyperaesthetic temperaments.

Much of the literature of the latter half of the century (fin de siècle), including Charles Baudelaire’s poetry were often characterized as ‘decadent’ for their lurid content or moral vision. In a similar vein, Verlaine used the term ‘Poètes Maudits’ (Accursed Poets) in 1884, to refer to a number of poets like Mallarmé, Rimbaud, himself and others who had fought against poetic conventions and suffered social rebuke or had been ignored by the critics. Verlaine’s poem ‘Langueur’ (Languour) which appeared in the review, ‘Le Chat Noir,’ (The Black Cat) was considered by many as the mouthpiece of decadence. However, with the publication of the “Symbolist Manifesto” in 1866 by Jean Moréas, it was the term ‘Symbolism’ which was most often applied to the new literary movement.

Arthur Symons in his work “The Symbolist Movement in Literature” (1899) has truly opined –

“Without Symbolism there can be no literature, indeed not even language. Words themselves are symbols. Symbolism began with the first words uttered by the first man as he named every living thing. In a symbol, there is concealment, yet revelation…."

5 British writer and critic.
Originating as a revolt against the rigid conventions and precise description of Parnassian poetry as well as the machine-like treatment of human beings and society by the Naturalists, the Symbolist movement soon shot into prominence. The most important prophet of Symbolism was the American poet Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), who strongly influenced Baudelaire, who in turn introduced him to the French literary circles, through his critical essays. Poe’s works, translated by Baudelaire, and Verlaine’s contemporary- Stéphane Mallarmé received instant acclaim in France, but took some time to be recognized in his home country.

Poe’s aesthetic doctrine as set out in his critical writings was that poetry is not utilitarian, is independent of moral values, and is the product of conscious and careful workmanship, rather than of inspiration. A poem written merely for the poem’s sake, does not lack in nobility or dignity. Théophile Gautier, a French writer, picked up Poe’s idea and upheld the slogan coined originally by Victor Cousin,-‘art for art’s sake,’ in defiance of those who advocated that true art had a moral purpose. Aestheticism is the doctrine of art that maintains this autonomy.

It emphasizes form rather than content and upholds the view that the value of art lies in its aesthetic appeal, rather than in any ulterior motive that may be assigned to it. This principle was taken up by the French Symbolists of the mid-19th century, who in their search for an Ideal Beauty and Ultimate Reality applied the poetics of aestheticism not only to the work itself, but also to its creator whom they considered to be a ‘priest in the religion of beauty’. According to Poe, “Poetry has for its immediate object, pleasure
not truth.” Man is born with an instinct for Beauty, and in the world of nature he finds much to satisfy it. But mere imitation of nature, however truthful it might be, cannot be poetry. Following in the footsteps of Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Verlaine, Rimbaud and others adopted Poe’s perception, of appreciating poetry for its own sake.

3:2:1 Aestheticism-A note on the Western concept

Aestheticism⁶, generally considered as the philosophical study of beauty and taste, is a branch of philosophy related to the fundamental nature and perception of beauty and ugliness. It is the knowledge (of beauty) as it is obtained through the senses, - not knowledge acquired through reason. The actual word derives from Greek ‘aistheta’ – “things perceptible by the senses,” and the Greek ‘aisthetes’ denotes “one who perceives.” Aesthetics studies new ways of seeing and of perceiving the world. It is a sub-discipline of axiology, a branch of philosophy, and is closely linked to the philosophy of art. Scholars in the field more broadly define aesthetics as a “critical reflection on art, culture and nature”

Aestheticism is thus the term given to a movement, a cult, a mode of sensibility or rather a way of looking at and feeling about things in the mid-18th century. Aesthetics attempts to explain the human reaction to beauty, and whether this reaction is objective or subjective: for instance, whether beauty is a universal concept, or whether environment, living conditions,

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⁶ Beardsley, Monroe.C.-Aesthetics from Classical Greece to the Present, 1966
class, gender, and race- affect a person’s taste and what is considered beautiful.

Aestheticism is defined in many ways: as the study of the principles that guide the formation and evaluation of art, as the philosophy of art, and as aesthetic theory. Aesthetic experience results from a specific mode of perception and cognition. To the early Greeks, art was not an inborn talent or a divine gift of only the chosen few. It was something learnt or acquired by practice and was indicated by the term ‘techne’. For Aristotle and Plato, art was primarily mimetic, representing or imitating reality.

The first contributions to aesthetic theory come from ancient Greece, and the first Greek thinker whose views on the subject are to be taken into consideration is Socrates. He considered the beautiful as coincident with the good, and both of them resolvable into the useful. Every beautiful object is so called because it serves some rational end, whether for the security or the gratification of man. Socrates appears to have emphasized the power of the beautiful object in furthering the more necessary ends of life. The really valuable point in his doctrine is the relativity of beauty. Greek philosophers initially felt that aesthetically appealing objects were beautiful in and of themselves. Plato tends to identify the self-beautiful with the conceptions of the true and the good, and thus there arose the Platonic formula ‘Kalokagathia’. He felt that beautiful objects incorporated proportion, harmony and unity among their parts. He emphasizes unity in its simplest

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7 Ancient Greek term meaning nobility, goodness. A Platonic teaching based on philosophy of a bodily, moral and spiritual whole.
aspect as seen in evenness of line and purity of colour. He recognizes in places the beauty of the mind, and seems to think that the highest beauty of proportion is to be found in the union of a beautiful mind with a beautiful body. He had but a poor opinion of art, regarding it as a trick of imitation (mimesis). Regarding poets and their works, Plato was of the opinion that poets attained excellence not by following any regulations of art; their beautiful melodies were uttered in an inspired state of mind, possessed by a spirit beyond themselves.

Aristotle, Plato’s exemplary disciple, undertook a more serious investigation of the aesthetic phenomena, leading by scientific analysis to the development of certain principles of beauty and art. Along with a theory of the arts of poetry and rhetoric, he gives us in his treatises, certain general, certain general principles of beauty: and scattered among his other writings we find many valuable suggestions on the same subject. He seeks in the ‘Metaphysics’ to distinguish the good and the beautiful by saying that the former is always in action, whereas the latter may exist in motionless beings as well. He further distinguished the beautiful from the fit, and in a passage of the ‘Politics’ set beauty above the useful and necessary. He helped to determine another characteristic of the beautiful, the absence of all lust or desire in the pleasure it bestows. The universal elements of beauty, Aristotle finds in the ‘Metaphysics’- to be order, symmetry, and definiteness or determinateness……In the “Poetics” he adds another essential, namely, a certain magnitude: it being desirable that the object should not be too large, while clearness of perception requires that it should not be too small.
Aristotle’s views on art are an immense advance on those of Plato. He distinctly recognized (in the ‘Politics’ and elsewhere) that the aim of art is immediate pleasure, as distinct from utility, which is the end of mechanical arts. He took a higher view of artistic imitation than Plato, holding that so far from being an unworthy trick, art implied knowledge and discovery, that its objects not only comprised of particular things which happened to exist, but contemplated what is probable and what necessarily exists. Aristotle was the first to adopt the term ‘catharsis’ to tragedy - till then a purely medical term meaning ‘purgation’ or ‘cleansing.’ By evoking the emotions of pity and fear in the mind of the audience Aristotle believed that a purification of these passions were effected. This is perhaps the point of greatest interest for aesthetics in the whole of his theory.

According to the Neo-Platonist writer Plotinus, (whose remarkable observations from among the later Greek and Roman philosophers are noteworthy), objective reason (nous) considered as self-moving, becomes the formative influence which reduces dead matter to form. Matter when thus formed becomes a notion (logos), and its form is beauty. Objects are ugly so far as they are unacted upon by reason, and therefore formless. The creative reason is absolute beauty, and is called the more than beautiful. There are three degrees of manifested beauty; that of human reason, which is the highest, that of the human soul, which is less perfect through its connection with a material body; and of real objects, which is the lowest manifestation of all. As for the precise forms of beauty, he supposed, in opposition to Aristotle that a single thing not divisible into parts might be beautiful through its unity and simplicity. He gives a high place to the beauty of colours in which material darkness is overpowered by light and warmth. In
reference to artistic beauty he said that when the artist has notions as models for his creations, these may be more beautiful than natural objects, which is clearly a step away from Plato’s doctrine towards our modern conception of artistic idealization.

In 1750, Alexander Baumgarten, the German philosopher often cited as the first philosopher of aesthetics, published ‘Aesthetica’, a treatise on the criticism of taste considered as a philosophical theory ‘Aesthetics’, which had always meant sensation was re-defined by Baumgarten, to mean taste or ‘sense’ of beauty. In so doing, he gave the word a different significance, thereby inventing its modern usage. In his ‘Metaphysica’-1739, Baumgarten defined taste, in its wider meaning as the ability to judge according to the senses, instead according to the intellect. Such a judgement of taste is based on feelings of pleasure or displeasure. A science of aesthetics would be for Baumgarten, a deduction of the rules or principles of artistic or natural beauty from individual ‘taste.’ Adopting the Leibnitz –Wolfian theory of knowledge, he sought to complete it by setting against the clear scientific or ‘logical’ knowledge of the understanding, the confused knowledge of the senses, to which he gave the name ‘aesthetic.’ Beauty with him thus corresponds with perfect sense-knowledge. Reducing taste to an intellectual act and ignoring the element of feeling, Baumgarten clearly makes himself an intellectualist in aesthetics, the Arguing from Leibnitz’s theory, Baumgarten concluded that nature is the highest embodiment of beauty, and that art must seek its supreme function in the strictest possible imitation of nature.
After Baumgarten, Immanuel Kant was one of the first philosophers to develop and integrate aesthetic theory into a unified and comprehensive philosophical system, utilizing ideas that played an integral role throughout his philosophy. In his “Critique of Judgement”, Kant tries to bridge the gap between two aspects of human nature. The very word ‘aesthetics’, whose Greek root means ‘of the senses’, aids Kant to get from the sensory to the supersensible. Beauty is experienced through the senses, but points us beyond mere sensation. According to Kant, beauty imitates the harmony within our dual human nature as free and physical beings. Beauty ultimately refers to the subjective experience of this harmony rather than to any property in the object that promotes the experience. Hence aesthetic experience is ‘subjective’: but because all humans are susceptible to the experience of harmony, this response possesses a ‘universality’ usually absent in subjective judgements. He wants the experience of the beautiful to signify that humans live in an ‘intelligent’ universe, where precepts generated by human reason are in tune with the nature of the universe itself. The experience of beauty tells us that the mind and the world fit. According to Kant, judgements of beauty are sensory, emotional and intellectual all at once.

In the view of Ferdinand Schiller, the aesthetic appreciation of beauty is the most perfect reconciliation of the sensual and rational parts of human nature. For Hegel, all culture is a matter of ‘absolute spirit,’ coming to be manifest to itself, stage by stage. Art is the first stage in which the absolute spirit is manifest immediately to sense-perception, and is thus an objective rather than subjective revelation of beauty. For Schopenhauer, aesthetic contemplation of beauty is the most free that the pure intellect can be from
the dictates of the will; here we contemplate perfection of form without any kind of worldly agenda, and thus any intrusion of utility or politics would ruin the point of beauty. Ferdinand Schelling is the first thinker to attempt a Philosophy of Art. According to Schelling a new philosophical significance is given to art by the doctrine that the identity of subject and object – which is half-disguised in ordinary perception and volition – is clearly seen in artistic perception. The perfect perception of its real self in the work of art is accompanied by a feeling of infinite satisfaction.

The only elaborated system of aesthetics in French literature are those constructed by the ‘spiritualistes,’ the philosophic writers, who under the influence of German thinkers effected a reaction against the crude sensationalism of the 18th century. They aimed at elucidating the higher and spiritual element in aesthetic impressions, appearing to ignore any capability in the sensuous material of affording a true aesthetic delight. J. Cousin and Jean Charles Lévêque were the principal writers of this school. The latter developed an elaborate system about the subject. All beauty is regarded as spiritual in nature. The several beautiful characters of an organic body – of which the principal are magnitude, unity, and variety of parts, intensity of colour, grace or flexibility, and correspondence to environment – may be brought under the conception of the ideal grandeur and order of the species. These are perceived by reason to be the manifestations of an invisible vital force. Similarly the beauties of inorganic nature are to be viewed as the grand and orderly displays of an immaterial physical force. Thus all beauty is in its objective essence, either spirit or unconscious force acting with fullness and in order.
Celebrating the joys of individual freedom, the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, hailed as the ‘Father of the Romantic Movement,’ exercised a great influence on many writers of the period. His enthusiasm for nature and appeal to the emotions was instrumental in paving the way for Romanticism. His exhortation to go back to nature was the most powerful regenerative force of the late 18th century. His work ‘The Social Contract’ (1762) contained the slogan “Equality, Liberty, Fraternity,” which became the watchword of the French Revolution, and later on, the motto of the Republic. The aesthetics of Rousseau’s one-scene lyric drama ‘Pygmalion’ had a profound influence on future writers, in its emphasis on the work of art being an externalized self of the artist. Thus the work was given priority over the artist.

Basically the aesthetic movement centered on the doctrine that art exists for the sake of beauty alone. In other words, art is an end in itself and need not be (or should not be) didactic, politically committed, propagandist, moral or anything else but itself, and it should not be judged by any non-aesthetic criteria (e.g. whether or not it is useful). It can be considered as a reaction against the prevailing social philosophies and the ugliness and hypocrisy of the Industrial Age. Aesthetic works are sometimes described as ‘autotelic’ (from the Greek ‘autoteles’) i.e. ‘complete in itself,’ a concept that has been expanded to embrace ‘inner directed’ or ‘self-motivated’ human beings.
In his 1891 essay “The soul of man under socialism” Oscar Wilde wrote:

“A work of art is the unique result of a unique temperament. Its beauty comes from the fact that the author is what he is. It has nothing to do with the fact that other people want what they want. Indeed, the moment that an artist takes notice of what other people want, and tries to supply the demand, he ceases to be an artist, and becomes a dull or an amusing craftsman, an honest or dishonest tradesman. He has no further claim to be considered as an artist.”

The aesthetes developed the cult of beauty which they considered the basic factor in art, life should copy Art, they asserted. They considered nature as crude and lacking in design when compared to art. The main characteristics of the movement were suggestion rather than statement, sensuality, massive use of symbols and synaesthetic effects, that is correspondence between words, colours and music.

Aestheticism in poetry as in art is closely identified with the Pre-Raphaelites and shows a tendency to withdrawal or aversion. Many poets of the period strove for beautiful musical effects in their verses rather than for sense. They aspired to sensuousness and to what has become to be known as ‘pure poetry’. They also revived archaistic modes and archaic language and revived an extensive use of classical mythology as a framework for expressing ideas. Medievalism and the interest in chivalry and romance was an important part of the aesthetic cult.

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8 Oscar Wilde was an Irish writer and poet, fluent in German and French also.
The major implication of the new aesthetic standpoint was that art had no reference to life, and therefore had nothing to do with morality. Art not life, Art instead of life, or as an alternative to life. Life as art, or as a work of art. The outstanding example of the aesthete’s withdrawal from life is J.K. Huysman’s *A Rebours* (1884), in which the hero, seeks to create an entirely artificial life. Much of the attitude of the new wave was neatly summarized by Villiers de l’Isle Adam when his hero in *Axel* says: “Live? Our servants will do it for us”

Ultimately, the most influential ideas arising out of aestheticism, are emphasis on the autonomy of the artist in his endeavour, and the independent existence of beauty as reflected in the form and content of a poem, and in the importance of craft and technique in the writing of a poem.

### 3:2:2 Indian Aesthetics - A glimpse

From antiquities to the contemporary, Indian art has had a strong link with ‘Soundarya Shastra’ or aesthetics. Indian aesthetics\(^9\) dates as early as 300BC, and is understood as the theorization of the beautiful. Its definition in the context of Indian rhetoricians is of a state of heightened bliss, which transcends pleasure, declaring kinship with the spirit rather than the corporeal self. The theory of Indian art practice is housed within the ‘rasa theory,’ as stated by Bharatha Muni in his ‘Natya Shastra’ (3\(^{rd}\) century BC). Over the centuries, philosophers and theoreticians have contributed greatly.

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\(^9\) Joris-Carl Huysman, French novelist. Famous work *A Rebours* (Against the Grain)  
\(^{10}\) Indian Aesthetics, from *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, Oxford University Press, 1998
to the development of Indian aesthetics, Shilpa shastras, written in consonance with the requirements of the Agama of liturgical texts, are among the most significant contributors to the understanding and comprehension of ancient Indian aesthetic practice.

Ancient Indian aesthetics have placed a distinct emphasis on the artist being the subjective beholder, expressing himself/herself in a highly detached and objective fashion. He meditates upon his experience and is able to give form to the formless. Thus the role of art is multiple – it is a means of self-expression, a record of the experiences of the artist, a form of communication satisfying man’s need to be part of a group, a way of searching for and understanding the virtues of life. Bharata distinguishes eight or nine rasas: love, humour, pathos, anger, heroism, terror, disgust, wonder, and serenity. Artworks are regarded as expressing one or more of these rasas. In his ‘Natyashastra,’ an extraordinary text on the theatre arts, Bharata enunciated the theory of art that focusses on the idea of ‘rasa’ for the first time, around the beginning of the Christian era. The ‘Dhvanyaloka,’ penned by the famous aesthetician Anandavardhana, revolutionized Sanskrit theory by proposing that the main goal of good poetry is the evocation of mood or ‘flavour’ (rasa) and that this process can be explained only by recognizing a semantic power beyond denotation and metaphor, namely the power of suggestion or ‘dhvani.’ On the basis of this analysis, the ‘Locana’ or ‘Eye’ of Abhinavagupta, develops a theory of the psychology of aesthetic response.
Etymologically, ‘dhvani’ is ‘reverberation’ or ‘suggestion.’ According to the ‘dhvani’\(^{11}\) theory, the content of a good poem may be divided into two parts. One is directly expressed through the power of denotation of the words, and may include the meaning hinted at by their power of connotation or ‘lakshana.’ The other, taken to be the soul of poetry, is the unexpressed or suggested meaning i.e. vyanga, i.e.‘revealed,’ or ‘dhvani,’ sometimes linked with the denotative and connotative meanings of the words.

The observations of the Sanskrit poetician Kuntaka regarding ‘vakrokti’\(^{12}\), or ‘oblique expression’ also forms an integral part of Indian aesthetics. The aesthetic delight is enhanced with the usage of ‘vakrokti,’ which, emanating from the creative faculty of the poet endows poetic language with strikingness. The actual meaning is deviated to imply something else. Etymologically, ‘vakra’ means crooked, indirect or ‘ukta’-poetic expression or speech.

The aesthetic experience is described as the ‘tasting of flavour’ or ‘rasaswadana.’ Rasa literally means the essence of a work of art. Rasa is bestowed not made. Arguably the most important term in Indian art theory, rasa lays claim to several definitions. In its most obvious sense, ‘rasa’ refers to the sap, juice of plants or extract. Rasa also denotes taste and flavor,

\(^{11}\) The Origin and Development of the Theory of Rasa and Dhvani in Sanskrit Poetics-Tapasvi Nandi,1973
\(^{12}\) Kuntaka’s Vakrokti and Literary Criticism: A Critical Estimate of Kuntaka’s Vakrokti Theory of Criticism in Sanskrit Poetics-Shikarapura Krishnamurthy,1994
relating to consuming and handling either the physical object, or taking in its non-physical properties that yield pleasure.

When rasa is applied to art and aesthetic experiences, the word signifies a state of heightened delight or ‘anand’, the kind of bliss that can be experienced only by the spirit. Rasa experience is not the physical understanding of a creation, but the emotion, or empathy – as opposed to sympathy. The artist creates a situation that the viewer enters – a world of illusion, ‘maya’– that leads the viewer to a state of empathic bliss.

Rasaswadana\textsuperscript{13} or the tasting of flavor is dependant upon several elements coming together in harmony. ‘Bhava’ (the mood/emotional state), ‘vibhavas’ (determinants), ‘anubhavas’ (consequents) and ‘vyabhicharibhavas (complementary emotional states). Though rasa is defined as one and undivided, it is one or more of these nine rasas through which the aesthetic experience takes place. Out of these nine, one sentiment or flavor dominates; a work of art propels a spectator toward, or becomes an occasion for a rasa experience. The artist evokes the core of feeling, removing veils, peeling away disguises, until we experience its essence. The pleasure one experiences comes from being able to relish the quality of feeling without being subject to it. Furthermore art provides resolution to the welter of conflicting emotions, demonstrating the inter-related nature of all the opposing feelings to which humans are subject and showing that life is held together by one thread that unites many apparently opposing threads. The system of correspondences between macrocosm and microcosm, linking

\textsuperscript{13}Natyasasthra, Rasa Theory of Indian Aesthetics-Gargi Bhattacharya,
the gross and the subtle, sense perception and human emotive states, paves the way for such an aesthetic experience of unity. The movement from the deeply personal dimension of emotion to its more universal quality creates an experience of liberation.

Aestheticians are emphatic in recognizing that the ‘taste’ of freedom experienced in art is not the same as ‘moksha’ (liberation), achieved through spiritual pursuit: the aesthetic experience is temporary and vicarious, while spiritual attainment is a more permanent condition that pervades one’s entire existence. Nevertheless, a profound work of art suggests and points toward the spiritual state. It is not the case, as in some Western views of art, that the taste of liberation experienced through an artwork is a mere imitation of the actual experience or an illusory experience. The difference is one of degree and depth, not one of value.

The initiation of Changampuzha into the artistic medium was thus through the highly developed and complex theories of Indian aesthetics dominated by a rigid Sanskrit tradition. The extraordinary talent in Changampuzha was instrumental in his mastery of the western poetics of his era and imbibing it to perfection. Employing his remarkable intellectual acquisition for enriching Malayalam poetry, Changampuzha endowed it with musicality and dynamism.

Verlaine’s ‘Art Poétique’, hailed as the manifesto of Symbolism heralded a new phase in the history of French poetry. Feeling rather stifled
by the meticulously sculpted verses of the Parnassians, the French literati was eagerly awaiting a break, which was provided by Verlaine, who almost donned the role of a ‘saviour’ in the context. The ‘imprecise’ or ‘indefinite’ assumed importance and intrigued the reader. In fact, it could be said without a shadow of doubt that the ‘Art Poétique’ is one of the great honourings of the Indefinite, expressing man’s urge to be in the unboundaried and intangible realm. French poetry had always been musical. But no poet had insisted that poetry be nothing but music:

“Music, music first and foremost
Choose those metres odd of syllable
Supple in the air, vague, flexible,
Free of pounding beat, heavy or terse…

Verlaine was very much aware that if music is honoured, verbal correctness and valid perception would automatically follow. Verlaine’s flexible usage of the conventional alexandr ine metre to suit his needs, only served to enhance the beauty of his verses, setting an example to his successors.