
Poetics of the East: Exploring the Relevance of Bharat Muni's *Natyashastra* in Contemporary Art and Culture

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Abstract:

Bharata Muni's *Natyashastra* transcends its ancient Sanskrit dramaturgical roots to emerge as a living civilizational text, continuously renegotiating its epistemic boundaries across temporal and cultural frontiers. Composed between 200 BCE and 200 CE, *Natyashastra* is often hailed as the *Panchama Veda* (fifth Veda) for its encyclopedic treatment of theatrical and performative arts, encompassing drama, music, dance, poetics, and aesthetics. As one of the oldest surviving texts on performing arts, it not only laid the foundational grammar for Indian theatrical traditions but also offered a holistic framework that seamlessly integrated aesthetics, emotions, performance, psychology, and cosmology. Rooted in the Vedic imagination yet expansive in its interdisciplinary vision, the *Natyashastra* has influenced everything from classical dance forms and theatre to modern day cinema and visual storytelling. Its genius lies not merely in systematizing classical Indian arts but in articulating a universal grammar of embodied storytelling, where the sacred and the secular coalesce through structured improvisation. Central to the text lies the *Rasa Sutra*, where the dynamic interplay of enacted sentiments (rasas) and states (bhavas) cultivate transcendent aesthetic experiences, thereby rendering art a conduit for universalized human sensibility. These elements have transgressed their classical origins, finding resonance in postcolonial literature, contemporary performance theory, and even global pop culture. By situating the text within a civilizational continuum, this paper aims to analyze its role in shaping South Asian identity formation, from diasporic literature to decolonial theatre. It not only explores the aesthetic and philosophical dimensions of Bharata Muni's *Natyashastra* but also examines the archetypal character types defined by the sage and how these archetypes have been adopted, adapted, and transformed across diverse cultural and artistic traditions that followed.

Keywords: Panchama Veda, Rasa, Bhava, Cinema, Culture, Literature.**I. Introduction**

The *Natyashastra* is an ancient encyclopaedic Sanskrit treatise on the performing arts,

traditionally attributed to the sage Bharata Muni. The text's title translates to the "science of drama" or "drama scripture," and it is often called the *Natyaveda* or *panchama-veda* (fifth Veda) in recognition of its Vedic status. While it is formally an upaveda of the Samaveda (the *gandharvaveda* of music), Bharata's work explicitly claims the authority of an independent Veda. Composed in roughly the first millennium BCE or early CE, the *Natyashastra* spans across thirty-six chapters and some six thousand verses describing dramatic composition, stagecraft, acting techniques, music, and the theory of aesthetic experience. Its importance is both technical and spiritual: the *Natyashastra* introduced the classical theory of *rasa*, asserting that a play's highest aim is to transport the audience to a higher consciousness.

The *Natyashastra* begins with a mythic account of divine inspiration and instruction. According to tradition, at the beginning of the Treta Yuga the gods, led by Indra, beseeched Brahma for a "fifth Veda" of drama and dance to counter the world's moral decline. They asked for an object of diversion that would be both visible and audible, and accessible to all castes and classes (unlike the caste-restricted older Vedas). Brahma consented and synthesized material from the four Vedas: he took lyrics from the Rigveda, music from the Samaveda, the art of gesture (*abhinaya*) from the Yajurveda, and *rasa* (aesthetic sentiment) from the Atharvaveda. Thus, he created the *Natyaveda*, the so-called fifth Veda. Brahma then imparted this knowledge to Bharata and charged him and his one hundred sons with codifying and disseminating the art. This narrative mythologizes Bharata's project: the hundred sons may symbolize the many components and practitioners of theatre (poets, actors, musicians, etc.) who together enact this art. In any case, the story underscores that theatrical knowledge was seen as a divine inheritance. In this way the *Natyashastra*'s origin myth itself sanctifies theatre: staging a play is portrayed as a divinely ordained duty.

The designation of the *Natyashastra* as the fifth Veda highlights how it democratized Vedic knowledge. By weaving together elements of all four traditional Vedas into theatre, Bharata created a comprehensive synthesis. In practice, this meant that the spiritual lore of the older scriptures could now be transmitted through dance, drama, and song. Brahma's *Natyaveda* was expressly intended for all people: it could be grasped even by those who were not proficient in Sanskrit. In effect, Bharata's treatise made sacred themes accessible beyond the priestly class, aligning with the broader Indian view that art and *dharma* belong to everyone. One verse even declares theatre itself a new Veda for a new age, fusing mythology and narrative into the "fifth Veda." The upshot is clear: Bharata's *Natyashastra* enshrines performance as both education and devotion. Indeed, Bharata's model anticipates medieval Bhakti traditions, where temple music and dance spread sacred narratives among the populace.

The *Natyashastra*'s framing of performance as divinely inspired shows the sacred dimension of art. It calls drama an art to engage every aspect of life so as to glorify and gift

a state of joyful consciousness. On the stage, characters enact the four aims of life (*dharmā, artha, kāma, mokṣa*), and even gods and demons appear, making the play into a cosmic teaching. The *rasa* theory itself teaches that entertainment is only a means: the ultimate goal is to transport the audience into a parallel reality of wonder, prompting reflection on spiritual and moral truths. Moreover, the text literally treats theatre as sacred space: it describes the stage as the “sacred space” for artists and prescribes architecture so the audience may be fully absorbed. In fact, by the medieval period many South Indian temples included performance halls built to the *Natyashastra*’s specifications (kuttampalams, namghars), effectively making theatre an integral part of worship. In essence, Bharata casts theatre as collective worship, aligning with the broader Indian view that art is a spiritual path to redemption from worldly affairs.

Yet the *Natyashastra* is also thoroughly practical and secular in detail. It provides elaborate rules for stage design, costume, makeup, gesture, and timing in the theatre. Nothing is left to chance: even building a stage or donning an actor’s costume is framed as a ritual act, ensuring that every physical element serves the higher purpose. In this way, Bharata sanctifies the profane: by codifying dance and drama under sacred authority, he turns performance into an act of devotion. Bharata shows that art itself can be a path to the divine: the performers’ discipline is akin to worship, and the audience’s enjoyment becomes spiritual instruction. For Bharata, drama itself was an act of worship. Bharata suggests that performance is sacred, blurring any distinction between theatre and temple. Thus, the *Natyashastra* exemplifies a quintessential Eastern tradition in which the secular and the sacred are seamlessly fused in artistic practice.

II. The Aristotelian Theatre

Bharata’s *Natyashastra* explicitly portrays drama as divine revelation. Its Sanskrit preface invokes Brahma and Śiva: “I shall relate the Canons of Drama, as these were uttered by Brahma”. In the mythic origin story, Indra requests a Veda open to all castes. Brahma then uses all four Vedas to create a *Natyaveda* for the people. One verse even declares that Brahma “shaped this *Natyaveda* compiled from the other four pre-existing Vedas”, effectively making theatre itself a fifth Veda of sacred knowledge. Drama is thus treated as scripture, a Vedic ritualistic enactment rather than a human invention. The playhouse which was therefore created by Vishwakarma at the behest of Brahma is also treated as a sanctified arena in the *Natyashastra*.

By contrast, Aristotle’s *Poetics* is an entirely secular analysis. It opens as a philosophical proposition: “I propose to treat of Poetry in itself and of its various kinds”. Aristotle locates poetry in human nature, not in worship: he observes that “men have a natural instinct for representation” and classifies poetic genres by social status (tragedy depicts noble “fine men,” comedy depicts “inferior men”). Nowhere in *Poetics* does Aristotle invoke gods or religious ritual; drama is treated as a technical art form for ethical

and civic education, not as a sacred rite. He even explicitly frames poetry as a product of mimesis (imitation) and skill, with no divine imprimatur.

Aristotle's theory of tragedy is explicitly psychological and formal. He defines tragedy as "an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions". In practice, a well-constructed plot arouses pity and fear via reversals (*peripeteia*) and recognition (*anagnorisis*), then purges these emotions in the audience – this catharsis educates and entertains. Aristotle even breaks tragedy into six parts (plot, character, thought, diction, spectacle, song) and insists that the plot's arrangement of incidents is the "soul" of the drama. His focus is moral: tragedy refines the audience's emotions by showing how misfortune can befall even the upright, but it remains an empirical, non-mystical process.

Bharata's aesthetic theory, by contrast, centres on *rasa* – the emotive "flavour" or essence of art. Every performance is designed to evoke specific *rasas*, for example, erotic (*śṛṅgāra*), laughter (*hasya*), pity (*karuṇā*), anger (*raudra*), heroism (*veera*), wonder (*adbhuta*), and so on through the actors' *bhāvas* or expressed emotional states which are fleeting in nature. The *Natyashastra* explicitly defines *rasa* as "juice, essence or taste", underscoring its rich, ineffable quality. Evoking *rasa* is the supreme aim of theatre: as one commentator notes, the *Natyashastra* treats entertainment as a mere "desired effect" while seeking primarily to transport the spectator into a higher, transcendental state. In other words, rather than moral education, the goal is spiritual as the audience experiences blissful absorption. Bharata enumerates eight principal *rasas* which are erotic, laughter, pity, anger, heroic, disgust, wonder, and fear covering the spectrum of emotion, ensuring that dramatic art can touch every heart. This *rasa* theory carries an essentially devotional dimension. Later tradition, for instance, links the peaceful (*Santa*) *rasa* with Vishnu's transcendence. Thus, Aristotle's catharsis is a psychological cleansing within the polis, whereas Bharata's *rasa* is a quasi-mystical ecstasy in line with Hindu aesthetics.

Aristotle's vision of drama, on the other hand is fundamentally aristocratic. He insists tragic protagonists be of high birth and noble character: for example, the ideal hero is "one of those who are in high station and good fortune, like Oedipus". He contrasts tragedy's portrayal of noble "fine men" with comedy's focus on lower-status characters. In practice, Classical Greek tragedy deals exclusively with kings, princes, and mythic elites (Oedipus, Agamemnon, etc.), reinforcing the existing hierarchy and affirming traditional values. *Poetics* contains no calls for social reform; it simply depicts nobility as natural and inevitable. Aristotle never imagines a commoner as a tragic hero, nor does he ascribe any sacred function to the theatre as it is a pastime for the educated citizen, not a communal ritual.

Bharata's text, by contrast, is openly egalitarian and universalist as it challenges the inaccessibility of the pre-existing Vedas. Its own origin story emphasizes reaching all the colour-groups (varṇa). Bharata proceeds to give detailed stagecraft for every class: he specifies gestures and dramatic roles for Brahmins, Kṣatriyas, Vaiśyas and Śūdras alike, and he categorizes characters into three tiers (superior, middling, inferior) without bias. In practice, the *Natyashastra* addresses not only gods and kings but also merchants, artisans and common villagers. The theatre is conceived as a "people's Veda" – its aesthetic and ethical teachings belong to everyone, not just the elite. In short, Bharata's drama is intended as cultural and spiritual education for all levels of society, whereas Aristotle's drama assumes an elite audience and upholds aristocratic norms.

Bharata's treatise is steeped in religious symbolism. It begins with hymns and invocation of Śiva, the cosmic dancer, underscoring that theatre is rooted in the divine dance of creation. The *bhāvas* and *rasas* themselves are treated as having spiritual import; indeed, later Sanskrit scholars explicitly associate certain rasas with divine moods, for instance, the serene *sānta* rasa with Vishnu's tranquillity. In Bharata's system, performance is a form of yajña (sacrifice) and *dharma* (duty). Aristotle's *Poetics*, by contrast, contains no sacred imagery or ritual context: it makes no mention of gods, temple dances or spiritual experience. It is entirely profane and analytical.

Aristotle's *Poetics* and Bharata's *Natyashastra* thus manifest contrasting worldviews. *Poetics* treats theatre as a secular art of imitation: it dissects plot and character to achieve catharsis and moral insight for a cultivated audience, with no ritual or divine purpose. *Natyashastra*, by contrast, is framed as a sacred scripture of performing arts: it begins with divine invocation, claims Brahmā and Śiva as its patrons, and conceives theatre as a means of cosmic wisdom. Bharata even calls his work *Natyaveda* and proclaims that Brahma "shaped this *Natyaveda* by compiling it from the four Vedas", thus bestowing scriptural authority on drama. In Bharata's vision, art is an inclusive Vedic path invoking Shiva's dance and linking rasas to divine order while in Aristotle's, art remains a humanistic, elitist craft born of "natural instinct".

Crucial to the *Natyashastra* is its theory of abhinaya (expression). Abhinaya, literally "leading towards," describes how performers convey rasa to spectators through expression. Bharata defines four interrelated limbs of abhinaya: *āṅgika* (bodily gesture), *vāchika* (speech or song), *āhārya* (costume and stagecraft), and *sattvika* (inner mental states). In practice, this means that classical dancers use precise hand mudrās, facial expressions, and body postures (*āṅgika*) to *act out* a narrative or emotion. All major Indian dance forms including Bharatanatyam and Odissi inherit this system: their vocabulary of 108 karanas and myriad mudrās comes directly from the *Natyashastra*. As a result, choreography in these styles is essentially a language of gesture and abhinaya that structures storytelling on stage.

III. Bharata Natyam, Odissi, and other Dance Forms

Yato hastaḥ sthato dr̥ṣṭiḥ, yato dr̥ṣṭiḥ sthato manaḥ, yato manaḥ sthato bhavaḥ, yato bhavaḥ sthato rasaḥ – “where the eyes follow the hand gesture, the mind follows the eyes, feelings evolve from the mind, and rasa (emotional essence) flows from that evolution”. This dictum from Bharata’s *Natyashastra* encapsulates the unity of gesture (hasta), gaze (dr̥ṣṭi), mind (manaḥ), emotion (bhava) and rasa in Indian dance. It is noted that this famous dictum is followed in all major schools of dancing during expressive abhinaya. In practice, dancers across traditions from classical forms like Bharata Natyam and Odissi to folk styles such as Gujarat’s Garba or Sri Lanka’s Yakuma Natam coordinate hand movements, eye-gaze and inner sentiment to culminate in rasa.

Bharata Natyam, the South Indian classical dance of Tamil Nadu, is built on the *Natyashastra*’s dramaturgy. Historical temple inscriptions at Thanjavur and Chidambaram even cite verses from the *Natyashastra* alongside dance poses, showing the form’s ancient links to Bharata’s compendium on performance aesthetics. In the mid-20th century Rukmini Devi Arundale (1904– 1986) revived this near-extinct tradition on a modern stage. She “catalysed the renaissance of the Bharata Natyam dance form” by founding Kalakshetra in 1936 to preserve and popularize Bharata Natyam. Kalakshetra’s curriculum stressed rigorous theory (dance history, literature and music) as well as practice. Arundale purged the devadasi form’s erotic *śr̥ṅgāra* elements, instead infusing the dance with *bhakti* (devotion) as its soul. She reorganized basic steps (*adavus*) with geometric precision based on scriptural principles, and she introduced a dance-drama format. For instance, Arundale also choreographed numerous new pieces drawn from the *Ramayana* (six themed dances among her most famous works).

Odissi, the eastern classical dance of Odisha, likewise traces its grammar to Bharata’s treatise. Contemporary scholars note that the *Natyashastra* explicitly mentions an “Odra-Magadhi” dance style, which many consider a precursor to modern Odissi. The form’s revival in the 1950s–60s drew on this heritage: leading guru Kelucharan Mohapatra (1926–2004) studied temple sculptures and ancient music, and expanded Odissi’s art by “making innovative use of forms from ancient texts and sculptures in his choreography”. Mohapatra’s work recovered the classic *tribhāṅga* posture and rich *abhinaya* vocabulary seen in Jagannath temple carvings. Odissi performance emphasizes *bhakti-rasa* narratives and stories of Krishna and Shiva as recommended by classical aesthetics. Today Odissi dancers celebrate “lyricism, sensuality and emphasis on *bhakti bhāva* (devotion)”, directly mirroring Bharata’s aesthetic hierarchy. In these ways, the *Natyashastra*’s dramaturgical framework provides the foundation for Odissi’s formal structures and its expressive storytelling, just as it did for Bharatanatyam.

In this way, the Rasa–Bhava framework and expressive techniques like *Abhinaya* and *Angika* not only shaped storytelling and dramaturgy in Sanskrit plays and epic performances but also gave rise to various classical dance forms. Bharata defines four

interrelated limbs of abhinaya: *angika* (bodily gesture), *vāchika* (speech or song), *āhārya* (costume and stagecraft), and *sattvika* (inner mental states). In practice, this means that classical dancers use precise hand mudras, facial expressions, and body postures to act out a narrative or emotion. All major Indian dance forms, including Bharata Natyam and Odissi inherit this system: their vocabulary of 108 karanas and myriad mudras comes directly from the *Natyashastra*.

IV. The *Natyashastra* and its Impact on Cinema

Filmmakers have translated *Natyashastra*'s abhinaya into cinematic acting techniques. Cameras capture the *angika* and *sattvika* which were originally meant for the stage, while edited film allows emphasis on eye movements or close-ups reminiscent of classical mime. Directors like Satyajit Ray consciously fused Indian and Western methods: Ray, who trained at Rabindranath Tagore's Santiniketan, cited the need for "the backing of your own culture" in his filmmaking. His early films, notably the *Apu Trilogy*, integrate slow, rhythmic pacing and subtle contrasts that reflect classical *rasa* theory (as Ray himself acknowledged to scholars). Contemporary actor-theatre directors such as Girish Karnad likewise privilege performative immediacy; theatre critic Santanu Basu notes that Karnad's work "privileges performance" in the Indian tradition as enshrined in the *Natyashastra*. In this tradition, acting is not naturalistic imitation but a shared energy between actor and audience. Bharata himself "assiduously itemizes" every tool of performance, not only bodily and vocal technique but also music, production style, and costuming to evoke *rasa*. In cinema this translates to careful choreography of gestures and expressions and the use of music and song to heighten sentiment.

The *Natyashastra* also speaks directly to cinematic dialogue and visual style. In the *Vacika* abhinaya, actors articulate poetry and prose with precise meter and ornamentation. Bharata insists that actors master diction and intonation to "transport the spectator to a supersensual inner state". Indian cinematic traditions echo this: screenwriters often employ elevated or poetic Hindi, Bangla, Tamil etc., and use refrains or classical meters in song lyrics to fulfil *rasa* aims. For example, dialogue in period films may deliberately employ courtly or literary Sanskrit-based phrases, reflecting the *pathya* (textual portion) style of Sanskrit drama.

Visual elements too draw on *Natyashastra*. Bharata's instructs on elaborate stage dress, costumes, makeup and props as a "conventional substitute" for painted scenery. He prescribes that kings wear crowns and fine robes, sages bear sacred ash and tiger-skins, and even animals are costumed with symbolic headgear. Modern costume designers reference these codes: historical epics like *Mughal-e-Azam* or *Padmaavat* use rich jewellery and attire to signify royal characters, while mythological films dress gods and demons exactly as the *Natyashastra* illustrates (e.g. peacock feathered crowns for Krishna, crescent-moon tiaras for Shiva). Basu notes that the text "copiously describes" such production details, including makeup and jewellery, to enhance the emotional impact. Similarly, cinematographers and

set designers orient scenes by symbolic colour and decor: *Natyashastra* even dictates how to portray a forest versus a palace simply by props. Though movies now have lavish sets, the principle remains unchanged.

Character types from *Natyashastra* also pervade books and cinema. Bharata classifies all dramatic personae into three ranks: *uttama* (superior heroes/heroines), *madhyama* (middling), and *adhama* (inferior), for both males and females. He then subdivides these into dozens of heroes and heroine types (e.g. *Dhīrodātta*, *Dhīralalita*, etc., for noble heroes) and famously the *Aṣṭa-nāyikā* (eight heroine archetypes defined by romantic situation). These archetypal templates resonate in film casting and storytelling. For instance, the *uttama-nāyaka* corresponds to the virtuous cinematic hero (for example, Maryada Purushottam Rama), while *adhama* roles include comic sidekicks or villains. The eight *nāyikā* categories (such as *abhisārikā* the bold lover, *vipralabdhā* the spurned mistress, *khoḍitā* the enraged woman) can be seen in stock characters: the devoted wife (*pativrata uttamā-nāyikā*), the jealous lover, the innocent ingenue, etc. Filmmakers internalize these models subconsciously. Thus, when a film introduces, say, a courtesan heroine who tests the hero's virtue, or a sage-like mentor, it is often deploying Bharata's classic types. Even supporting cast (the *adhama* servant, clown or *vidūṣaka*) follow the Sanskrit stage convention that the low-born figure provides comic relief or moral commentary.

Many leading filmmakers consciously wove *Natyashastra* into modern narrative art. Satyajit Ray, a luminary of India's parallel cinema, insisted on narrative "contrast, rhythm, and pace" terms he explicitly aligned with classical aesthetics while blending them with realism. He once remarked that despite his Western film education, he has been going back to the history of his own country in recent years. Ray's dignified pacing and character-driven scenes (e.g. in *Charulata* or the *Apu* series) mirror Sanskrit drama's tranquil, reflective episodes, even as he embraces visual naturalism. Parallel-film icon Mrinal Sen similarly credited Bengali folklore and epic forms for shaping his cinematic vision.

Playwright-filmmaker Girish Karnad also exemplifies this fusion. His 1984 film *Utsav*, a screen adaptation of the Sanskrit play *Mṛcchakaṭika*, explicitly brought an ancient romantic satire to contemporary audiences. Critics note Karnad's *Utsav* kept the "true tradition of *kāvya*" ending while adding new scenes and a women-centric perspective. This indicates deep respect for the original Sanskrit dramaturgy even as he reworked it for film. In theatre and film, Karnad has often exploited classical forms (such as *Yakṣa* and *Daśarūpa*) to critique modern issues. More broadly, the 1960s–70s Parallel Cinema movement (Ray, Sen, Shyam Benegal, Govind Nihalani, etc.) deliberately drew on India's narrative roots while adapting literary classics and folk tales with an emphasis on social ethics. Hence, Bharata's treatise provides a dramaturgical foundation that modern artists and filmmakers still mine.

V. Conclusion

Bharata Muni's *Natyashastra* emerges not merely as an ancient dramaturgical text but as a profound civilizational document that continues to inform, shape, and inspire contemporary artistic and literary expressions across South Asia and beyond. Situated at the confluence of sacred ritual, performative expression, and aesthetic philosophy, the *Natyashastra* articulates a uniquely Indian vision of art wherein the sacred and the secular are not bifurcated but rather seamlessly interwoven. This vision is encapsulated in the doctrine of *rasa*, wherein the evocation of aesthetic sentiment transcends mere entertainment to become a pathway to spiritual and emotional elevation. Unlike Aristotle's *Poetics* which frames drama as a secular, mimetic art aimed at psychological catharsis within a civic and social context, Bharata's text affirms drama as a sacred Vedic tradition, democratized for all castes and classes, intended to uplift and universalize human experience through structured performance. The comparative analysis of Bharata and Aristotle reveals fundamental divergences in worldview: the former grounding performance in cosmic order and spiritual purpose, the latter in empirical logic and ethical instruction.

The *Natyashastra*'s theoretical frameworks such as *rasa*, *bhava*, and *abhinaya* have not remained confined to classical theatre but have found renewed vitality in multiple artistic disciplines. From the codification of Bharata Natyam and Odissi dance forms to the narrative strategies and performative stylizations of Indian cinema, Bharata's influence is enduring and pervasive. The revivalist efforts of figures such as Rukmini Devi Arundale and Kelucharan Mohapatra exemplify how the classical aesthetic vocabulary has been reintegrated into modern performance traditions with both fidelity and innovation. Moreover, the cinematic medium has extended the reach of *Natyashastra*'s principles, with auteurs such as Satyajit Ray and Girish Karnad deliberately integrating its expressive codes and character archetypes into narrative and visual storytelling. Through *angika* and *sattvika* *abhinaya*, symbolic *mise-en-scène*, and the invocation of archetypal *nāyakas* and *nāyikās*, filmmakers have adapted Bharata's dramaturgy to contemporary idioms while retaining its emotive and symbolic potency.

In this light, the *Natyashastra* continues to function not merely as a dramaturgical treatise but also as a living, adaptive epistemology that bridges ancient aesthetic thought with present-day artistic practice. It provides an enduring template for embodied storytelling, wherein gestures, emotions, music, and narrative coalesce to reflect and reshape cultural consciousness. As such, Bharata's legacy remains central to South Asian identity formation, offering both a decolonial aesthetic counter-narrative and a universal grammar of expressive form. By engaging with the *Natyashastra* as a dynamic rather than static tradition, contemporary artists and scholars alike reaffirm its relevance as both a philosophical guide and a creative blueprint in the ongoing evolution of contemporary literature and global allied arts.

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