

Criticism and Theory - I

Aristotle Concept of tragedy:-

The poetics by Aristotle primarily deals with tragedy. According to Aristotle, Tragedy is the highest Poetic form. The origin of term tragedy is not clear but there are different assumptions by scholars.

Definition according to Aristotle in Poetics :-

"A Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious and also having a magnitude, complete in itself with each kind of artistic ornaments. Each kind brought in separately in the parts of a work in dramatic not in narrative form with incidents arousing pity and fear wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions."

Date: _____

Day: _____

This definition clearly falls into two parts. First part tells about nature of tragedy, its object manner and medium of imitation.

Second part points out the function of tragedy.

An undeniable fact associated with the cathartic effect is that tragic representation of suffering and terrific defeat leaves on audience and depressed but relieved or even exalted.

The distinctive effect on the reader "the pleasure of pity and fear", is the basic way to distinguish it from dramatic and comic form of representation.

• Elements of tragedy :-

There are six major elements of tragedy according to Aristotle.

They are "Plot", "Character", "Thought", "Diction", "Song" and "Spectacle".

Q1. Plot :-

According to Aristotle, Plot is most important aspect of tragedy.

Aristotle defines plot as "the soul and life of tragedy".

"The arrangement of incidents in a logical sequence by cause and effect."

He treats it as a unified artistic whole directed towards the intended effect that is pleasure of pity and fear and catharsis of such human emotions. Being a unified whole a plot should have proper beginning, a middle and an end in which every part supports the whole. None of parts are non-functional.

And being an imitation of an action the plot should imitate single Action.

Types of Plot :-

Plot is of two types-

- Simple Plot
- Complex plot

Simple Plot :- In this the events unfold in a straight forward manner without much complication or entanglement. It follows a straight forward narrative structure. It usually focuses on a single main character and has a linear progression of events. i.e Oedipus Rex by Sophocles.

Macbeth , Tess of d'urbervilles by T.Hardy.

Complex Plots :- Aristotle Prefers it.

It involve a series of interconnected events and subplots adding layers of depth to the story . There are three things important in complex plots-

a) **Peripeteia (Peripety) :-** The reversal of hero's fortune.

• Misfortune or controversy in Hero's fortune. Hero suffers without knowing true facts. i.e Oedipus Rex.

Date _____

Day _____

b. **Anagnorisis** :- Recognition of truth. It is a change from ignorance to knowledge. ^{i.e.} Oedipus Rex.

c. **Suffering** :- Third kind of tragedy depends for its effect on scenes of suffering or of painful incidents. Aristotle rates it very low. Focuses on showcasing the hardships, pain and emotional turmoil that characters go through. ^{i.e.} (Romeo and Juliet)

Examples:-

Shakespeare's 'Hamlet' is a classic example of complex tragic plot.

2. Character:-

According to Aristotle:-

"A proper bent of mind

that plays a drama is

called as character."

It has second place after plot. By character Aristotle means the tragic hero who is always

Date: _____

Day: _____

a noble man. That is neither thoroughly good nor thoroughly bad or evil, but a mixture of both. According to Aristotle the character is better than we are, the tragic effect will be stronger. He moves us into pity and misfortune is greater than what he actually deserves from his hamartia.

3. Thought:-

It is an intellectual element of tragedy. It is a way of saying what is appropriate to a given circumstances or situation. There should be proper relationship between thought and situation. The speech of character express the views and feelings of a character.

4. Diction:-

It refers to the expression of meaning in words or it is a primary mode of imitating.

Diction or language used by writer in tragedy must be highly expressive and sublime.

5 Mallody or Song:-

Song is taken to be chief among the embellishments used in tragedy. It particularly refers to the song sung by a group of people known as chorus.

Also known as chorric commentary in tragedy. It includes analysis of major events of past, present and what will happen in future. It narrates major events shown on stage.

6. Spectacle.

It means the scenes used in drama for the sake of emotional attraction of audience. It heightens the emotional significance of an event in drama. But this is scenery actors, costumes, scenic effect soon.

● Limitations in Concept :-

- It is true that concept of tragedy by Aristotle is a no mean achievement. But he only discussed Greek tragedy he knew. It put a limitation on his concept of tragedy.
- Another limitation is that he does not take into account religious origins of tragedy.
- He neither discussed the inner or outer conflict that is basic issue in tragedy.
- Another limitation of his concept of tragedy was that he does not define the ideal tragic hero properly.

● Conclusion :-

The main features of Aristotle's concept can't be ignored easily. His concept is based on Greek tragedy Only. Yet his views are universal. His theory of tragedy is a foundation on which all subsequent discussion of literary aesthetics has most securely based itself.

Aristotle Concept of Imitation

- Imitation:- Copy of Something real.

- Introduction:-

The term imitation was not used for the first time by Aristotle. This has already been used by Plato in his Republic. But Aristotle uses this term with new dimensions. We have to locate what Plato says about imitation before Aristotle.

- Plato's Concept:-

Plato in his book Republic has distinguished between useful arts and imitative arts. The useful arts such as medicine, agriculture etc.

But imitative arts do not have such utility. Poetry belongs to category of imitative arts. Poetry like other imitative arts is not the Truth. Poetry by imitating world of appearances was twice removed from

Date: _____

Day: _____ 2

the truth. It was imitator or shadow of shadows.

A carpenter made a bed is working on the basis of idea of a bed.

The idea is real. What he makes is copy of that reality. So God created the world as we see it on the basis of an idea. The idea is truth and does real.

The world we see it is a mere copy of idea. The Poets who created on the basis of this world is basing creation on a copy. Hence this work is a copy of copy. And thus removed twice from reality. He called poetry the mother of all lies.

• Aristotle Concept :-

Aristotle was not the originator of term mimesis in fine arts.

But he added new dimensions to this term. He gave it significance. The concept of imitation

according to Aristotle is :- that unites poetry and all other fine arts. Art imitates not merely with appearance or external of this world. Art deals with essence of things Poetry is thus an imitation of shadow.

But it is imitation of ideal reality. Poetry deals with universal and ideal.

Thus Aristotle defends poetry and offered a wide scope and greater significance to the term. Imitation is not mere slavish copying.

It is not mere representation of outward appearances. Imitation is of deeper reality. It is very basic element of human nature.

Key Points in theory :-

- Poetry is not imitation of imitation but is of reality.

Not a copy of copy.

- Imitation is objective representation of life in literature. It is imaginative construction of life.
- Imitation is not photographic representation of surface of things. But it's a creative process. The poet select material from natural things and create reality.
- Aristotle argues that all form of poetry forms of imitation and differ only in 3 ways. Medium, object and Mode of Imitation.
- Aristotle argues that human tendency to create art and poetry come from a natural instinct of imitation. Imitation comes to human beings from childhood. This is how human are different from animals.
- Aristotle does not explicitly state whether imitation and therefore poetry is good or bad. He does imply that its existence is inevitable and should be answered.

Conclusions:-

Aristotle took this concept or term from Plato. He gave it wider significance. He refuted the charge that poetry was a pack of lies. He brought out higher truth involved in poetry which made it higher than history.

He brought creative imagination within scope of poetic imitation

F.R Lucas observes : Mimesis cover both representation of objects with a realism so photographic. Aristotle calls music as "the most mimetic of arts".

By declaring poetic imitation a creative process Aristotle has given poetry a very high place in realism of art and literature.

Chapter 09

Aristotle Conception of Tragic Catharsis

Introduction: Catharsis is a Controversial Term

The term 'Catharsis' is used only once in the course of Aristotle's *Poetics* in the fourth chapter. Yet there is hardly any other single term which has given rise to so many different interpretations and controversies. The difficulty arises out of the fact that Aristotle does not define or explain the term. Perhaps, he did so in the second book of the *Poetics*, which is lost. The term has been explained by critics in the light of its use in Aristotle's other works, such as his *Politics* and *Ethics*. It has also been noted that the term 'Catharsis' has three meanings: it could mean "purgation" or "purification", or "clarification". Critics have interpreted Aristotle's views in the light of each of these meanings—and it has not done much to ease the difficulty. Only one thing has been agreed upon—that tragedy should arouse pity and fear. But there is difference of opinion as to how the arousal of these emotions lead to 'tragic pleasure'.

The Place of Catharsis in the Definition of Tragedy

The term 'Catharsis' occurs in Aristotle's definition of tragedy:

(Tragedy is 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 a narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper catharsis, or purgation, of these emotions.)

We see that the term is also linked with the concept of pity and fear. It is, therefore, necessary to consider the meanings of pity and fear as connected with tragedy.

The Place of Pity and Fear in Catharsis

The terms, 'pity' and 'fear' are closely connected in Aristotelian theory. There are different types of fear. Fear can be centred on an individual, in the form of some vague feeling of insecurity and anxiety. It could possibly derive from a feeling for others, even for society or the state. Fear could be the outcome of facing some inexplicable event, or some disastrous and awful incident. Fear may also arise out of feelings of guilt, or rather a recognition of this guilt in ourselves, when we see it portrayed in someone else. It is apparent that tragedy can easily encompass all these forms of fear, either singly or collectively.

Pity, we are told by Aristotle, is occasioned by undeserved misfortune, and fear by that of one like ourselves (*i.e., by the misfortune of one like ourselves*). In the *Rhetoric*, fear is defined as "a kind of pain or disturbance due to a mental picture of some destructive or painful evil in the future". The impending evil in this case must be near at hand, not distant. Anything that causes fear in us if it happens to us, causes pity in us if it happens to others. Pity is a "sort of pain at an evident evil of a destructive or painful kind in the case of somebody who does not deserve it, the evil being one which we might expect to happen to ourselves or to some of our friends, and this at a time when it is near at hand."

Pity and fear are related emotions. Pity turns to fear when the object is closely related to us that the suffering seems to be our own, and we pity others in circumstances in which we should fear for ourselves. Pity is derived from the feeling that similar suffering might be 'fall us'. It is because of this that the tragic character should be like 'ourselves' and at the same time slightly idealised. In such a case, we feel pity for the suffering of the innately good person, while having a sympathetic fear for one who is so like ourselves. Aristotle everywhere says that pity and fear are the characteristic and necessary tragic emotions.

The essential tragic effect depends on maintaining the intimate alliance between pity and fear. According to Aristotle, pity alone should not be evoked by tragedy, as many moderns have held; not pity or fear, for which Corneille argued; not pity and admiration, which is the modification under which the Aristotelian phrase finds currency in the Elizabethan writers. The requirement of Aristotle is a combination of pity and fear, as Butcher says.

The tragic fear is impersonal in the artistic sense. It is not really the crushing apprehension¹ of personal disaster. In reading or seeing a tragedy, one does not really fear that one would be placed in similar circumstances, or be overtaken by the same calamities² that overtake the tragic hero. But there is a feeling of horror or of vague foreboding, as Butcher observes. The tension and excited expectation with which we wait for the catastrophe derives from our sympathy with the hero, with whom we tend to identify ourselves. Butcher says in this context: "We are thrilled with awe at the greatness of the issues thus unfolded, and with the moral inevitability of the result. In this sense of awe the emotions of fear and pity are blended."

Having dealt with the emotions of pity and fear, let us now go on to the concept of the catharsis of such emotions. Various interpretations have been offered regarding the term.

'Catharsis' Taken as a Medical Term: Purgation Theories

The term 'Catharsis' has been interpreted in medical terms, meaning purgation. In medical terms (especially in the older sense), purgation meant the partial removal of excess "humours". The health of the body depended on a true balance of the humours. Thus purgation of the emotions of pity and fear does not mean the removal of these emotions, but that the passions or emotions are reduced to a healthy, balanced proportion. Catharsis in this sense, denotes a pathological effect on the soul comparable to the effect of medicine on the body.

1. Like Curing the Like: Some critics who favour the medical sense of the term Catharsis, explain the process in the light of "homeopathic" treatment, in which a little substance of something cures the body of a excess of the same thing. It is a case of the 'like curing the like'. A passage in the *Politics* of Aristotle bears this out, where the effects of music on some morbid states of mind is talked about.³ The emotions should not be repressed; they must be allowed

1. an anxious feeling of dread.
2. dangers.
3. The passage in the *Politics* which gives strong justification to the view, that catharsis is a "relief to overcharged feeling": Those who are subject to the emotions of pity and fear and the feelings generally will necessarily be affected in the same way; and so will other men in exact proportion to their susceptibility to such emotions. All experience a certain catharsis and pleasant relief. In the same manner cathartic melodies give innocent joy to men.

an outlet, so that the mental equilibrium is maintained. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle refers to the curing of religious frenzy. According to Plato, a crying child is rocked to sleep by singing a song. The outward restlessness (induced by the rocking) allays or cures the inward restlessness, and brings about calm.

In his *Preface to Samson Agonistes*, Milton expresses a similar view, that the effect of tragedy is to "temper and reduce..... (Pity and fear and such emotions) to just measure with a kind of delight, stirred up by reading or seeing those passions well imitated". Pity and fear are artificially produced in tragedy, and it expels the excess of these emotions lying latent in us. Bernays, and before him Twining, put forward the pathological theory of the effect of tragedy. The stage, according to them, provided a harmless and pleasurable outlet for instincts which demand satisfaction, and which can be indulged here more fearlessly than in real life. In the pleasurable calm which follows when the passion is spent, an emotional cure has been wrought. Freud's theory of psychological cure of neurosis is similar to this, when he says that a neurotic can be cured by being made to recall painful childhood experiences.

2. Unlike Curing the Unlike: In the neoclassical period, the medical interpretation of the term took on an "allopathic" light. Catharsis was seen to be in the nature of the unlike curing the unlike. The arousing of pity and fear, the more tender emotions, brought about a purgation or evacuation of other emotions like anger and pride. The sight of the incidents aroused pity and fear and the spectator is purged of those emotions which caused the incidents of suffering in the tragedy.. If the suffering in the play was caused by anger or pride, the spectator was cured of these emotions.

Dryden in his preface to *Troilus and Cressida*, says that it is not the abasement of pity and fear, but of such aggressive and evil emotions as pride and anger through the feeding and watering of the soft-hearted emotions.

Psychological Interpretation of 'Catharsis'

Some critics have tried to give a psychological explanation to the term 'Catharsis'. Herbert Read considers it in the light of a safety valve. Tragedy gives a free outlet to the emotions of pity and fear. The result is a feeling of emotional relief. This, one notes, is quite closely related to the purgation theory.

A. A. Richard puts forward an ingenious theory. He says that the emotion of pity is an impulse to advance, while fear is an impulse

to withdraw. In tragedy both these impulses are blended, harmonised into balance. Emotional excess is thus brought to a balance. However, the theory holds good only for the emotion of pity and fear, and it restricts the range of tragic emotions to these.

Ethical Interpretation of 'Catharsis'

The ethical interpretation of 'Catharsis' regards the tragic process as an illustration of the soul, a lighting up which results in a more philosophical attitude to life and suffering. The spectator sees the largeness of the disasters presented onstage and realises that his personal emotions are insignificant beside such a catastrophe. It brings him to a balanced view of things. Man sees himself in proportion to the large design of the universe. In the words of John Gassner, "only enlightenment, a clear comprehension of what was involved in the struggle, an understanding of cause and effect, a judgement on what we have witnessed", can bring about a state of mental peace and balance, and result in complete aesthetic gratification.

Another set of critics said that the effect of tragedy was to harden or 'temper' the emotions. Just as soldiers become hardened against death after seeing it so many times on the battlefield, so too, constant contact with tragedy on stage hardens men against pity and fear in real life. This is, undoubtedly, a bit far-fetched, if not totally absurd.

The Purification Theory of 'Catharsis'

One meaning of Catharsis is 'purification'. Some critics have interpreted the term in the light of this meaning. These critics reject the interpretation of Catharsis in the lights of medical terminology. Humphry House, for instance, says that Aristotle's concept of Catharsis was not as a medical term. He interprets the word to mean a kind of "moral conditioning", which the spectator undergoes. He comments that purgation means 'cleansing'. This cleansing may be a quantitative evacuation or qualitative change in the body, in the restoration of the proper equilibrium. In this context he says: "A tragedy arouses pity and fear from potentiality to activity through worthy and adequate stimuli; to control them by directing them to the right objects in the right way; and exercises them, within the limits of the play, as the emotions of the good man would be exercised. When they subside to potentiality again after the play is over, it is a more "trained" potentiality than before.... Our responses

are brought nearer to those of the good and wise man." Catharsis results in emotional health. Catharsis is thus a moral conditioning. It is a purification of the excess and defect in our emotions, so that emotional equilibrium can be restored. According to House, Aristotle's whole doctrine only makes sense if we realise that the proper development and balance of the emotions depend upon the habitual direction of them *towards worthy objects*.

Butcher, too, agrees with the purification theory. He observes that Catharsis involves "not only the idea of emotional relief, but the further idea of purifying the emotions to be relieved." He says, further, that, the poets found out how "the transport of human pity and human fear might, under the excitation of art, be dissolved in joy, and the pain escape in the purified tide of human sympathy." Tragic experience, onstage, purifies the feeling of pity and fear of its morbid content.

The Clarification Theory of 'Catharsis'

There are some critics who show that the implications of Catharsis are to be found in the *Poetics* itself without any need to refer to the *Politics* or the *Ethics*. Writing of the imitative arts, Aristotle points out that the pleasure in the imitative arts is connected with learning. Pleasure does not come from joy alone; even the pictures of dead bodies can give pleasure if well executed. This shows that pleasure is linked with learning; that pleasure is there in anything fitted to instruct. It is paradox that even the ugly and the repellent¹ can and do give pleasure. A similar paradox lies there in tragedy. The tragic incidents are painful. They might present horrible situations of man blinding himself, or a woman killing her husband, or a mother killing her child. Such events would horrify us and repel us in real life; yet, in tragedy, they afford us a special pleasure. It is a pleasure peculiar to tragedy.

Aristotle himself tells us that tragedy has its own kind of pleasure, and that we must seek from it this pleasure—"the pleasure proper to it." And Catharsis involves such a pleasure. The function of tragedy is to provide the pleasure peculiar to it. This pleasure involves the presentation of events which arouse pity and fear. According to this theory, Catharsis becomes an indication of the function of tragedy, and not of its emotional effects on the audience. Catharsis is

1. which causes dislike.