

MODULE- IV

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ARISTOTLE : CONCEPT OF *CATHARSIS*

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1.1: AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

The “ Father of Western Philosophy” Aristotle was born in the city of Stagira, Chalkidiki, in the north of classical Greece. The main source of his interest was a complex but even synthesis of the philosophies that existed prior to his time and west was benefitted by a philosopher who with his fundamental intellect provided the solutions of problems and methods of inquiry.

He lost his father , Nicomachus ,in his early childhood and was brought up by a patron and guardian. In c.347 B C at the age of thirty seven he left Plato's Academy after completing his education . Then a gamut of writings on various subjects constituted the first comprehensive system of Western Philosophy. After Plato's death Aristotle shifted himself from Platonism and immersed himself in empiricism where he proclaimed that all concepts and knowledge were based on perception. By 335 B C Aristotle had returned to Athens which he left on 343B C to be the tutor of Alexander the Great and established his new school named Lyceum. The period between 335 and 323 B C Aristotle was believed to have composed most of his great works that were survived in Treatise, Poetics being one of them. After Alexander's death he was denounced for impiety and left for Chalcis, on Euboea where he died a natural death on 322 B C.

1.2 : ARISTOTLE'S IDEA OF CATHARSIS

Aristotle's Treatise, usually called the *Poetics*, was never meant by Aristotle himself to be a Treatise. Like almost everything else of his that has survived, it was not composed as a book; it merely represents the lectures which he used to give his students. It is abrupt, disjointed, awkwardly loose, as awkwardly digressive; essential ideas are left unexplained, inessential things are elaborated. In short, it has all the literary defects of lecture notes.

One casualty of such treatment is the term *Catharsis*. It is used only once in the 6th chapter of the *Poetics*. Unfortunately, the idea of *Catharsis* was so familiar to him, and doubtless to his pupils, that he never stops to explain it. The word *Catharsis* occurs in the definition of Tragedy, where, Aristotle says that the function of Tragedy is, "through pity and fear effecting the *Catharsis* of these emotions." This single term has given rise to many different interpretations and controversies. Corneille, Racine, Lessing – each offered different solutions, but all agreed in assuming the purely ethical intention of the drama. Goethe protested; but his own most interesting theory is, for linguistic reasons, quite impossible. Barneys, with learning and literary skill mentioned that *Catharsis* is a medical metaphor, 'purgation' and denotes a pathological effect on the soul analogous to the effect of medicine, on the body. Only one thing has been agreed upon – that tragedy arouses pity and fear.

Now, Plato brought his gravest charge against the function of Tragedy, specially as rousing pity and fear.

Plato's charge, roughly, was this – how does a tragic hero arouse our emotions? By bewailing his misfortunes the more he can make us feel his grief, the more we admire him. Now, in real life, the man we admire, is the man who, without complaining induces misfortune and controls its effect on him. Then it can be right to admire an actor for doing the very things we despise in real life? Aristotle does not attempt to challenge the facts that it is characteristic of tragedy to arouse emotions which, in themselves, are dangerous. But, says Aristotle, tragedy not only rouses these emotions; it also, by the way it rouses them, effects a *Catharsis* of them. This is his answer to Plato.

Catharsis is in any case a metaphor. It may allude to rites of religion, in which case it means 'purification'; or it may allude to theories of medicine, in which case it means 'purgation.'

1.3 : CATHARSIS AS EFFECT OF TRAGEDY

The feelings of pity and fear in real life contain a morbid and disturbing element. In the process of tragic excitation they find relief, and the morbid element is thrown off. As the tragic action progresses, when the tumult of the mind, first aroused, has afterwards subsided, the lower forms of emotion are found to have been transmuted into higher and more refined forms. The painful element in the pity and fear of reality is purged away; the curative and tranquillizing influence that tragedy exercises follows as an immediate accompaniment of the transformation of feeling. Fear can be centered on an individual, in the form of some inexplicable events or some disastrous and awful occurring or it may also arouse out of a feeling of guilt, or rather a recognition of this guilt in ourselves. Pity is occasioned by undeserved misfortune, and fear, by that of one like ourselves. Anything that causes fear in us if it happens to us, causes pity in us if it happens to others. So, they are related emotions. Pity is derived from the feeling

that similar suffering might befall us. According to Aristotle, pity alone should not be evoked by tragedy. The requirement of Aristotle is a combination of pity and fear, as Butcher says. The tragic fear is impersonal in the artistic sense. 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 calamities that overtake the tragic hero. But there is a feeling of horror or of vague foreboding as Butcher observes : “ we are thrilled with awe at the greatness of the issues thus unfolded , and with the moral inevitableness of the result. In this sense of awe the emotions of fear and pity are blended.”

1.4 : INTERPRETATIONS OF CATHARSIS

The ethical interpretation of Catharsis regards the tragic process as a lustration of the soul , a lightning up which results in a more philosophical attitude to life and suffering. The spectator sees the largeness of the disasters represented on stage and realizes that his that his personal emotions are insignificant beside such catastrophe. It brings him to a balanced view of things. Man sees himself in proportion to the large design of the universe.

Fear cannot be combined with the proper measure of pity unless the subject matter admits of being universalized. Within the limited circle of a bourgeois society a great action is hardly capable of being unfolded. A parochial drama , like that of Ibsen’s , where the hero struggles against the cramping conditions of his normal life, sometimes with all the ardour of aspiring hope, more often in the spirit of egoistic self-assertion which mistakes the measure of the individual’s powers, can hardly rise to tragic dignity. Tragic *Catharsis* requires that suffering shall be exhibited in one of its comprehensive forms where the deeds and fortunes of the actors shall attach themselves to larger issues and the spectator be lifted above the special case , and, divine plan of the world.

The ‘purgation’ and ‘purification’ theory of *Catharsis* have limitations. These theories are concerned with the effect of Tragedy on the audience, i.e. with the psychology of the audience. Both views concentrate not on what tragedy says or what tragedy is but what it may do to us. Modern critics advocate the classification theory . This theory refers to the incidents of tragedy rather than to the reaction of the audience.

1.5 : CONCLUSION

Aristotle is a great critic and what he said centuries ago will continue to influence thinking, as it has done all this time. The term Catharsis has been interpreted so variously that it is difficult to come to an agreement as to what Aristotle really meant. Greek tragedy , in its beginning was but a wild religious excitement , a bacchic ecstasy. 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. Aristotle has succeeded to throw light on the art of poetry , yet the last word on *Catharsis* has not been said.

1.6 : BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

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1.7 : QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Analyse Aristotle's concept of *Catharsis* .
2. The art of tragedy aims itself at audience. Discuss with reference to Aristotle's Poetics.
3. What is the meaning of this line from Aristotle's Poetics: "Fear and pity may be excited by the tragic hero through *Catharsis*."
4. What is meant by the "catharsis of emotions" in Aristotle's Poetics?