

MODULE- II

DR BARNALI MUKHOPADHYAY

ASST. PROF . IN ENGLISH

K N COLLEGE

ARISTOTLE : TRAGIC HERO

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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 343 B 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 TRAGIC HERO

The concept of an ideal tragic hero is deduced from the primary fact that the function of tragedy is to produce the *catharsis* of pity and fear; pity being felt for a person who , if not wholly innocent , meets with suffering beyond his deserts; fear being awakened when the sufferer is a man like in nature with ourselves. Tragic character must be exhibited through the medium of a plot which has the capacity of giving full satisfaction to these emotions. The tragic hero must fall from prosperity into misfortune. This transition must be effected not through any vice and villainy which may justify the disaster but through an error; this error, commonly called as tragic flaw , or, *hamartia* must

cooperate with the malignity of fate. Thus, although the tragic hero does not deserve his fall, yet, his own mistake reinforces the tragic disaster. As Chaucer paraphrases Aristotle so tellingly:

*Tragedie is to sayn a certain storie,
As olde books maken us memorie,
Of him that stood in great prosperitee
And is yfallen out of high degree
In to miserie, and endeth wretchedly.*

The good man may be represented as passing from adversity to prosperity. On Aristotle's principles this would fail to produce the proper tragic effect; for, though we may be profoundly moved by the spectacle of threatened ruin in the course of the action, the total impression is alien to tragedy. The 'happy ending' in Greek and in all dramatic literature, comes under the same general censure as attaches to a plot with a double thread of interest and a double catastrophe, -- prosperity for the good, misfortune for the bad. Aristotle observes that 'owing to the weakness of the audience' a play so constructed generally passes as the best. He himself regards the pleasure hence derived as proper rather to comedy, where all discords are reconciled, the bitterest foes part as friends, 'no one slays or is slain': -- or, as Goethe puts it, 'no one dies, every one is married.'

Perfectly blameless character is deemed unfit to be a tragic hero on the ground that wholly unmerited suffering causes repulsive, not, sympathetic feelings because, such persons themselves despise the pain of suffering; they enjoy so much inward consolation that they have no need of our sympathy. *Si vis me flere dolendum est primum ipsi tibi* -- may appear a cynical reflection, though it can convey a real truth. Aristotle, too, would say that pity is expelled by a stronger feeling; as in the Rhetoric 'terror tends to drive out pity.' blameless goodness has seldom the quality needed to make it dramatically interesting. It wants the motivated power which leads to decisive acts of will, which impels others to action and produces a collision of forces. Dramatic character implies some self-assertive energy. By a touch of egoism, it exercises a controlling influence over circumstances or over the wills of minor characters that are grouped around it.

No doubt Aristotle's generation about the tragic hero are based on Greek Tragedy, especially on Sophocles' *Oedipus Trilogia*. Now Oedipus though of a hasty and impulsive temperament, with something too of proud self-assertion, cannot be said to have owed his ruin to any striking moral defect. His character was not the determining factor in his fortunes. He was, in a genuine sense the victim of circumstances. If Oedipus is the person who suggested to Aristotle the formula of this chapter, we can hardly limit the words to its moral meaning, as marking either a defect of character otherwise noble, -- each and all of this may carry with them the tragic issues of life and death. Aristotle had not to go beyond the Greek stage to find a guiltless heroine whose death does not shock the moral sense. Nothing but a misplaced ingenuity, or a resolve at all costs to impart a moral lesson into the drama, can discover in Antigone any fault or failing which entailed her suffering as its due penalty. She sacrificed the lower duty to the higher; and if, in so doing, her conduct fell short of formal

perfection , the defect lay in the inherent one-sidedness of all human action in an imperfect world.

Aristotle set aside the overthrow of signal villainy as unsuited to tragedy – in spite of the satisfaction it offers to the moral sense. Crime as crime has no place in art; it is common , it is ugly. But crime may be presented in another light. Wickedness on a grand scale , resolute and intellectual , may raise the criminal above the common place and offer him a sort of dignity. It needs the genius of a Shakespeare to portray this potent and commanding villainy. Only he can concentrate the whole interest of a play round a character such as Richard III. The wickedness of Richard III is on a different level from that of Iago. Iago is not a heroic criminal , but a plotter of a meaner order , in whom the faculty of intrigue amounts almost to genius; coldly diabolical , more malignant than Richard , and delighting in evil for its own sake. On the other hand , Richard's masterpieces of crime are forged by intellect and carried out with artistic finish and completeness. Tragic pity there cannot be for the protagonist ; hardly even for his victims; terror and grandeur leave little room for any gentler feelings.

1.3 1.3: DISCOURSES ON HIS IDEA OF TRAGIC HERO

There is a certain ' contradiction' Schiller observes in Aesthetical Essays, ' between the aesthetic and the moral judgment '. The Menelaus of Euripides is twice cited as an example of character ' gratuitously bad ', as if badness is required by dramatic motive and the structure of a play. The law demands the light and shade of contested characters – each forming the compliment of the other. Thus we have such pairs as Antigone and Ismene, Odysseus and Neoptolemus , Lear and Gloucester, Hamlet and Laertes, Brutus and Antony. Aristotle admits the principle , but in a cursory and parenthetical manner, he does not seem to have been aware of its range and significance.

Aristotle's theory of tragic hero has suggested two divergent lines of criticisms. The rule leaves no room for a ' true tragic collision' and the fate of the hero is determined by forces outside the control of human will. Macbeth does not start with criminal purpose . but with him , the primal defect , is the taint of ambition , which after the promptings of a stronger character than his own and a will of inflexible force works in him as a subtle poison. Here, tragic fear is heightened into awe when the first false step has issued in crime and crime has engendered fresh crime. Thus it can be said that a mere error , due to the inherent limitations of man's faculties , brings ruin.

The serious objections which modern critics level against this definition are based upon tragic characters in modern tragedies . Aristotle's doctrine of *Hamartia* or tragic flaw does not apply to the *Tempest* or to *The Death of a Salesman* . It is doubtful if pity and fear are the only emotions appropriate to Shakespearean tragedy. It produces its effect by the revelation of subtle psychological motives.

1.4 CONCLUSION

Modern literature , and above all the Shakespearean dramas , while proving that the formula of Aristotle is too rigid , have also revealed a new meaning in the idea of the tragic hero. In Hamlet, Othello, Lear, Macbeth, Coriolanus, one sees the run of noble nature through some defeat of

character, it has been shown that the most dramatic of motives is the process by which a frailty or flow of nature grows and expands till it culminates in tragic disaster.

1.5: BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

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1.6 :QUESTIONNAIRE

1.What is Aristotle's tragic hero?

2.What is ideal tragic hero?

3.Is Antigone the tragic hero?

4.What is Aristotle's concept of tragedy?