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The Poetics of Aristotle: An Introduction

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Abstract: Aristotle was a disciple of Plato who was born in 384 BCE. He was a versatile and prolific writer. Aristotle is considered the first scientific critic in the world of literary criticism. Plato was the first critic to apply the Greek word *mimesis*, which means acting like someone. However, according to Aristotle, imitation is a common principle in the Arts of Poetry, Music, Dancing, Painting, and Sculpture. Aristotle breathed a new meaning by saying that mimicry is not mere copying or drawing. Poetic imitation is an imaginative creation. He applies various terms in his poetics- mimicry, imitation, Catharsis, Hamartia, peripety and discovery. The Catharsis is open to many interpretations. Purgation is to be considered a homoeopathic treatment. Plato claims the metaphysical reality, while Aristotle denies the existence of the metaphysical reality.

Keywords: Mimicry, Imitation, Catharsis, Hamartia, Peripety and Discovery

I. INTRODUCTION

Aristotle was a disciple of Plato who was born in 384 BCE. He became the tutor to Prince Alexander of Macedon. Aristotle wrote 400 volumes in his literary career. He was not only a versatile writer but also a prolific writer worldwide. His list of contributions was so amorous. He wrote *Dialogue*, *On Monarchy*, *Natural History*, *Organon*, *The Instrument of Correct Thinking*, *Rhetoric*, *Logic*, *Educational Ethics*, *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Physic*, *Metaphysics*, *Politics* and *Poetics*. Aristotle is considered the first scientific critic in the world of literary criticism. His intelligence was so great that it grasped mastery over all subjects. The *Poetics* is a treatise on literary criticism. It has become the most important treatise. He applies various terms in his poetics- mimicry, imitation, Catharsis, Hamartia, peripety and discovery.

The *Poetic* has twenty-six chapters, forty-five pages and six parts. Chapters I and VI are about introductory remarks on poetry and different types of poetry. These chapters deal with tragedy and comedy. Chapters VI and XIV discuss the definition of tragedy and its elements. Chapters XX to XXII deal with poetic diction, style and vocabulary. Chapter XXIII is devoted to narrative poetry and tragedy. In Chapters XXIV and XXVI, Aristotle compares the Epic with the tragedy. He answered the objections raised by the critics in Chapter XXV. Thus, his *Poetics* became the storehouse and eye-catching treatise in literary criticism. It was the treatise not of an age but of all ages.

Plato was the first critic to apply the Greek word *mimesis*, which means acting like someone. The word *mimesis* is interpreted as imitation. He considers that virtual kinds of literature are not real literature. According to Plato, *true reality resides in a metaphysical, divine sphere above and beyond the human realm*. However, according to Aristotle, *imitation is a common principle in the Arts of Poetry, Music, Dancing, Painting, and Sculpture. These Arts are distinguished according to the Means, the Objects, and the Manner of Imitation. The Means of Imitation are Rhythm, Language, and 'Harmony' (or Melody), taken singly or combined*. Aristotle considers that imitation is the common principle of the Arts of Poetry, Music, Dancing, Painting, and Sculpture, so imitation is not a mere mimicry. However, Aristotle breathed a new meaning by saying that mimicry is not mere copying or drawing. The poet does not bring his material from nature, but he adds poetic imagination to it, so it becomes something new. Aristotle equated poetry with music. Plato compares poetry with painting, while he compares poetry with music. The manners and medium are different. He says in *the Poetic: Epic poetry and Tragedy, Comedy also and dithyrambic poetry, and the greater part of the music of the flute and the lyre, are all in their general conception modes of imitation. They differ, however, from one another in three respects—the means, the objects, and the manner of imitation being in each case distinct*.

Aristotle explains in the first chapter of the Poetic that there are Epic, Tragedy, Comedy and Dithyramic which are the four types of poetry. The different types of poetry have different manners of imitation. As considered the object of poetic imitation, *the objects of imitation are persons acting, and these persons must be either of a higher or a lower type (for moral character mainly answers to these divisions, goodness and badness being the distinguishing marks of moral differences), it follows that we must represent men either as better than in real life or worse or as they are. It is the same in painting. Polygnotus depicted men as nobler than they are, Pauson as less noble, and Dionysius drew them true to life*. Aristotle says that imitation is not a mere photocopy. Poetic imitation is an imaginative creation. The function of the poet is not to relate what has happened but what may happen- according to the laws of probability or necessity. These two words probability and necessity reflect that the poet is applying the creative powers because the poet deals with incidents and situations as per the laws of probability and necessity.

Aristotle defines tragedy in the following words; there are *Six elements in Tragedy: three external, —namely, Scenic presentation, Lyrical Song, and Diction; three internal,— namely, Plot, Character, and Thought. The plot, or the representation of the action, is of primary importance; Character and Thought come next in order*. There are six elements of the tragedy. Three are external, and three are internal. Tragedy is the superior form of literature because Aristotle puts tragedy to a higher level. He compares tragedy and comedy and says that comedy is the lowest form of the art. *Comedy aims at representing men as worse and tragedy as better than in actual life*.

According to Aristotle, *tragedy is the imitation of an action, serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude, in a language beautified in different parts with different kinds of embellishment, through actions and not narration, and scenes of pity and fear bringing about the 'Catharsis' of these (or such like) emotions*. Thus, the tragic plots and characters are designed to arouse the emotions of pity and fear. When watching or reading a tragedy, the audience or readers feel pity for the characters who suffer, but the audience and readers do not feel their pain. According to Aristotle, the emotion of Catharsis is possible when the characters must be good. The characters must have their status. They must be like us. They must be mixtures of good and evil and virtues and weakness. They must have certain tragic flaws. These faults of the characters will bring their misfortunes. Aristotle applies the Greek word, *Hamartia*, which literary means missing the mark. In Greek words, Catharsis has three meanings purgation, purification and clarification. *Some argue that it is an intellectual 'clarification': the audience learns something about humanity, and learning produces pleasure*. Aristotle applies the word Catharsis in a technical term. The Catharsis is open to many interpretations.

Purgation is to be considered a medical metaphor. Just in homoeopathic treatment, the like curing the like means an analogous effect on the body; in tragedy, emotions of pity and fear cure the soul. The modern critic F R Lucas rejects this medical metaphor by saying that the theatre is not a hospital. It is psychological relief.

Aristotle defines tragedy as *the imitation of an action, serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude, which distinguishes tragedy from comedy and other parts of poetry*. He emphasizes the Unity of Action. He never liked subplots in tragedy. About the unity of time, he defines a certain magnitude and completion.

According to Aristotle, a plot is the soul of a tragedy, and a character is subordinate to the plot. He states, a tragedy is impossible without a plot, but there may be one without character. Christopher Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* is a tragedy without a plot. There are two types of plots, i.e., serious and complex. A simple plot is one where there is a change in the future of the fortune of the hero without Peripety and Discovery. Peripety means the change in the fortune of the hero. Discovery means a change from ignorance to knowledge.

II. CONCLUSION

Aristotle is the first scientific critic in the galaxy of the criticism. He is a Pole star who guides many critics. Aristotle develops a quite different response to Plato and separates arts and literature from history and politics. He suggests that we should not judge literature in ethical and political terms. He shows that poetry is not mere mimicry. But it is the imaginative creation of the poet and emphasizes that tragedy has an aesthetical and universal quality. In the *Poetic*, he offers a technical interpretation of tragedy. Plato claims the metaphysical reality, while Aristotle denies the existence of the metaphysical reality. Aristotle judges the literature by artistic criteria. Aristotle recues the literature from Plato's attacks by introducing an aesthetic approach to literature.

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