

ARISTOTLE'S CATHARSIS : SOME THEORIES

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ABSTRACT-The term 'Catharsis' appears only once in Aristotle's *Poetics* and without any definite meaning or explanation, but it has still been one of the most popular and celebrated terms in the field of literary criticism. Critics have advanced three different meanings to this term: 'purgation', or 'purification', or 'clarification'. Despite differing in their interpretation of catharsis, critics have agreed upon the fact that tragedy arouses 'pity' and 'fear' which lead to 'tragic pleasure'. Aristotle's *Poetics* is a treatise on the art of poetry and not about the effect of poetry; therefore, his view of Catharsis is mainly intellectual and not didactic or theological. Thus, the Clarification theory, compared to Purgation and Purification theories, appears to be the most acceptable one as it offers an intellectual clarification to Catharsis.

KEY WORDS: catharsis, tragedy, pity, fear, purgation, purification, clarification.

THE CONCEPT OF 'CATHARSIS'

Scholars and critics interested in the study of tragedy have always been attracted to the concept of 'Catharsis'. Indeed Catharsis is one of the most celebrated terms in the field of literary criticism. Though this term appears only once in Aristotle's *Poetics* and without any definite meaning or explanation, but it has still been one of the most popular and sought after concept among scholars. On the basis of understanding its usage in Aristotle's *Poetics* and his other works, such as *Politics* and *Ethics*, critics have attempted to explain this term. They have advanced three different meanings to the term 'Catharsis': 'purgation' or 'purification' or 'clarification'. Though critics have differed in their interpretation of this term, however, they have agreed upon the fact that tragedy arouses 'pity' and 'fear' which lead to 'tragic pleasure'.

DEFINITION OF TRAGEDY

Aristotle has used the term 'Catharsis' and its association to terms like 'pity' and 'fear' while defining 'Tragedy'. He states,

Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of 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; though pity and fear effecting the proper catharsis, or purgation of these emotions.

LOCATING FEAR AND PITY IN CATHARSIS

Aristotle affirms that 'pity' and 'fear' are essential emotions for creating 'tragic pleasures'. For an individual, fear is some uncertain feelings of insecurity and anxiety which perhaps is derived from such feelings for others in his surroundings. Fear may be an outcome of facing some bizarre event, or some disastrous and unpleasant incident, a sense of guilt in self or as portrayed in others in his environs. Tragedy covers all these types of fear either individually or collectively.

Pity on the other hand, asserts Aristotle, is aroused from the understanding of an undeserved misfortune of someone like ourselves.

From W. Rhys Roberts's translation of Aristotle's the *Rhetoric* (Book II Chapter V), we find that Aristotle while talking about fear states "what follows will show things and persons of which, and the states of mind in which, we feel afraid". Here Aristotle defines fear as "a pain or disturbance due to a mental picture of some destructive or painful evil in the future."

The definition of Pity in the *Rhetoric* is given as 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."

We understand from the above definitions that both pity and fear are connected emotions and it is also evident from Humphrey House's, *Aristotle's Poetics*, where he writes that according to Aristotle, "pity turns into fear when the object is so nearly related to us that the suffering seems to be our own, and we pity others in circumstances in which we should fear for ourselves".

With such concepts of fear and pity, critics have presented various interpretations for Aristotle's 'Catharsis'. Some critics understand this term in moral and medicinal sense depending on external grounds referring to its usage in *Politics* and *Ethics*. Others see Catharsis in intellectual terms on the basis of general concept of tragedy as developed by Aristotle in the *Poetics*. A

brief attempt is being made here to understand Aristotle's catharsis through various interpretations advanced by critics from time to time.

THE PURGATION THEORY OF 'CATHARSIS'

A majority of critics who have worked on the concept of catharsis have claimed it to be a metaphor derived from Greek medicine and signified 'purgation' of fear and pity from the audience / readers who are viewing / reading a tragedy. This interpretation is based on the theory of Greek homeopathic medicine. Such close connection between medicine and tragedy is also seen in the works of 16th century writers like Minturnus and Milton. In the preface to *Samson Agonistes*, Milton writes,

"Tragedy, as it was anciently composed, hath been ever held the gravest, moralest, and most profitable of all other poems: therefore said by Aristotle to be of power by raising pity and fear, or terror, to purge the mind of those and such-like passions, that is to temper and reduce them to just measure with a kind of delight, stirred up by reading or seeing those passions well imitated. Nor is nature wanting in her own effects to make good his assertion: for so in physic things of melancholic hue and quality are used against melancholy, sour against sour, salt to remove salt humors".

Later, in the 19th Century author like Jacob Bernays has repeated this medical interpretation of catharsis. He asserts that apart from generally meaning 'cleansing', Catharsis can also be understood as a religious purification of guilt and sin and medical relief from one's illness. Catharsis has been described to denote a pathological effect on the soul comparable to the effect of medicine on the body.

THE PURIFICATION THEORY OF 'CATHARSIS'

Gotthold Lessing held the opinion that 'Catharsis' meant some form of moral 'purification'. They refuted the interpretation of catharsis in the light of medical terminology. Humphrey House in his *Aristotle's Poetics* has developed this interpretation where moral aspect plays an important role in understanding Catharsis. He opines that Aristotle has never used the concept of catharsis as a medical term, he (Aristotle) has rather used it as a moral conditioning. The excess and defects in our emotions are purified to maintain a balance or equilibrium. House argues that the entire doctrine of Aristotle may be understood only if we realise that the proper development and balance of the emotions depend upon the habitual direction of them towards worthy objects.

Other critics of this period like Butcher and Moulinier have also agreed to the purification theory. Butcher observes that catharsis not only involves the idea of emotional relief, but also the idea of purification of the emotions to be relieved. According to him 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." They stressed the fact that a tragic experience when portrayed on stage purifies the feeling of pity and fear of its morbid content.

PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF 'CATHARSIS'

Critics like Herbert Read consider catharsis to be a safety valve that provides outlet to excess emotions. Under this psychological explanation, which is very close to the purgation theory, Tragedy is said to give a free outlet to the emotions of pity and fear, resulting in the feeling of emotional relief.

According to I. A. Richards emotion of pity is an impulse to advance, while fear is an impulse to withdraw. In Tragedy, these two impulses are harmonised such that emotional excess is brought to a balance. However, the theory restricts the range of tragic emotions to and is applicable only for the emotion of pity and fear.

ETHICAL INTERPRETATION OF 'CATHARSIS'

Some critics have given an ethical interpretation of 'Catharsis'. They regard tragedy as a depiction of the soul, paving the way for a more philosophical attitude to life and suffering. It is a kind of inner illumination resulting in a more balanced attitude to life. Tragedy makes us realize that divine law operates in the universe shaping everything for the best and making the world a best place to live in. The audience sees the largeness of the disasters presented onstage and realises that his personal emotions are insignificant beside such a catastrophe. It helps to develop in him a balanced view of things. Man compares himself in proportion to the large design of the universe.

In the words of John Gassner, "In a successful tragedy, we see these drives [resulting from anxieties, fears, morbid grief or self-pity, sadistic or masochistic desires, etc.] enacted on the stage directly or through their results by characters with whom we can identify ourselves". John Gassner further states that the enlightenment attained from a clear understanding of what was involved in the struggle, its cause and effect which was witnessed, one can come to mental peace and balance resulting in complete aesthetic gratification.

THE CLARIFICATION THEORY OF 'CATHARSIS'

Modern critics like Leon Golden, O.B. Hardison and G.E. Else were of the opinion that the earlier theories were occupied with the psychology of the audience, with speculation regarding the effect of tragedy on those who come to the theatre. They argue that Aristotle was writing treatise on poetry and not on psychology. Aristotle was concerned with the nature and technique in which an ideal tragedy can be written rather than its psychological effects. These critics emphasised that Catharsis is related to incidents of

the tragedy, not to the emotions of pity and fear evoked in the audience. Hence they argued that the implications of Catharsis are to be found in *Poetics* itself without any necessity to refer to Aristotle's other works like the *Politics* or the *Ethics*.

Aristotle meant pleasure by Catharsis says O. B. Hardison. He opines that Catharsis refers to the tragic variety of pleasure because tragic events being pitiable and fearful, produce pleasure in the spectator. While writing on imitative arts, Aristotle states that the pleasure is connected with learning and it does not come from joy alone. Even pictures of dead bodies or horrible and painful situations of man blinding himself, or a woman killing her husband, or a mother killing her child can give pleasure if they are well executed. Such pleasures are peculiar and special to tragedy; however, in real life we would naturally dislike such unpleasant events. Thus pity and fear are presented in events which arouse pleasure.

The Clarification theory interprets Aristotle's view as contained in his *Poetics*. Catharsis is referred to as technique of the tragedy relating to both the theory of imitation and to the discussion of probability.

CONCLUSION

The theories of purgation and purification are merely incidental with noticeable limitations. They are unable to explain the whole process involved in catharsis. As these theories are concerned more with the psychological effect of tragedy on audience, they fail to explain tragedy in the true sense. Moreover, as Aristotle was writing on the art of poetry and not about the effect of poetry, therefore, his view of Catharsis is mainly intellectual and not didactic or theological. Thus, the Clarification theory appears to be the most acceptable one, as it offers an intellectual clarification to Catharsis.

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