

UGBA Sem. – 5  
2019- 20

English (Core) Paper No. - 306  
Title - Essays - I

### Essay on Aristotle's notion of tragedy.

#### Introduction:

Aristotle's Poetics is one of the most outstanding works of European thought. It was Aristotle who started an analysis of poetry and the drama. All worthwhile criticism from his own time to the present day stems either directly or indirectly from him.

Poetics is a treatise of about fifty pages, containing twenty-six chapters. It is believed to have had a second part which is lost. Aristotle undertakes to examine the nature and differentiating qualities of imaginative literature with a view to demonstrate that it is true, serious and useful. It seems that he was more interested in tragedy rather than epic or comedy.

#### 'Mimesis':

Aristotle begins his Poetics by stating that **imitation** (mimesis) is common to all arts. Poetry is epic, drama and lyric. Dramatic poetry is either comedy or tragedy. Comedy imitates men lesser than what they are while tragedy imitates men as better than they are. Thus, Aristotle establishes the unique nature of tragedy by differentiating it from the other kinds of poetry. The meaning which Aristotle attaches to the term 'imitation' was designed to be a reply to **Plato's** attack on poetry and the fine arts. Plato believed that the imitation of the artist is twice removed from reality. Aristotle differs with Plato radically. He believed that the objects of this world are not a mere appearance or an illusion but the primary reality. Poetry and the fine arts are then to be regarded as the manifestation of a higher truth, the expression of the universal which is to be found in each particular.

While Plato equated poetry with painting, Aristotle equates it with music. It represents not only the surface or appearance of things but also the emotions and passions of men. Aristotle's theory enlarges the scope of imitation. The poet imitates the higher reality embedded within. Imitation is equivalent to producing something according to a true idea. The poet gives us a truth of an ideal or universal kind telling us not what men are but what they can be or what they should be. He says, "It is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened but what may happen...".

Different kinds of poetry differ from each other in their manner of imitation. The objects of poetic imitation are "men in action". The poet may imitate "men as they were or are, or as they ought to be". In other words, he may present men either as better than in real life or as worse than they are. Tragedy and epic represent men on a heroic scale better than they are and comedy represents men of a lower type, worse than they are.

#### Aristotle's Definition of Tragedy:

Aristotle defines tragedy in the following words: "**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 ... in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions.**" According to Aristotle, tragedy has six main elements namely plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle and song (music). Out of these six constituent parts of tragedy, the first two are primary. Major part of Poetics is devoted to analysis of the scope and proper use of these elements. To explain his notion of tragedy Aristotle uses Sophocles' Oedipus the King as a paradigm.

#### Aristotle's Views on Plot:

E-mail: [englishgueta@gmail.com](mailto:englishgueta@gmail.com) Website: [www.englishgueta.in](http://www.englishgueta.in)

Free Android App of English GUETA is available on Play Store

Please visit the Facebook page of English GUETA also for latest updates...

The **'action'** that a tragedy imitates is its plot which consists of a logical sequence of events. He considers tragedy as a literary form rather than a theatrical presentation. His arrangements of the elements of tragedy are in order of importance which puts plot first and character second. He regards plot as 'the soul of tragedy'. He goes to the extent of saying that **"A tragedy is impossible without plot but there may be one without character."**

Tragedy is not an imitation of man but of action. Action means a process, the process of change from happiness to misery. Every such action is made up of a number of incidents and events. Such an organized plot has a beginning, a middle and an end. A beginning is that before which the audience or the reader does not need to be told anything to understand the story. From it follow events that would not follow otherwise and that constitute the middle. In their turn they lead to those other events that can issue from them and that lead to none other after them. They form the end.

Such a plot should have certain **magnitude** or a reasonable length. A reasonable length or size is an essential condition of beauty. A beautiful creation is neither too long nor too short, but just in proportion. The same is true of the plot. It should be of the right proportion. It must be of such dimensions that the meaning or the mind can embrace it and retain it. In Aristotle's own words, it should be of **"a length which can be easily embraced by the memory"**. As a general formula, it should present the stages from happiness to misery.

The plot being the 'soul' of tragedy, the artistic arrangement of its incidents is of the prime importance. Number of incidents and events may vary but together must constitute one action. Plot must have organic unity of a living creature. Different parts must be interrelated to each other and to the whole. All the events, situations, incidents fall into the structure of the main plot which leads to the end or catastrophe.

The **unity of action** is both external and internal. Plot must have variety but still it must have unity. Each event and incident should be connected to each other. Episodes are allowed as they serve to lengthen the plot but episodes must be integrated into the main action.

Aristotle regards episodic plot as "the worst". An episodic plot is one in which the scenes or incidents follow one another without the inward connection of probability or necessity. Tragedy imitates action. Its purpose is to arouse **pity and fear**. Such an effect will be best produced if the events come on us by surprise. The effect will be enhanced if at the same time they follow one another as cause and effect. The suffering or misery of a hero must be caused either by the action of a stranger but pathos would be more intense if caused by friends or relatives unintentionally.

### **Simple and complex plot:**

Plots are simple or complex. Simple plot moves forward without any violent change. It does not have reversal of intention or situation or *peripeteia* and recognition or discovery or *anagnorisis*. Ideal tragic plot is complex having '**peripeteia**' and '**anagnorisis**'. Complex plot is one in which calamity is due to a bold move on the part of the protagonist himself against his relatives or friends. The most powerful elements of emotional interest in tragedy are reversal of situation and recognition. Atkins says, "It is a tragedy brought about not by the deliberate purpose of some evil agent not yet by mere chance but by human error." Discovery implies a change from ignorance to knowledge. The discovery being of persons, it may be that of one party only to the other or both parties may have to discover themselves. In *Oedipus*, for example, the messenger who brings Oedipus news of his real parentage with an intention to allay his fears, brings about a sudden reversal of his fortune. Oedipus passes from a stage of happiness to misery when he recognizes that his wife is also his mother.

The third part is '**hamartia**' – suffering. It is an action of a destructive or painful nature, such as murders on the stage, tortures, wounding and the like. As Humphry House says, "Hamartia, Peripeteia and

**E-mail:** [englishgueta@gmail.com](mailto:englishgueta@gmail.com)      **Website:** [www.englishgueta.in](http://www.englishgueta.in)

**Free Android App of English GUETA is available on Play Store**

**Please visit the Facebook page of English GUETA also for latest updates...**

Anagnorisis all hang together in the ideal schematization of the tragic plot... After the recognition the plot must veer in a new direction.”

The plot is divisible into two parts – complication and its unraveling. A tragic plot must be designed very carefully. Its end should be convincing and effective. Resolution should come out of successful and logical unraveling of plot. The complication means all that happens from the beginning of the action to that part which marks the turning point to good or bad fortune. The ‘**denouement**’ or unraveling is that which extends from the beginning of the change to the end.

Plot should be so framed that it arouses the emotions of pity and fear. A tragic plot must choose characters with great care and precision. Tragedy cannot show good men passing from happiness to misery or a bad man passing from misery to happiness. Neither of these arouse tragic emotions. Therefore, a good man but not a perfectly good one is to be shown.

### **CATHARSIS:**

In the technical sense, Aristotle uses the word *catharsis* only once in the whole of the *Poetics*; that is, in the definition of tragedy. Aristotle rejected his predecessor Plato’s view that the emotions aroused by poetry are bad. His theory of *catharsis* is his answer to Plato on the emotional effect of poetry. The theory of *catharsis* cannot be taken out in the wider ethical context and any attempt to isolate it and to speak of it as if it is in the modern sense of the term an independent aesthetic theory is a distortion of this whole treatment of the matter.

The two emotions of pity and fear are described by Aristotle as particularly and specially the tragic emotions. He nearly always uses them in conjunction with each other, as a pair. The main passage in which he writes about the nature of these emotions in the *Poetics* is in Chapter XIII where he says; “pity is occasioned by undeserved misfortune and fear by that of one like ourselves.” In his treatment there cannot be pity where there is also no fear. Both pity and fear are derived from the self-regarding instinct and pity springs from the feeling that a similar suffering might happen to us.

### **TRAGIC HERO:**

In Chapter XV of *Poetics*, Aristotle says that in treating dramatic characters, there are four points to be considered. They are:

- (i) That the character should be good
- (ii) That they should be appropriate
- (iii) That they should be like reality
- (iv) That they should be consistent

Aristotle considers the goodness of character to be the predominant requirement. It is the foundation of that initial sympathy in spectator or reader. The tragic emotions cannot be aroused or the tragic pleasure cannot be conveyed without the goodness of character. The bad man falling from happiness to misery arouses some kind of human feeling but not pity. For Aristotle, the tragic hero was to be “not pre-eminently virtuous and just” but something less than that. A good man passing from happiness to misery “is not fear inspiring or piteous but simply odious to us.” He rejects such a character because his suffering offends our sense of justice.

The second point is that the character should be appropriate. One brought up in slavery would become slavish. One brought up as an heir to a monarchy would stabilize a habit of command and authority. The character must be true to life. Characters are either better or worse than ourselves. The character must be seen as a whole; development must take place according to intelligible principles.

### **‘HAMARTIA’:**

The term ‘hamartia’ means an error which is derived from “ignorance of some material fact or circumstance”. The misfortune of the hero is brought upon him not by vice and depravity but by some

**E-mail:** [englishgueta@gmail.com](mailto:englishgueta@gmail.com)      **Website:** [www.englishgueta.in](http://www.englishgueta.in)

**Free Android App of English GUETA is available on Play Store**

**Please visit the Facebook page of English GUETA also for latest updates...**

error of judgment. The theory of error fits the play Oedipus very well. Oedipus sets in motion voluntarily with a good end in view, the whole train of action which aims to discover the pitied person and so release Thebes from plague. But he is ignorant of the circumstance that he has killed his own father and the discovery of that produces a result other than what he expected.

### **CONCLUSION:**

Aristotle's Poetics is not a mere enunciation of the principles of poetic art. Its conclusions are firmly rooted in the Greek literature. Its approach is that of scientific one of observation and analysis. Aristotle uses the same analytical methods in defining the importance of tragedy that he had applied in his studies of politics, ethics and the natural sciences. His concept of tragedy enunciated in Poetics dominated the composition of tragedy in Western Europe during the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Moreover, any serious criticism on tragedy begins with Aristotle's notion that dominates the Western literature even in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.



**E-mail:** [englishgueta@gmail.com](mailto:englishgueta@gmail.com)      **Website:** [www.englishgueta.in](http://www.englishgueta.in)

**Free Android App of English GUETA is available on Play Store**

**Please visit the Facebook page of English GUETA also for latest updates...**