

Catharsis- A Safety Valve for The Heart

DR. ANJO RANI

ABSTRACT:

Aristotle popularized the term catharsis as early as the 3rd century B.C. Catharsis is the purgation of pity and fear in theatre audiences. He even made the claim that as a process 'Catharsis in drama, was functional and necessary for society' rather than based on the joy for it. This paper looks at this term, catharsis in the context of classic Greek tragedy. The history of this term in Aristotle's poetics and for much of it we'll focus on Aristotle. We look extremely specify at Aristotle's Poetics and Politics, which are the only two works by him that refer to the term catharsis. In part, we will look at the three meanings of catharsis that are: purgation, purification and clarification. Out of necessity we can only argue one thing, tragedy evokes pity and fear. After thorough research of Aristotle's texts we present a variety of interpretations that have arisen over the centuries, but we will review these and derive an elementary understanding of catharsis - for the entire paper we will focus on these three meanings or points of catharsis. This paper aims to follow catharsis in a selection of preserved tragedies of major playwrights. It considers tragic character, tragic plots and tragic emotions (pity and fear). The purpose is to contrast between Aristotle's theory and the practice of playwrights.

Keywords:-Pity And Fear, Catharsis, Poetics, Tragic Emotions, Socio-Cultural Influences.

To initiate this discussion, I would reiterate the truism that no artist works from empty canvas, but from his/her environmental and socio-cultural influences. As this truism is indeed true, it therefore follows that it would be useful to launch our analysis of Aristotle's Poetics with an account of the man Aristotle, his socio-cultural context, and the environment that shaped his thinking and inspired his creative genius. Aristotle lived, historically, in the twilight years of Greek city-state. Ancient Greece was made up of a number of independent cities also known as city-states. Athens, where Aristotle lived most of his active life was one of those city-states and indeed the most significant of those cities in terms of active intellectual enterprise.

In essence, Aristotle was a scientist with a strong interest in Biology and Physics. His scientific training and upbringing as a doctor's son motivated him to develop a philosophy that stood as a counterweight to the idealism of Plato. To be clear, Aristotle certainly possessed a knowledge of Platonic philosophy, particularly Plato's Theory of Forms, which holds that objects of experience are merely shadows of a higher world of forms that exist outside of sensory experience. The constant emphasis that Aristotle placed on Biology led him to become more inclined to take careful data concerning natural phenomena and accurate classification of that data, as the keys to making sense out of things. Aristotle was a product of a Greek civilization that, in short, believed in an ordered and balanced physical universe, and the conduct of man was guided by the principles of rationality and moderation. Although the Sophist movement and other related philosophical schools attempted to counter this dominant worldview, Aristotle remained, as his writings imply, a proponent of this worldview. In fact, Aristotle rejected the anti-scientific view that we only make sense of things by referring to invisibility beyond our knowledge of the world.

Closer in time to Aristotle, Euripides at times deliberately violated the Athenian principles of structure and balance in order to demonstrate a world that lacked structure and balance, so it is not surprising that Aristotle preferred Sophocles, who was a proponent of structure and balance, to Euripides. Elaborate examples of Aristotelian tragedy can certainly be found in Oedipus Rex, and it is unsurprising that Aristotle references this play so often in his examples. Aristotle wrote on many topics beyond the arts and humanities, and most of his works have not survived. Among those surviving, specifically related to the arts, Poetics is generally viewed as the most important. It is also arguably the earliest surviving systematic, in depth study of theory and practice of tragedy. Many have also suggested that the limits of the Poetics are an outline for a book, or perhaps lecture notes. In the opening paragraph of the Poetics, Aristotle provides some guidance on how we might read the work: he intended for it to be descriptive rather than normative - in other words, he isn't primarily advocating that poetry or tragedy should be one way or another. Instead, he seeks to investigate prior instances of poetry—tragedy, mainly—and by analyzing the instances and thinking about their parts and composition to derive a broad concept of what poetry is and how it functions.

In the spirit of his scientific rigor in the disciplines of Physics and Biology, Aristotle approaches poetry in the Poetics as well. As we have pointed out, this is perhaps the most clear manifestation of his influence as a scientist on his writings. In the Poetics, Aristotle opens by collecting and categorizing the data available to him and brings conclusions while articulating theses, based on his analysis. The Poetics has arguably provided since

the classical period, the focal point for most discussions on criticism and tragic drama. It should be mentioned that the Poetics is somewhat sketchy to a degree on a number of topics, which has resulted in interpretations that often conflicting and, a nearly limitless body of scholarship. In this analysis, we attempt to delineate a basis of mutual understanding in the Poetics, through defining some of the basic ambiguous concepts that have shaped the interpretation of the work.

Basic Concepts in Aristotle's Poetics

Mimesis: Mimesis is the act of creating in an individual's mind, through artistic representation, an idea or ideas that the such person will connect to real past experience. Sometimes translated as "imitation," mimesis in poetry is the act of telling stories that are set in the real world. Each story does not have to be based on the real world (fictional realism), but by telling the story, the audience will imagine the events as having taken place in the real world.

Hamartia: This term could be translated almost directly as "error," but it is frequently elaborated on as "tragic flaw." According to Aristotle, tragedy involves the error of judgment of a hero, which leads to the hero's downfall. It is important to note that this error does not need to be a general moral failing- not a vice: it could simply be not knowing something or forgetting something.

Anagnorisis: Translated as "recognition" or "discovery", it describes the moment where the hero, or some other character, passes from ignorance to knowledge. This could be recognition of a long lost acquaintance or relation, or it could be a sudden recognition of some fact about oneself, as is the case with Creon in Sophocles' Antigone. Anagnorisis often occurs at the climax of a tragedy in tandem with peripeteia.

Peripeteia: A change in circumstances in some manner from good to bad or bad to good. Peripeteia typically takes place at the story's pinnacle, often following anagnorisis. We could assert that the peripeteia represents the top of a story's movement: it is a turn in a story's action, a moment of action that begins to suggest a resolution.

Mythos: While the term is typically interpreted as "plot" in tragedy—it refers to more than what happens and in what order (it leverages a non-naturalistic understanding of plot)—mythos applies to all art. Instead of being a sequence of events, mythos refers to the coming together of the components of a tragedy or the five arts as a cohesive and unified whole. The mythos of a work conveys the meaning, which is a global message or impression we retain.

Catharsis: This word was used by doctors in Ancient Greece to mean "purgation," and by priests to mean "purification." In relation to tragedy, Aristotle uses it to refer to the purgation or purification of emotions. This implies that katharsis is a release or expulsion of emotional energy that has built-up and is now freed. After katharsis, audiences settle into a more stable, neutral emotional state.

Desis: Literally it indicates "tying", the desis was all the action in a tragedy that leads to the climax. The plot threads are skillfully woven tighter and tighter into a bigger and bigger muddle. At the peripeteia or turning point the plot threads begin to untie in the denouement. Catharsis in Aristotle's Poetics.

The term "catharsis" is a contentious one. The term "catharsis" occurs only once in the course of Aristotle's "Poetics" and in that instance, it is even disputed regarding the meaning that Aristotle has in mind. Apart from this, there are few words which have given rise to so many differing interpretations and disputed meanings. Within the 'Poetics' in the section entitled "Tragedy" when Aristotle is defining tragedy he writes that its function is to arouse two emotions, pity and fear, and in this way effect the catharsis of both of these emotions. In the Greek language, the term 'catharsis' originates from the Greek "kathairein" meaning "to cleanse". The word "catharsis" has three meanings in Greek; it can mean purgation, purification, and clarification. Aristotle only uses this term one time in the text of the "Poetics". During the time of Aristotle, the word 'catharsis' was also used in the medical sense to indicate therapeutic relief and during the sixteenth century the notions of "hardening of the emotions of pity and fear" were emphasized, which enabled the spectator to face the pure feelings at boldness in real life. However, in the eighteenth century the notion of 'catharsis' took an entirely opposite meaning when it meant "softening of the emotions of pity and fear." The term Catharsis occurs in Aristotle's definition of tragedy: "Tragedy is an imitation in the form of action, not of narrative, through pity and fear affecting the proper Katharsis or purgation of these emotions."

Purgation:-

According to some Renaissance critics and later on critics like Twining and Barney: "Catharsis is a medical metaphor." In medical terms, especially in the older sense, purgation means the removal of excess 'Humours'. First there is the pathological theory of the function of tragedy which has expounded by Jacob Barneys. In it, Catharsis has been taken to a medical metaphor, 'purgation' denoting a pathological effect on the body. "Catharsis is a kind of Homeopathic treatment".

By some critics like Twining and Barney has been compared to homeopathic treatment with 'like curing the like' and thus the arousing of pity and fear results in the purgation of these emotions. Some critics like Herbert Reed and Lucas however, objected and says that: "The theatre is not a hospital".

Dryden too accepts the purgation theory of catharsis in his 'Preface to Troilus and Cressida'. He says it is not: "the abasement of pity and fear, but of such aggressive and evil emotions as pride and anger through feeding and watering of soft hearted emotions."

Purification:

Humphrey House does not accept purgation as purgation in the medical sense, and he is the most vehement proponent of the 'Purification' theory which brings into play moral instruction and moral learning contrived as a part of purgation. Purgation means catharsis is purification, or at least it bears a meaning of purification that some critics have construed the word into the discourse. They say that purgation means "Cleansing". The word cleansing is rendered in a proper understanding as either as qualitative or as an evacuations change within the body that disadvantage the reestablishment of proper equilibrium. Catharsis is ultimately a change into emotional health, and is thus a moral conditioning into a good or purity. It is a purification of the excessive and defect in our emotions and to restore our emotional equilibrium. Butcher, as well agree to the purification theory. He remarks that Catharsis includes: "not only the idea of emotional relief but the further idea of purifying the emotions to be relieved."

Clarification:

As per this doctrine, catharsis signifies 'the watching or witnessing and the realization of the essential and universal meaning of the events and situations' in the tragedy. Some critics have emphasized the clarification theory of Catharsis. For them, catharsis is experienced on an intellectual level, not medical or religious. O.B. Hardison considers purification and purgation as 'merely incidental' and 'secondary.' Catharsis is a learning process, and, thus, it is pleasurable. Aristotle states that if well imitated images even of corpses and ugly characters give pleasure, then pleasure is attached to learning. Even the ugly can give pleasure, which is a paradox. A similar paradox exists in tragedy. Tragic events are pitiable and fearful, but they produce pleasure. This is the tragic paradox; this is the pleasure peculiar. Catharsis is a process of learning and therefore pleasurable. According to this theory: "Catharsis serves as an indication of the role of the tragedy, and not of how the audience had been affected emotionally."

Catharsis can be explained as a type of experience that affects the disbandment of absences and resolution of disruptions and heightened states of knowledge and learning as we have moved 'from pity to sympathy' and 'from fear to confidence', which was virtue for Aristotle.

Psychological Interpretation:

Several critics have attempted to provide a psychological interpretation of the word 'Catharsis'; tragedy provides a freely felt outlet for the emotions of pity and fear. Consequently, the result is emotional relief. It seems that this is closely aligned with the idea of purgation. Emotional excess is brought under control. I.A. Richards also makes a psychological argument when he suggests, "fear is the impulse to withdraw and pity is the impulse to approach. Both of these impulses are brought into harmony and fused in tragedy, and this harmony brings relief and rest." Catharsis acts as a term in the realm of dramatic art, and denotes the effect of tragedy (or comedy and perhaps other art forms) primarily on the audience. Aristotle never specifies in any place in the poetics the explanation of what he means by "Catharsis" as he is using the term in the definition of tragedy. (1449b21-28). G.F. Else states that the traditional or commonly-held interpretations of catharsis as "purification" or "purgation" are not found anywhere in the text of the poetics and in fact stem from the usage of catharsis in other Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian contexts. As such, a number of different interpretations of the meaning of this term have developed. Often relating it to Aristotle's notion of anagnorisis, catharsis has most recently been characterized in the twentieth century as "intellectual clarification" that has competed with the earlier general views in describing the effects of the catharsis upon an audience. In his earlier works on poetics, Aristotle used the term catharsis solely in its medical meaning (generally, of the evacuation of the katamenia - menstrual fluid or other reproductive matter), though here the term is used as a medical metaphor. Consequently, F.L. Lucas also argues that purification and cleansing are incorrect definitions for the term catharsis, and therefore catharsis should be translated as purgation. "*It is the human soul that is purged of its excessive passions.*"

William Shakespeare crafted two well-known cases of catharsis; one of these is in his tragic drama, Macbeth. Audiences and readers of Macbeth typically view the protagonist of the tragedy sympathetically because he was consumed by his obsessive ambition, which was also destructive. In Act I, Macbeth has been made thane of Cawdor by King Duncan, which signifies that he is a genius, notably appreciated for his bravery and talent. However, a beginning of doom occurs for him, just as it does with most people living in their ambition, and also the supernatural. Following this, he loses his wife, he loses his integrity, and ultimately, he loses his life. The seducing quality of ambition steals the essence of who he is as a human person, and leaves nothing left behind except for discontentment and a worthless existence. In Act V, Macbeth encapsulates this

view in his soliloquy, and says, "Here's to my love! [Drinks] O true apothecary! Thy drugs are quick. Thus with a kiss I die. [Falls]." In Shakespeare's play, Romeo chooses to take his own life by drinking the poison he believes Juliet has tasted as well. Audiences almost always cry at this moment for a number of reasons. Certainly, losing a loved one is something each of us has experienced. We can all recall moments of separations from that loved one (again by killing them off or separating them from us for other reasons), and when we watch or read a scene and it becomes a trigger for us to relive a character's experience, we suddenly unload the feelings that we have been holding back.

Function of Catharsis: Dramatic Uses

Within the field of Dramatic Arts, catharsis represents the effect that tragedy, comedy, or another form of Art has on the spectators – and sometimes on the performers themselves. Aristotle did not provide any clarification of the meaning of "catharsis," nor did he provide any helpful explanation of his use of it in terms of defining tragedy in Poetics. G. F. Else stated the normal and most accepted meaning of 'catharsis as 'purgation' or 'cleansing', cannot be traced in Poetics. It emerges from other Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian contexts. Such confusion regarding the etymological roots of the term has resulted in various translations of the meaning of the word. D. W. Lucas, in his authoritative version of Poetics, examined, in an appendix under "Pity, Fear, and Katharsis," the various shades of meaning and aspects of meaning involved in interpretations of the word (Aristotle: Poetics, Oxford, 1968, pp. 276-279). Lucas does seem to find that there is some possibility of an aspect of catharsis involving meanings like "purgation", "intellectual clarification", and "purification". However, the kind of discussion he conducts on these terms is not as precise as other leading scholars would want it to be. He does not consider any interpretations other than his own, and rather takes a different approach. His approach is centered on "the Greek doctrine of Humours," which was not received too well. The most common interpretations of the term are purgation and purification, which are still widely used. The most recent interpretation of the term catharsis is "intellectual clarification".

To conclude it can be said that catharsis is release of emotions, purgation of thought or purification of thought. Catharsis purifies our inner conscience with the reaction on action. It pacifies the characters after they have took revenge on their enemy. And this is used not only in plays but also in the daily life of people. Catharsis can happen in other ways too. Stressed or compressed emotions released by the character are the catharsis. It releases emotional tensions. Catharsis makes the character feel light, relaxed and comfortable. It gives a sense of relief that helps characters handle daily living in calmer fashion. Through drama, it leads to a more rational mind sees the extreme of emotion are tapped and left in a safe setting.

Works Cited

- [1]. Aristotle, *The poetics*: Translated by S.H Butcher <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.html>
- [2]. Butcher, Samuel H., *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, New York, 1911.
- [3]. Price, James: *A Lesson on Criticism from Aristotle* on January 22, 2013 in Leadership and Management (<http://www.refreshleadership.com/index.php/2013/01/lesson-criticism-aristotle/>)
- [4]. George W. E. Russell (editor), *Letters of Matthew Arnold*, 1849–88, 2 vols. (London and New York: Macmillan, 1895
- [5]. Ransom, John Crowe: *The Literary Criticism of Aristotle* (Reconsiderations, No. 10), The Kenyon Review, Vol.10, No. 3 (Summer, 1948), pp. 382-402