



Aristotle's *Poetics*: Theory of Imitation and Concept of Catharsis

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The *Poetics* is quite correctly considered to be a 'covert' answer to Plato's charges against poetry. Aristotle, though a disciple of Plato disagreed with some of Plato's contention. Poetry as declared by Plato is mother of lies and Aristotle set out to prove that it was not so. Originality of Aristotle cannot be denied, but at the same time, Aristotle takes several hints from his master, elaborates and modifies them. The present paper is an attempt to discuss theory of imitation and the concept of catharsis in Aristotle's *Poetics*.

The term 'imitation' was not used for the first time by Aristotle. Plato used 'imitation' in his Republic. But Aristotle's use of term imitation in *Poetics* is fraught with new dimensions. According to Plato, poetry like all other imitative arts, is an imitator of appearance and thus twice removed from reality. In *Poetics*, Aristotle defines poetry as an imitation of human actions. By "imitation" he means something like "representation": the poem imitates by taking an instance of human action and representing it in a new "medium" or material that of words. Poetry according to Aristotle, is not an imitation of a shadow, but it is the imitation of 'ideal reality'. Poetry achieves idealization by dealing with the essential and discarding the accidental and transient. Imitation is of deeper reality and the very basic elements of human nature.

A tragic poet represents a man with a nature better than average. This would not be possible in an imitation when copied external appearances alone. It would possible only if the poet represented an idea of human nature. A poet communicates his emotion by imitating or recreating life. So, poetry is an imitation of deep inner feelings and ideas of man.

Poetry, like other forms of art, is also a mode of imitation. The medium of the poet and painter are different. The painter's medium of imitation is colour and form. The poet's is rhythm and harmony. Poetry is nearer to music than to painting. The link of poetry and music is significant as poetry is something above mimicry. The objects of poetic imitation are 'men in action'. These men may be either better than or lower than the average man in real life. Aristotle said elsewhere in *Poetics* that "Art imitates nature." Here Aristotle means the "creative force, the predictive principle of the universe", when he is talking of nature being imitated in art.

There are mental dispositions in human nature which have a permanent quality about them. Then there are emotional needs and feelings. These are transitory aspects of the human psyche. Poetry is an imitation of human life. Action involves the inward life of man as well,

not merely the outward events, which in any case, are the result of inward motives. Aristotle when observing poetry in connection with men in action excludes from the sphere of poetry, the 'physical' world containing landscapes and animals. The poet does not produce a literal copy of the world as he sees it, the inner world of man is very much the object of imitation in poetry. Abercrombie rightly remarks about Aristotle "within the scope Aristotle has assigned to his subject, all poems may be classified as either narrative or dramatic". (77) Poetry is not a mere photographic representation, is not a mere copy of the world, but the poet tries to create a work of art which has a permanent relevance. Aristotle asserts in the *Poetics* that:

By a Universal (or General) statement I mean one as to what such or such a kind of man will probably or necessarily say or do – which is the aim of poetry, though it affixes proper names to the characters. (50 & 52)

It implies "how a certain type or nature will on occasion speak or act, according to the law of probability or necessity. Poetry has no place for irrelevant. The material has to be pruned. The chaos of life has to be brought under a design, a pattern or an order. This is imperative for the poetry to gain truth and universality.

Critics have found Aristotle somewhat inconsistent in his case of world imitation: Aristotle comments that poet should not speak in his own person, "for this does not make him an imitator", yet he allows the poet the scope of imitating through narration. J.W. Atkin remarks: "Into the term 'imitation', he read a new and definite meaning which made the poetic process out to be not mere copying but an act of creative vision." (99) He further remarks. "Imitation to Aristotle was none other than 're-creation'." (99)

Aristotle himself says in the *Poetics*: "Poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular." (100)

The term 'Catharsis' is used once in the course of Aristotle's *Poetics* in the fourth chapter. The term catharsis occurs in Aristotle's definition of tragedy: "Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear affecting the proper catharsis, or purgation of these emotions." Aristotle himself has not defined this term. The term has been explained by other critics in light of Aristotle's other works, such as the *Politics* and the *Ethics*. 'Catharsis' has three meanings; it could mean "purgation" or purification" or "clarification." Pity as told by Aristotle is occasional by undeserved misfortune and fear by that of one like ourselves. Both are related emotions. Aristotle everywhere says that pity and fear are the characteristics and necessary tragic emotions. The term catharsis has been interpreted in medical terms meaning purgative. In medical terms purgation meant the partial removal of excess "humours". Catharsis in this sense denotes a pathological effect on the soul comparable to the effect of medicine on the body. Some critics favour this medical sense in the light of "homeopathic" treatment in which it is 'like curing like'. Aristotle says in the *Politics*, that emotions should not be expressed but they must be removed. In the *Poetics* Aristotle refers to the curing of religious frenzy.

Milton in his *Preface to Samson Agonistes* expresses a similar view that the effect of tragedy is to temper and reduce. In the neo-classical period, the medical interpretation of term took on an “allopathic” light. Catharsis was seen to be in nature of the unlike curing the unlike. Dryden in his *Preface to Troilus and Cressida*, says that it is not “the abasement of pity and fear, but of such aggressive and evil emotions as pride and anger through the feeding and watering of the soft hearted emotions.”(138) Some critics have tried to give a psychological explanation to the term ‘Catharsis’. Herbert Read considers it in the light of a safety valve. I. A. Richards puts forward an ingenious theory. He says that the emotion of pity is an impulse to advance, while fear is an impulse to withdraw. In tragedy both these impulses are blended.

Humphrey House says that Aristotle’s concept of catharsis was not in medical term, but he says that it is a kind of “moral conditioning” which the spectator undergoes. He comments that catharsis means ‘cleansing.’ It is a purification of the excess and defect in our emotions, so that emotional equilibrium can be restored. Butcher too agrees with purification theory.

Some critics believe that the implications of catharsis are to found in the *Poetics* itself. Aristotle writes that the pleasure in imitative arts is concerned with learning. Pleasure does not come from joy alone. Again he tells that tragedy has its own kind of pleasure and that we must seek from it this pleasure –“the pleasure proper to it” and catharsis involves such a pleasure. The function of tragedy is to provide the pleasure peculiar to it. This pleasure involves the presentation of events which arouse pity and fear. According to this theory, catharsis becomes an indication of the function of tragedy, and not of its emotional effects on the audience.

The purgation theory and the purification theory of catharsis have obvious limitations. The main drawback of these theories is that these are concerned with the effect of tragedy on the audience i.e. with the psychology of the audience. But in all Aristotle is a great critic and what he said centuries ago will continue to influence thinking as it has done all this time. It is unfortunate that he has not explained some of the terms which seem very significant. The term ‘catharsis’ is interpreted so variously, that it is difficult to come to an agreement as to what really meant. Catharsis is the part of complex plot not of simple plot and it comes from ‘missing the mark.’

Works Cited

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2. <https://www.google.co.in/search?text=aristotle%27s+poetics>