

Rethinking on Aristotle's Four Conditions of Characterization and Morality

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ABSTRACT: The four conditions regarding characterization of tragedy is a very popular topic of Aristotle's *Poetics*. Ignoring *Poetics* we cannot proceed towards any discussion of morality in literature. The discussion of morality in characterization of a play along with the whole art system is very popular at present. Modern tragedy opposes the Aristotelian concept of morality and rethinking of this Aristotelian issue is vital to get the conflict. Discussions along with the given perspective are not enough. Following Aristotle this research paper is using the term 'agent' instead of 'character'. Rethinking Aristotelian concepts, this paper reflects on the necessity of 'august will' (holy aim). Examples from modern dramas are taken here. Is there any difference between social ethics and the ethics of art or must there be so-called moral ideal of the agent in a play ---A critical discussion of these research questions leads to conclusions and shows that there is no such thing as the inevitability of morality of agent in the characterization of drama. But, since drama is a social construction, morality must be associated with the whole.

KEYWORDS: Morality, Ethics, Ethical, Aristotle, *Poetics*, agent, August Will, Spectator, Play, Plyawright, Oedipus, Characterization.

1. INTRODUCTION

Aristotle composed *Poetics* during 4th century B.C. After many hundred years this book built a foundation for western criticism through translation. It could easily influence the eastern intellectuals also for its fundamental-universal concepts. A lot of controversies have been created in different time regarding many ideas and terms of *Poetics* as it lacks elaborate explanation of the same. It is so because the chapters of *Poetics* were originally some small notes composed specially for the students of his school. However, these arguments have enriched the universal literary tradition by creating many new concepts. Among these a very common topic is moral ethics in literature. Although common, Aristotelian concept of morality and rethinking of this Aristotelian issue is absolutely necessary. Aristotle provided four conditions of characterization in a tragedy: goodness, propriety, true to life and consistency. These conditions remind us the ethical importance of characterization in classical tragedy. The question is if this importance is valid for all time. It has been assessed in this paper in the context of some modern plays.

2. OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of this paper are:

- To discuss relevance of morality in characterization of a play with rethinking of Aristotelian concept.
- To research on the question whether there is any difference between social morality and morality in literature.
- To research the relevance of the four conditions of characterization provided by Aristotle.

3. FOUR CONDITIONS

A very popular topic from *Poetics* is the four conditions of characterization in a play. The word morality is an indispensable part of tradition. Based on the four principles of characterization given by Aristotle, let us examine how morality can affect a play and its characterization. In *Poetics* Aristotle has provided a detailed study in the formation of character which a playwright take into consideration while forming a character. They are: The characters—

- i. must be good.
- ii. should aim at propriety
- iii. must be true to life
- iv. should be consistent.

4. CRITICAL ANALYSIS

However the style in which these four principles are delivered is still creating a conflict at present time. S.H. Butcher in his essay 'Art and Morality'¹ has ascertained that Aristotle has not given priority to morality while creating art. The main aim of tragedy is to provide pleasure. Catharsis² will be created in a tragedy only when the agent, whom we term as character, is especially virtuous. That means the character cannot be too good or too bad. Reference of morality or values must be in order to define an art form. But the aim of art will be disrupted if the playwright moves away from the road of the art and places morality first. A work of art must be able to influence the readers through literary perception. That is why Aristotle gave importance to formation of the plot with the rules of recognition and reversal by depicting a special class of actors. These concepts of Butcher are just if we examine it with the examples of Greek tragedy. But in a broader sense, the meaning of tragedy is not limited to Greek tragedy only. We may say it as the aesthetic pleasure derived from any art. From that point of view catharsis may happen to any play from any time. Catharsis is produced does not depend on the status of the agent. The question may arise that if giving pleasure is the only goal of art then there are many mundane activities from which one can derive pleasure. What is the necessity of art then? In answer to this question one can say that art provides an aesthetic balance and man being social creatures have an outright need for it. Then again the scale of deriving pleasure is also relative. As an example, it may be noted that spectators sometimes may not derive that much pleasure by watching Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. Classical plays are based on well-known myths and the viewers are quite acquainted with it. Therefore the pleasures in such cases are quite diminished. There is also a difference between the pleasure of a spectator and that of a reader. Due to the vivid description of the scenes and finesse of the actor enacting a play, a spectator's pleasure is comparatively more than that of a reader in such cases. Hence we can conclude, pleasure itself is a relative term. I.A. Richards in his 'Principles of Literary Criticism' chapter xii, 'Pleasure' states that the ultimate goal of every action is not pleasure; it is side-effects. The consolidation of many sensations is the cause of pleasure. The sensation is always the same and only the stimulus can bring disparity to the pleasure process in different situations.³ These stimuli in different situation can be judged based on prolonged tradition. With the change of values there is a shift in preferences of the spectators.

It is not possible to explain enjoyment or to feel good nor is it easy to clarify how it differs from feeling good about something else. Neither it is easy to differentiate one from the other. It can be 'recognized by immediate intuition'.⁴ Therefore, it is not a matter of judgment how much pleasant an art form could be, rather why? In the process of creating art, character is also a primary factor. Along with other factors character should form a proportionate relationship to acknowledge the aesthetic balance. So, from that point of view the idea forwarded by Aristotle, 'character must be good', cannot be considered as

a relevant notion in the construction of contemporary plays. However, the 'morality context' forwarded by Aristotle will remain pertinent. He established the example of converting social morality to art morality. Art proceed towards end from practical syllogism. It is human creation, because human has a natural power to create, like different creatures have different special skills. That is why aim of humanity must be related to art. In support of this we can quote John Rowe Walkman: "Productive art is considered by Aristotle to be the result of reason, but it is considered by (1) the morality that it may convey to human beings and (2) the validity of the representation that it achieves. Thus, in imitating or representing facts and states of nature, art can be a strong determinant in the virtue and happiness of man".⁵

Aristotle connects ethics to a scientific basis. This is related to the aim of bestowing pleasure and this pleasure is different from pleasure in general and from pleasure we derived from a comedy. Because of this difference the follower agents are always special. These follower agents will have two characteristics, which will signify a character. These are 'ethos' i.e. morality and '*dionia*', i.e. thought.⁶ Butcher explains that although 'ethos' is generally translated as 'character' in English, it has a deeper meaning than Aristotle's 'ethos'. According to him 'ethos' acquires meaning with the help of *dionia*. Aristotle offers a preferable notion. Here we notice a supplementary relation of this concept with the four conditions of a character by Aristotle. If there is thought, the agent will select proper action and proper selection will lead him (agent) towards proper goal. Aristotle is saying on experience and intelligence too. In *History of Animal Science* he says that there is already a soul in human body, our mind works here and increases the power of relation only through experience. In case of character this power of selection reveals the aspects of character. Again, aspects are in probable form and that is why selection could be done. There is also intelligence along with that. This concept of intelligence is near to the concept of thought which is a factor of character. The good qualities expressed by human being could be divided into two-- morality and intelligence.⁷ There was a dramatic character like Oedipus for Aristotle to represent all his concepts. Oedipus dominates Sphinx which is a proof of his intelligence by answering the questions of Sphinx. He also proves his debating capacity. The play reflects the excellence of intellectual leadership by invoking that action.

His definition of tragedy is the result of the conflict between previously written plays, epics, various forms of art, philosophical lesions and insights gained from the various phenomena of the world. Uniting the tragedies by some common features came to his notice and a few of them get excellence through its literary perfection. Some tragedies were naturally tied by some special principles. For example—proper recognition of the agent, unknowingly proceeding towards danger, reversal proceed of an agent etc. When Aristotle says that it should be depicted suitably, then the type of suitability is such that the play should move towards tragic consequence through proper discovery. After that Aristotle said that to become best and suitable is different from that of real. But he did not give any explanation which makes way to controversy. But from one point of view it is very natural. In reality a bad person's stream of life may change from misfortune to fortune. But it is not appropriate for a tragedy to depict in that way. So, probability and necessity of aesthetics are related to this.

F.L. Lucas has raised question about Aristotle's pity and terror.⁸ According to him Aristotle's concept of sympathy and pity is situated far away from the idea of completeness. A good writer, Lucas argues, can create sympathy towards all kinds of agents through characterization. So, it is not mandatory that the agent must be good. One of the examples demonstrated by Lucas is Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Macbeth had killed his guest king Duncan at his own residence, who is not only his king but also his kinsman. This action does not represent Aristotelian goodness no matter how much potentiality he posses to become a king, which is possible in case of King Oedipus. Macbeth's personal ambition has brought misfortune to

the kingdom, along with that the country is about to lose a great hero. Macbeth has already proved his heroism by heavily defeating Macdonwald one of his mighty opposition. So there might be a natural ambition to become a King. But state policy does not support such ambition. Satanic forces prevail here. From that point of view there is disorder Aristotelian good, pity and incidents which create sympathy. But from another point of view it is dangerous to accept the exact idea pity and sympathy—for both critics and dramatics. But it is also dangerous to directly reject Aristotelian thought. On basis of his theory, in later periods, critics are able to establish new theories from. Our perspective the main point is good as a whole, it is not necessary to think about pity and sympathy. Aristotle himself gave special important to qualities/characteristics of a protagonist. But dramatist will bring all the agents amid a structure or to an Organic Whole in such a proportion that their gathering will also ease the way of human development, sometimes will give way to reanalysis a subject, but at any point of time, one aspect will always be leading---human existence. This aspect exists in Aristotelian thought also, but technically his aspect has lost relevance. It is a technical aspect of the protagonist being in the middle of good and bad and emerges of sympathy. Augustus Murray while explaining concepts of *Poetics*, said that, human being is no longer the master of great direction. He told so with reference to protagonist like Oedipus. That is why agent like Vladimir, Estragon, Rani, Kappana, Mrs. Bannare with multiple voice have been created in modern time. A lot of examples of such depiction of agent could be found in the plays of Shakespear, like Macbeth, Hamlet, Iago etc.

Ghasiram Kattowal by Tendulkar is another example of such agents from modern play. It was one of Tendulkar's own principles to leave the agents on their own. He was very careful not to let the agents get influenced by the personality of the playwright. He believed that open ending leave a deep impression on spectator's mind. Here the meaning of agent Ghasiram(character is one type of meaning) has changed according to situation's demand. Here Aristotle's idea of depicting a character with holy aim(august will) is not relevant. A sick social system has given birth to a tyrant Ghasiram, but Ghasiram does not have any control over the current systems. At last Ghasiram (like a puppet) was hanged. Ghasiram is an active and moving signal of society, an agent depicted in a form of multiple voices. In a broader sense Tendulkar's dramatic language itself is a social symbol. If we access that which one of the four aspects of Aristotle is there in Ghasiram, we will find that mainly suitability is given importance and there is disorder instead of order. Because, from Aristotle's point of view, it is 'consistently inconsistent'. Here agent does not have Aristotle's 'august will'. There is nothing like agents must have moral principles. Values of playwright will always be present in his creation, no matter which period he belongs to. From one point of view agents from plays like *Sakharam Binder*, *Ghasiram Kattowal* etc. do not have any 'august will' directly, the playwright make the reader or spectator feel the lack of high ideology and eternal human values. Here the playwright does not allow any hatred towards the agents, but rather allows for sympathy with the agents that are lurking in the situation.

5. CONCLUSION

From the above discussion we come to the conclusion that

- There may not be an august will of the agents or characters in a play and without it a serious tragedy is possible.
- An agent may not have so-called moral principle.
- There may not be a directly moral and virtuous agent with august will in a play. But its absence compels the audience to feel the necessity of its existence.

- The aspects of social morality in a play are relative, it gains or losses meaning with time. So the conscious application of the aspect of social morality prevents an agent from being multi-dimensional. But the desire for human welfare is directly or indirectly active in the play of any period and the morality of literature embodies this vast human value.

6. FOOT NOTES:

1. S.H.Butcher, Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art, P. 215-239
2. There is still much debate about the term catharsis. Critics like S.H. Butcher, Ingram Bywater, David Daiches, T.S.Dorch, Humphry House, Gilbert Murray, F.L.Lukas, L.J.Potts etc. are noteworthy for their comments on *Cathersis*. While these views differ, it is clear that the term *Cathersis* is derived from medical science. Its English synonym is purgation and it refers to the removal of unwanted substances from the body with the help of laxatives. Aristotle preferred borrowed words, using them as metaphors to reflect the effects of the literary text and the psychological state of the audience. He has only taken help from science. Humphry House argues that it is not appropriate to ask whether Catharsis is a metaphor derived from medicine or religion. House suggests that it should be judged from a moral point of view. House rightly addresses the issue of ethics. Aristotle also takes ethics as one of the grounds for distinguishing the arts from the scientific tradition. Aristotle expressed the concept of literary perfection based on scientific perfection, which includes morality. Therefore, it is not unreasonable for the term *Cathersis* to be derived from Medical science (Herbalism).
3. I.A.Richards, Principle of Literary Criticism, ch.12, p.92-97-74
4. I.A.Richards says in the sixth chapter (Value as an Ultimate Idea) of his book Principle of Literary Criticism--The things which are not good, it is held, are just good, possess a property which can be recognized by immediate intuition, and here, since good as unanalysable, the matter must rest. ch. Vi, p.39
5. John Rowe Workman, A Critical and Biographical Profile(preface from the edition of Standard Literature), p.xv
6. S.H.Butcher, op.cite. p.350
7. Ibid, p.xv
8. F.L.Lucas, Tragedy, p.129

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