

ARISTOTLE: HAMARTIA AND CATHARSIS

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*“Aristotle’s analysis of tragedy is by far the most well-known section of the **Poetics**. It remained influential for many centuries and was not seriously challenged until for many centuries.... It is in this treatment of tragedy that the connections between the foregoing notions – imitation, action, character, morality, and plot – emerge most clearly.”*

- M. A. R. Habib. 54, **A History of Literary Criticism and Theory From Plato to the Present.**

Aristotle defines the essence of tragedy in his **Poetics**: “Tragedy is...imitation of an action that is serious, complete and of a certain magnitude – by means of language enriched with all kinds of ornament, each used separately in the different parts of the play: it represents men in action and does not use narrative, and through pity and fear it effects relief to these and similar emotions” (**Poetics**, VI. 2-3. qtd. in M. A. R. Habib. 54, **A History of Literary Criticism and Theory From Plato to the Present**).

Tragedy is the imitation of an action that entails a change of fortune that excites pity and fear. Ingram Bywater explores into the cardinal quintessence of a tragedy: “The Plot in fact should be so framed that, even without seeing the things take place, he who simply hears the account of them shall be filled with horror and pity at the incidents; which is just the effect that the mere recital of the story in Oedipus would have on one” (52, **Aristotle: On the Art of Poetry**, 1977). A change of fortune of a particular kind: unmerited misfortune of a nobleman that excites pity and fear. Aristotle talks about four kinds of change of fortune of which only one- the one that gives rise to pity or fear. According to Aristotle pity is a kind of pain from evident undeserved unmerited misfortune. He says that pity is “a sort of pain at an evident evil in the case of somebody who does not deserve it.” Fear is the pain that arises from the impending misfortune. We pity in others what we fear for ourselves. According to Aristotle, fear is a “kind of pain” from an impending misfortune of oneself.

Categories of Change of Fortune:

- i) Underserved misfortune of a pre-eminently “virtuous man”. This change of fortune only causes shock rather than pity and fear because one cannot relate with or identify oneself with the fallen protagonist.
- ii) Undeserved good fortune of a bad man. This doesn’t occasion pity and fear, rather offends the sensibilities and one is morally offended at such a turn of events. One feels that “the moral sense” is outraged.
- iii) The deserved misfortune of the “utter villain”: this illicit satisfaction rather than pity and fear. It satisfies the moral sense as people feel that justice has been rendered by punishing the bad and villainy.
- iv) Undeserved misfortune of a man like with whom one can easily identify himself/herself: a fall brought not by wickedness or villainy, but by a mistake or Hamartia.

Hamartia means “error”/mistake: an error in judgement due to the ignorance of facts of a circumstance” (**The Nicomachean Ethics**). Hamartia is synonymous with ‘tragic flaw’. Though ignorance gives rise to wickedness, ignorance of Hamartia is very different. **Nicomachean** Socrates comments on wickedness as:

Every wicked man is ignorant of what he ought to do and what he ought to abstain from, an error of this kind makes men unjust and in general bad; but the term involuntary tends to be used not if a man is ignorant of what is to his advantage – for it is not mistaken purpose that makes an action involuntary (it makes men wicked) nor ignorance of the universal (for that men are blamed), but ignorance of particulars, i.e. of the circumstances of the action and the objects with which it is concerned. For it is on these that both

pity and pardon depend, since the person who is ignorant of any of these acts involuntarily. ” (40 **The Nicomachean Ethics**, Aristotle.)

Aristotle explores the reasons that lead to the fatality of Hamartia: “No one acts contrary to what has seemed to him the better course”. (Aristotle, **The Nicomachean Ethics** vii, 2)

One cannot know good and act evil. To do evil is not to know good. When one knows good, one always does good. Hence Aristotle’s emphasis is on knowledge rather than intention. An act of wickedness entails an unpardonable ignorance of good. The good deeds always protect one and the wicked has no concept of safe-guarding attached to them. Hamartia is not a vice. It is not a question of deep seated element in character. It is an act that is occasioned by a particular ignorance of certain facts.

Ingram Bywater says that “Hamartia is ignorance of some material fact of circumstances” According to S. H. Butcher, “Hamartia is inadequate knowledge of particular circumstance.” Both Butcher and Bywater define Hamartia with focus on circumstance. Hamartia traces back to Aristotle’s idea of the nature of character and deed. It is the doer that decides the nature of the act and the doer in the case of Hamartia is not an evil person. And because of the inherent goodness of the person that their plight induces fear and pity in the hearts of people.

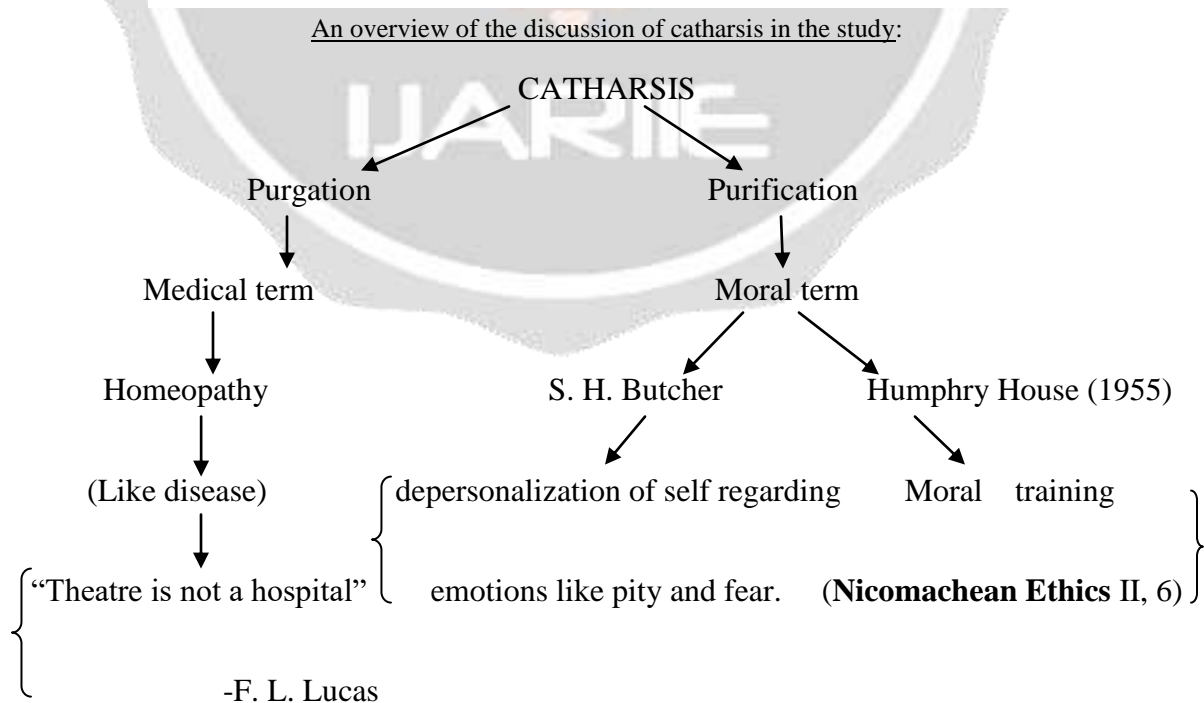
CATHARSIS

“Without doubt *katharsis* is the most celebrated concept in the entire field of literary criticism, and its appeal is immense to the broad community of scholars critics and creative writers who concern themselves with tragedy.”

- Leon Golden. “The Clarification Theory of ‘Katharsis’ ” **Hermes**, Vol. 104, No. 4 (1976), pp.437-452

“Catharsis is the *telos* of tragedy, the end towards which the formal artifacts is functionally directed.”

- Eva Schaper. “Aristotle’s Catharsis and Aesthetic Pleasure.” **The Philosophical Quarterly**, Vol. 18, No. 71 (Apr., 1968), pp. 131-143



Catharsis is a Greek work that defines the tragic effect. Catharsis appears in section six of Poetics. This single term has given birth to man volumes of literary criticism, probably because of the myriad conflicting interpretations of it. Catharsis is interpreted in two ways: as a medical term and as a moral ethical term. Catharsis as a medical term follows the tenets of homeopathy that maintains that “like causes like.” This principle is applied to tragedy and tragedy is filled with pity and fear. Both pity and fear rise from a self-regarding emotion that rises as a result of a deep anxiety about ourselves. Tragedy elicits pity and fear and renders relief. Just as the body returns back to calmness or homeostasis when toxicity is flushed out of it, the mind becomes relieved when pity and fear are expelled out of our mind.

F. L. Lucas believed that this interpretation of the term was too narrow to encompass the full scope of this complex term. He would like to favour the critics who argued the moral aspect of the term. Commentators who favoured with this notion accepted the medical interpretation of meaning but did not limit catharsis a sort of claustrophobic definition. To begin with there must be self-regarding toxin in pity also and the medical interpretation only stresses on fear. S. H. Butcher advocated depersonalization as a mode of purgation of pity. This is substantiated in the **The Nichomachean Ethics** II, 6, where Aristotle says one must feel emotions appropriately. The depersonalization in tragedy expels an ordinate amount of pity allowing one to function in equilibrium.

Humphry House (1955) uses the **Nichomachean Ethics** to substantiate the theory that Catharsis is not merely a medical term, but also a code of moral training. Watching tragedy becomes an elevated experience of moral training of pity and fear. **The Nichomachean Ethics** lays stress on hexis and moral training and emphasizes the need to relentlessly train our minds and emotions. **The Nichomachean Ethics** II, 6 advocates feeling emotions appropriately and avoiding promiscuity or squandering of emotions. “...to feel them to at the right times, with reference to the right object...” According to Humphry House, the value of plot lies in the wisdom it imbibes and its ability to feel pity and fear in aright way for the right object.” Literature is the best way to train oneself.

Aristotle’s theory of catharsis is an emotional theory of literary effect. It underscores that literary effect. It drives in the fact the literary effect is deeply emotional and at the same time very cognitive. This is also crucial to the twentieth century literary criticism that deals with cognitive discomfort. Cognitive estrangement pertains to the ability of a good novel/poem to disturb one psychologically. Cognitive complacency or satisfaction removes the anxiety of the new and the fear that follows it. The new is always uneasy. The literary effect makes one an outsider in the old and the known. And therefore to keep in company with literature makes one a Ulysses of awareness.

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