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Comparison between Plato and Aristotle's Criticism on Poetry

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Abstract:

Literature is examined methodically and is known as criticism. The work of critic is to bring out the merits and demerits of the work. Though criticism must be unbiased it is limited to its age. Here a comparison between Plato and Aristotle's criticism is made and their views on art is analysed. Plato divides art into two: art for mere pleasure and useful arts. Plato rejects art because he says it is an imitation. He compares poet to mathematician, historian and philosophers and says poet is inferior to everyone. He rejects not only poetry but also tragedy and comedy. Plato rejects art but Aristotle glorifies it. Aristotle also says that art is an imitation but for him it results in pleasure. He says, "Tragedy is an imitation of an action..." (Aristotle 19) which shows, he gives much importance to imitation. Hence Plato expects art to be moral whereas Aristotle expects art to be aesthetic.

Keywords: Criticism, Aristotle, Plato, Art, Poetry, Aesthetic, Imitation.

Introduction:

One can enjoy Literature in two ways that is it can be enjoyed in a random manner or it can be analysed methodically. Analysing literature methodically is known as criticism. A critic makes judgement by making thorough examination of a work and brings out whether the art is good or bad. Though criticism is born out of questions, one should not question divinely inspirations. No free discussion is allowed on orthodox opinion and it is the word of God. But during Renaissance, people started questioning everything and they made critical inquiry on everything.

Today the people's mind is same as that of people during Renaissance period; they too started inquiring about everything freely. Nothing can be out of reach to criticism. Criticism is based on throwing light on the work of art and bringing out in a proper perspective. The primary work of critic lies in understanding the work of literature. The critic must try to understand the writer's work completely and must bring out the merits and demerits of the work.

Though a criticism must be unbiased and it must provide proper judgement to an art, it also has its own limitation. One is always slave to one's time. The critical approach of one age differs from another age that is one particular age may give importance to aesthetic

feeling whereas the other age may give importance to morality; this variation in thought brings variation in criticism too. That is why the criticism of two or more ages is dissimilar.

There are many critics and when one takes the beginning of criticism, one remembers Plato and Aristotle. Both Plato and Aristotle are philosophers and more or less they belong to same age. Aristotle is also considered as disciple of Plato. Though there are many similarities between these two critics, their criticisms are dissimilar and contradictory.

Comparison between Plato and Aristotle's Criticism on Poetry

First the criticism of Plato is taken into consideration. Plato's date of birth is generally put down to 427 B.C and he died in 348 B.C, he was the disciple of Socrates. Socrates guides his disciple to inquire the truth. So this age can be considered as the age of critical inquiry and analysis whereas the previous age was the age of creative activity. His works are scattered in several books, they are: Ion, Catylus, Protagorus, Gorgias, Symposium, Republic, Phaedrus, Philebus and Laws. Plato's chief investigation is on philosophy; however ethics, metaphysics and politics also occupied its position, whereas literature occupies least position in his criticism.

Though Plato gives least importance to literature, students of literature give much importance to know Plato's views on literature. According to Plato Art is of two types. They are: Art for mere pleasure (Literature, painting, music, and sculpture), Useful arts (Medicine, agriculture, etc). Plato says the arts which are used for mere pleasure are just imitation. He mentions it with the word "mimesis". There is also mimetic criticism which views the literary work as an imitation, or reflection or representation of the world and human life.

In school of Abuse, Gosson has attacked poetry, and his arguments are: a man can use his time in a better way than in poetry. Poetry is the mother of lies and the nurse of abuse. So Plato completely rejects poetry in his work. According to Plato the productions of art is not useful for moulding the character or for the well- being of the state but negatively it spoils the individual and the society. Plato rejects poetry because the poets has not think long to write but they write things which inspires them, which is not useful even for self- guidance. He equates the word "inspired" with "divine madness" and says one cannot write poem without turning mad.

It is obviously known that Plato rejected and attacked poets and poetry in his work *Republic*. Though Plato rejects poets and poetry, he himself wrote poetry; and the main reason for his rejection is that he considers poetry is without political utility. He also charges poetry for its emotional appeal, because as a product of inspiration, it must be intellectual and reasonable rather than emotional.

On one hand Plato rejects poets and poetry and on the other hand he glorifies Mathematicians and Philosophers. Plato says that, everything Mathematicians says are verifiable whereas poets' world is an imitation and an individual cannot be turned into better citizen by reading poetry. When philosophy is taken into consideration, according to Plato poetry cannot reach the position of it. Socrates says, "...any impression we choose to make

leaves a permanent mark” (Socrates 15). But when poetry is taken into consideration it does not provide any moral grounds and it presents revengeful, lustful and cruel things, which definitely creates bad impression in the minds of the people.

Plato does not reject or object children being told untrue stories. He rejects poetry only on two reasons: the one is it is immoral and the other is falsehood of poetry. He also says that it is painful to see both virtue and vice treated alike and it projects wrong things like a good person often suffers, lives of vice men are happy. So Plato believes that these kinds of literature may corrupt people.

Plato not only attacks poetry, he also attacks dramatic poetry. He considers dramatic poetry worse than the poetry. He also worries about the actors who perform the characters like cowards, criminals as these evil character may slowly enter into their nature.

Plato next rejects comedy and he questions, “What is it in a painful scene that causes pleasure?”(Plato 16). He says that the people laugh at the weakness of fellow- men, they laugh at ugly men, coward men and foolish men instead they must feel pity on them. So Plato rejects this kind of comedy as malicious.

Though the poem’s main purpose is pleasure, to Plato moral teaching is primary. He says a poet can be a good artist only when he is a good teacher. He wants poetic truth to be the highest truth. In his critical work *Republic*, Plato says,

We must look for artists who are able out of the goodness of their own natures to trace the nature of beauty and perfection, that so our young men, like persons who live in a healthy place may be perpetually influenced for good. (Plato 5).

Though Plato is all against poetry and art, David Daiches says, “His (Plato’s) final remarks of poetry in the *Republic* suggest that he had presented only the brief for prosecution and is awaiting the arguments of the defence” (David Daiches 16). He adds that the arguments of defence are provided by Aristotle, Plato’s own disciple.

Aristotle is the first person to deal literature in aesthetic point of view whereas Plato deals it on moral basis. Aristotle is known to Indians as the tutor of Alexander, the Great. It is believed that Aristotle has written more than half a dozen critical works but only two are extant- *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*. – *Poetics* deals with the art of poetry whereas *Rhetoric* deals with the art of speaking. Aristotle has written *Poetics* and *Rhetoric* to frame principles for a good poet and good orator.

Aristotle examines poetry and drama and observes the essential qualities and power of both. David Daiches says,

Plato would have banished poets from his ideal *Republic* because poetry was not in his view, conducive to the shaping of the good citizen. Aristotle defended poetry by removing its discussion from the general ethical context

and showing that the nature, the function and the special kind of pleasure produced by poetry were each unique... (David Daiches 17)

Aristotle's *Poetics* is a work which defence poetry and it is divided into twenty six chapters. *Poetics* is actually a lecture given to the Athenian students. The first three chapters of *Poetics* deal with the discussion of mimesis (imitation). The next two deals with origin and development of poetry. Chapter six deals with tragic drama and this can be considered as most important part of *Poetics*.

According to Aristotle the most important parts of tragedy are: plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle and song. In the subsequent chapters, Aristotle discusses about these important parts of drama. In chapter 20, 21, 22 he discusses figures of speech and in the final chapter he discusses about epic.

Though many consider the *Poetics* as an answer to Plato, the purpose of it is not just that. T. S. Dorsch remarks,

It is of course more than this, for Aristotle is much concerned with putting forward views of his own, with studying the methods of the great poets and drawing conclusions from them, and with laying down and defining critical terminology, in doing which is rendered a valuable service to critics of later periods... (T. S. Dorsch 118)

As mentioned earlier Aristotle begins his *Poetics* with mimesis. He borrows the word from Plato but Aristotle's dealing with imitation is totally different from that of Plato's. M. H. Abrams distinguishes Plato's use of the word mimesis with that of Aristotle. According to Plato, poetry is based on prior models but to Aristotle art is made of prior ideas, as nothing in this world can act individually. Plato condemns poetry as an imitation of imitation. But Aristotle says that by doing this the writer makes imaginative re-construction.

To Aristotle imitation results in pleasure and it is the essential function of poetry. He further adds that imitation is a pleasure which is an inborn instinct in man, which brings difference between man and animals. Here Aristotle tries to say that a child learn to speak and behave only through imitation; in the same way the poet is also a growing child who learns to write poem by imitation. David Daiches says

The ideal world of the poet is of value because it is both a better world than the real one and it is presented in such a way that the reader is stimulated to try and imitate it in his own practice. Thus the Aristotelian notion of imitation is transferred from the poet to the reader. The poet does not imitate but creates: it is the reader who imitates what the poet creates. (David Daiches 54)

Plato says that art is "twice removed from reality" (Plato 12), but to Plato art is permanent and universal. In order to prove this Aristotle compares Poetry and History. History deals with how a person behaved in the past that is the past deeds but poetry defines what may happen in future by applying universal appeal. Plato mentions, poetry is mere imitation of facts but Aristotle says it is the truth which can be applied to all times and places.

Aristotle further adds that imitation means not exact reproduction but taking its cue from nature.

After discussing the theory of poetry, Aristotle goes on to discuss the various kinds of poetry. He begins his discussion with tragedy.

Tragedy...is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play, in the form of action not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions. (Aristotle 19)

From these words it is known outwardly that Aristotle pays primary importance only to imitation and action is only secondary. Aristotle also frames the six constituent parts of tragedy. They are plot, character, thought, diction, music and spectacle. To Aristotle plot is the soul of tragedy and it must have beginning, middle and an end; the action must be single and the plot must be simple. Plato believes that tragedy is harmful because “by feeding upon the grief of others, it is not easy to restrain it in the case of our own sufferings” (p-13). But Aristotle says it is health giving and artistically satisfying as Milton beautifully calls “calm of mind, all passion spent” (Aristotle 14).

Aristotle defences poetry and tragedy and next he talks about comedy. Comedy can be compared to satire because satire criticizes sinners whereas comedy criticizes sin. Aristotle does not accept with the comedy which bullies defect of people which is painful and destructive. He says a comedy should not bring pain. He further adds that the comedy can be general instead of pointing individually. For example, Brain- worm, backbite. They are universal and do not satirize a man particularly.

Finally Aristotle deals with epic. He does not mention anything about the length as it can be used as much required for narration. The advantage of epic is that it needs not to be performed on stage, so improbable things can be included in epic. Hence Aristotle suggests that “the poet should prefer probable impossibilities and improbable possibilities” (Aristotle 22).

Conclusion:

Plato’s criticism is based on moral grounds whereas Aristotle’s criticism is based on aesthetic and scientific. To Plato, function of poetry is to teach, but “from the Aristotelian and Greek point of view art is an element in the higher life of the community; the pleasure it affords is an enduring pleasure, an aesthetic enjoyment which is not divorced from civic ends” (Aristotle 13).

Aristotle partly agrees and partly disagrees with the view of Plato, this means the poetry can also have moral teaching but this cannot be the only aim of poetry. B. Prasad says that Plato wants literature to do the work of morality but Aristotle expects it to be no more than what it is- an art. So Aristotle could clearly see the distinction between the two which Plato had failed to see.

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