

Aristotle's Theory of Imitation. Nature of Poetic Imitation. (4)

Aristotle a pupil of Plato is the first systematic literary critic though, he started with the interpretation of his master's views, he gave entirely new meanings, and new directions to them and thereby exhibited his originality and genius. Unlike Plato, he was an experimentalist and formulated his literary theories on the basis of his observation and analysis. He is the first critic to give the theory of Poetry as opposed to its practice. He is also first to discover the universal aspect of Poetry and its presentation of truth. Through out the ages, his Poetics has been a positive source of literary speculations among the critics. His concept of Tragedy serves as the foundation for all discussions of literary aesthetics. His theory of Poetic imitation is the most valuable of all his contributions, to the literary theories. Let us see it in a brief.

Aristotle made the concept of Poetic Imitation the starting point of his critical investigations in his Poetics. The term 'Imitation' was first used by Plato who condemned Poetry for being an 'imitation of imitation'. Aristotle interpreted it in his own way and rendered a new meaning and new form to it. Actually, Plato equated Poetry with painting and declared it to be merely a shadow of shadow, hence worthless, and called Poets 'white liars'. But, Aristotle equated it with music and tried to prove that it does not represent ^{the surface} of things. In fact it represents the passion and emotion of men which are also imitated by music. It is only the manner of imitation that differentiates them.

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On the out set, Aristotle agrees with Plato that Poetic is an imitation of Nature. But, he strongly refutes him regarding the nature of imitation and emphatically argues that it imitates 'men in action'. In other words, a poet imitates men as they are or as they ought to be. That is, he represents men as they are better than the real life or as they were or as they actual are. It means that the imitation is not merely a photograph.

representation of things, rather it is a creative process. The poet selects his materials from his knowledge and experiences of life, gives them an intelligible order and in this way, he creates reality. He brings order out of disorder and chaos. He eliminates the purely irrational and unwanted elements and focuses on the permanent and the significant.

Thus the poet gives us a truth of an ideal of a universal kind. He tells us not what men are but what they can be or what they ought to be. He does not care so much for what has happened, but ^{with} what may happen. There is an element of universality in great poetry, and hence its permanent appeal. The poet gradually rises from the particular to the general. He studies the particular, and on the ^{basis} of his studies he devises principles of general application. In a way, he transcends the limits of real life.

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According to Aristotle, the poet imitates the creative process of nature, but the objects of imitations are 'men in action' on men doing and experiencing things. By action is meant not only the physical activity but the movement of spirit, thoughts, feelings and emotions. The poetry can be classified according to the types of men it represents. Tragedy and epic poetry represent men of higher type, men better than the real life. Comedy represents men of lower type, men worse than the real life. Though, Aristotle leaves the men of the third type, it is meant that poetry can also represent men in naturalistic manner, neither heightened nor trivial. In this context critics have rightly observed that Aristotle knew nothing of realistic or fluxy school of fiction.

Aristotle further argues that in nature there is a ceaseless and upward progress. The poet imitates this upward movement of nature. A work of art produces the original not as it is but as it appears to the senses. (note words it produces imaginatively. The artist moves in the

(6)

world of images and reproduces the eternal according to the ideas or images already in his mind. Thus, the poet does not copy the external world but creates a new one in accordance to his 'idea' of it. That is why even an ugly object, well imitated, becomes a source of pleasure. In this way, poetry is a creative process, that gives out the poet's conception of truth, what according to him 'men ought to be' in accordance with the law of probability and necessity. It is probability that gives new shape to the imitated object.

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According to Aristotle, poetry is the highest form of imitative art and it expresses the universal element in life. It is not a mere reproduction of empirical fact, but a picture of life with all its trivialities and accidents. The world of possible that poetry creates is more intelligible than the world of experiences. The poet presents permanent and eternal facts, free from the elements of unreason which thwart our comprehension of human conduct. He may create the actual, but he must avoid the ludicrous, the fantastic, the impossible. Poetic truth passes the bounds of reality, but it does not wantonly violate the laws which make the real world rational.

To conclude, Aristotle has successfully refuted Plato's charges against poetry. He has given a new meaning and direction to the concept of poetic imitation, has widened its scope and has established that it is a creative process.