

Introduction to World Literature
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The poetics of Aristotle - I

Hello and welcome to today's session of the NPTEL course entitled introduction to world literature. Today we are looking at the text, The Poetics by Aristotle, Aristotle was a Greek philosopher as you all know and he was also the disciple of Plato. Unlike Plato, Aristotle was not an idealist so we find the kind of balance in his approach towards rhetoric, towards arts, towards literature and multiple ways it's also important to note that Aristotle's works and his thought process, his methods it has also laid the foundations of Western critical thought in ways that no other text has been able to do.

And when we talk about the understanding of literature, when we talk about the framing of literature in the Western context it's always important and we find that it's always imperative that one begins with Aristotle. And about the conception of poetry, tragedy and rhetoric in the ways in which we find that appearing in this text to the poetics. And it's also important to state that there are significant departures that we can identify the approaches and the works moving away from that of the poetics, so it remains at many levels one of the starting points which I used to define and also to define the departures which signify the formulation of literature in general.

So, in a course which deals with world literature it is important to look at Aristotle's poetics because that's a work which is been widely translated and also has been in circulation. Irrespective of the century that has passed between the time the work came out and the contemporary.

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That the version that we are using for this session is a translation along with critical notes by S. H. BUTCHER and this he was Greek professor and alongside the translation is from Greek, this is also an improved translation as the author S. H. BUTCHER also points out in the preface. While he says in this edition the critical notes are enlarged and the translation has been carefully revised, the improvements in the translation are largely due to the invaluable aid I have received from my friend and colleagues, there are acknowledgements and he also says, in making use of the mass of critical material which is appeared in recent years, especially in Germany. I have found it necessary to observe a strict principle of selection my aim still being to keep the notes within limited compass.

So this is one thing that I wanted to keep in mind when we are looking at Aristotle's poetics. A lot of translations have happened and there are lot of critical interventions as well. So, the poetics that we receive as of now is also embedded within a critical tradition, within a canonical tradition. So, there is a way in which the original text remains a little inaccessible to us the nuances one there have then papers which talk about whether the nuances have been left out in some way or the other, but what is important to note is that this is a text which has assumed more relevant than it had originally during the time of its initial circulation and now it is circulated across languages in across literary traditions and it has travelled across centuries and it's in such a context that we now received this text the poetics and also try to understand it and try to make sense of it especially when we talk about the relevance of criticism and the relevance of early critical methods in understanding literature, in framing any kind of work of art.

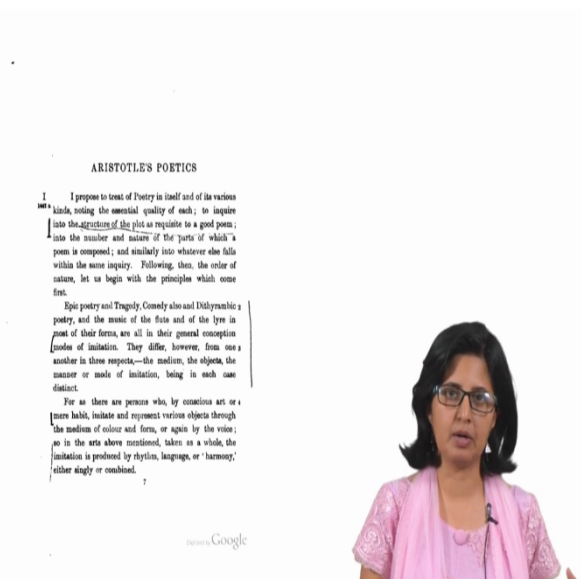
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And this is a version which is available online and (03:48) sense of the critical works which have been happening in and around poetics and also get a sense of how the critical notes are helpful in understanding the text you may please access this version by enhance your understanding as well.

So in this version we find the original, when I see original does he revised the refined one from the (04:07). We find the Greek text as well as the translation simultaneously.

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And I would want you to go through some of the excerpts to see to get a hang of the language which is used and also to realize that this is a very lucid and a very accessible text. And

though the ideas engaged in poetics are profound and it has been significant enough to lay a foundation of Western critical thought. We would also know that this is a highly readable text, there is a way in which the language suits the language of students.

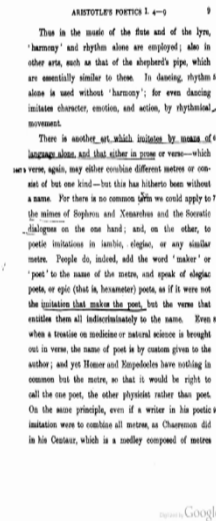
So, there is every reason for us to believe that maybe this was written down in the form of lecture notes, while Aristotle was engaged in while he was having this dialogue with his students. And we know that how learning happened in those times especially in the Greek society. And we also get to know that there is a very significant literary well-read population in Greece that must have been during that time because Aristotle's discussion, the dialogues that he initiated also gives us such impression.

And look at the way the text begins, it begins in this first person. I propose to treat of poetry in itself and of its various kinds, noting that essential quality of each; to enquire into the structure of the plot as requisite to a good poem; into the number and nature of the parts of which a poem is composed; and similarly into whether else falls within the same inquiry. Following then, the order of nature, let us begin with the principle which come first.

Look at the directness of thought over here. It's very clear what Aristotle wants to do. There are no abstractions over here. It's a very scientific, a clinically precise approach when he wants to talk to us about the principle, the underlined functions, the underlined methods and the structures within which the dominant art forms of those times were situated. And he also talks about specific kinds, specific (06:03) and what makes this work specially significant is that.

There is a certain kind of a compartmentalization which we can adopt and which we also find easier to engage with. And at the same time there is a very fine kind of a balance which is maintained between the abstract things that art or literature or tragedy in specific seems to do and the more or less scientific kind of principles which are underline those abstractions. And what Aristotle perhaps tries to do is, to look at those abstract emotions and to see and to try and see whether any kind of a scientific breakdown or breaking down of those principles could be found or not.

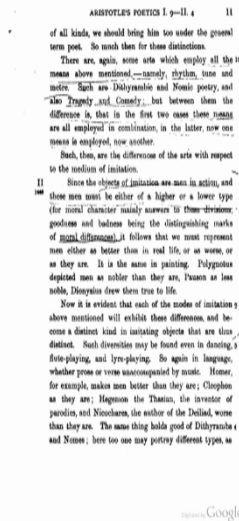
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Aristotle discusses extensively about imitation and he looks at art as a supreme kind of imitation as well as. So, this is something which can be identified as the underlined thread across all his discussion. And as you can see over here he says “As if it were not the imitation that makes the poet but the verse that entitles them all indiscriminately to this name.” So, there are certain instances where we find him giving very direct definitions but we also find that there are certain things which are there in the background informing the understanding of this text also implying that maybe this was a kind of discussion that they used to have, maybe this is all framed in a particular way, it’s all situated within the other large discussions which were happening.

And as noted there is no evidence to show that Aristotle himself had written this, this was taken down in the form of notes and then it was circulated. So, there could be certain gaps, there could be certain things which are not really well laid out. For instance we would later come to know that the three unities which are attributed to Aristotle there is only a passing mention of that but it was strongly attributed to him through the later critical interpretations and the through the later translations particularly from the 16th century onwards in Europe, so one needs to be very attentive to those gaps and also be very alert to the tone that this work is setting up.

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And more than everything perhaps one should be careful not to essentialise any of the things which are being told over here so as to not excuse this text of being partial being essentialist but being alert to the fact that this was written, not even written this was taken down it was passed down generations through within specific context and one also needs to be attentive to the context while making certain kinds of judgments about works like this.

So, we shall continue to look at some important aspects which also make poetics very significant in understanding the critical tradition through which the Western systems of thought which in processes of thought went through. So, when Aristotle talks about tragedy and comedy is very very careful to state clearly that whenever imitation is happening in a work of art in any tragic or comic work, what is being imitated is real-life.

Look at the second section “since the object of imitation are men in action, and these men must be either of a higher or lower type (form oral character mainly answers to this divisions it goodness and badness being the distinguishing marks of moral differences) it follows that we must represent men either as better than in real life or as worse or as they are. It is the same in painting, polygnotus depicted men as nobler than they are, pausion as less noble, Dionysius drew them few to life.”

And here is making a very succinct point about art being an imitation of life and at the same time it's very important to distinguish between life and its representations, life in the way in which it gets imitated. Here Aristotle is not trying to make a value judgment of what life is on

the other hand he is trying to showcase what imitation does and how action becomes very very significant and a defining factor then qualifying the nature of that imitation.

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You may notice the structure of this work it's been conveniently divided into different sections and this was done by later commentators and the one who critically intervene with particular notes. So, the purpose of these different sections are two also indicate the shift in the shift in topic because it's not as if that as a very definite kind of a beginning middle and end in all these different sections, there are no dramatic introductions or significant conclusions that one can identify.

But on the other hand the divisions have been made largely based on the different topics or sometimes when there is a significant shift switch in tone or a switch in mode from one mode to the other you find it getting split into different sections. So, it also tells us about the different kinds of imitations in section 3. There are these different kinds of imitations based on how things are narrated or how things are shown.

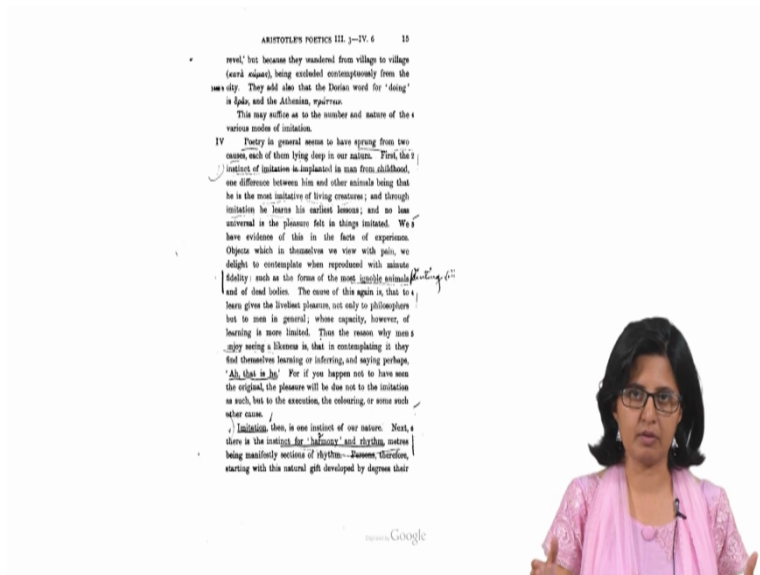
And he also says there are three things, the differences which distinguish artistic imitation. The first one being the medium, the second one being objects and the third one being the manner. And he gives this example "From one point of view, Sophocles is an imitator of the same kind as Homer for both imitate higher types of character; from another point of view, of the same kind as Aristophanes-for both imitate persons acting and doing."

So two different kinds of imitation that he talks about, one is where certain higher-ordered of character is imitated and a second one is there are specific actions, there are specific people

and their contacts and their situations and the way they respond to life gets imitated. These are two different kinds and there is no hierarchy that Aristotle tries to draw on the other hand he goes on to argue that action is at the heart of all kinds of imitations and all kinds of tragedy and he even goes to the extent of arguing it later point as we would see it's possible to have a tragedy without character but it is not possible to have a tragedy without action.

And this is a principal that he identified quite rightly and even if one is not aware of what Aristotle wrote about even if one was not aware of the Aristotle in precepts. If you look at any work of art, if you look at any kind of drama it becomes very evident that it is possible to have a story emerging without specific characters but action is very very important, action is something which propels and which takes the story forward and backwards.

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And when he talks about imitation, he is seeing that is something very very inherent that's what we see in section 4. "Poetry in general seems to have sprung from two causes, each of them lying deep in our nature. First the instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and other animals being that he is the most imitated of living creatures." And this is what we mean when we talk about Aristotle using a scientific approach as well.

There is a rationality that Aristotle brings in even when he's talking about things related to, even when he's talking about things which are seemingly abstract like literature or poetry or drama. And here he goes on to same. And through imitation he learns his earliest lessons. So, this is something given the power to imitate the skill to imitate or something that all human

beings are blessed with, but what makes an artist different is the principles which he uses in order to put this imitation to a better use.

“And no less universal is the pleasure felt in things imitated. We have evidence of this in the fact of experience. Objects which in themselves we view with pain, we delight to contemplate when he produced with minute fidelity: such as the forms of the most ignoble animals and of dead bodies.” And if you know about ancient civilization and art, it’s a well-known fact that in from the times human being started living in the caves we find inscriptions of animals and nature around them.

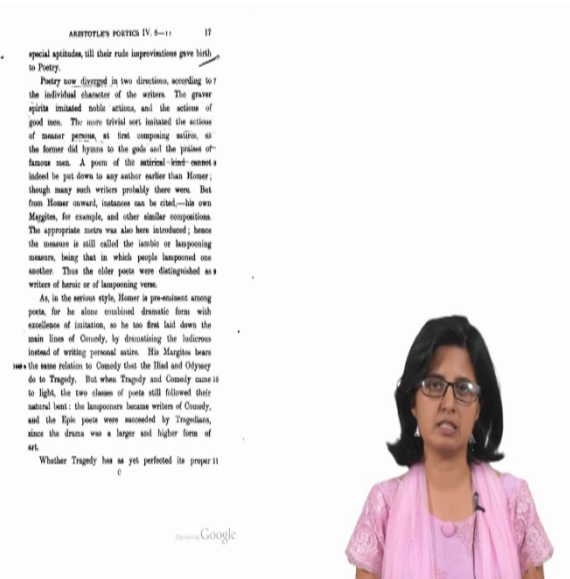
There was always a tendency to imitate not just in terms of action but also in terms of representation to produce painting, to produce works which would imitate what is seen in and around nature. And the relevance of this text almost surprises in spite of this its datedness. ((14:38) see end of this paragraph in section 4 “Thus is the reason why men enjoy seeing the likeness is that in contemplating it and they find themselves learning awe-inspiring or saying perhaps, ‘ Ah that is he ’ .

So, this is something that we continue to experience if there is a painting, if there is a portrait done and the moment we realize that the portrait is done in the same way as the person looks. The moment thus resemblance is very very uncanny, one begins to get a lot of pleasure and surprise and search similar emotions out of it. For if you haven’t not to have seen the original the pleasure will be tune not to the imitation as such but at the execution the coloring or some such other cause.

So, there is always an original and an imitated version and he talks about the principles which one can call out from this process, from the process of seeing the original and also imitating this in such a way that it is identifiable to the ones who are looking at it. And he underscores this argument here that imitation is one instinct of our nature. So, there are two ways in which we find Aristotle approaching this, he looks at imitation as something that is given, something that is inherent, and something that human beings are inherently blessed with.

But at the same time he also talks about the skill and the training which are needed in order to be produce a work of art, in order to be able to present it within specific frameworks.

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Of Homer, in page 17 continuing from section 4 “As in the serious style, Homer is pre-eminent among poets, for he alone combined dramatic form with excellence of imitation, so he to first laid down the main lines of comedy by dramatizing the ludicrous instead of writing personal satire.” So, look at how he talks about Homer. Homer had combined dramatic form with excellence of imitation and this is perhaps one of the underlined ways in which Aristotle continues to tell us that, whenever he’s talking about imitation, whenever is talking about good art it’s also about this combination about having dramatic form and excellence of imitation and one the latter being something inherent.

He’s also implying that the former dramatic form that is something that would come to the artist through hard work, through training and by acquiring specific skills.

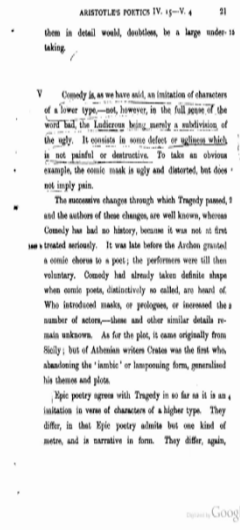
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When you go through the way in which the discussion progresses and the different points that are being made you also find that Aristotle is being an excellent teacher and we find him using very appropriate examples and also relating that with imitate context which is the Greek society of those times. And in page 19 we find him talking about a number of examples “Aeschylus first introduced a second actor; he diminished the importance of the chorus and assigned the leading part to the dialogue. Sophocles raised the number of actors to three, and added some scene painting.”

So, it's not just the principle that he is talking about, is also giving very live examples from contemporary theatre. He is also trying to see how the principles that he is attempting to draw out and the examples which they see around in the contemporary that there is an ongoing dialogue between them that he is not developing, he is not this principles out of (())(17:59) but it's also based on what he sees and experience as an audience during that period.

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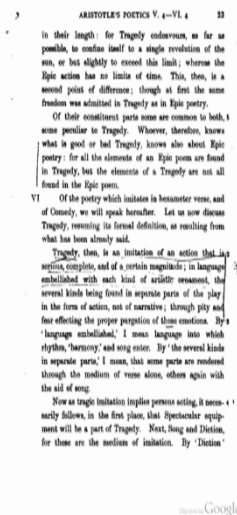
Before he starts to talk about tragedy which is the most significant discussion the poetics as many would say. Aristotle has a sections special in section 5 about comedy. And he begins with this very straightforward opening remark “Comedy is as we have said, and imitation of characters of a lower type - not however in the full sense of the word bad, the Ludicrous being nearly a subdivision of the ugly. It consists in some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive. To take an obvious example, the comic mask is ugly and distorted but does not imply pain.”

And look at the clarity with which he defines comedy and this is a definition which we can still relate to in the contemporary in spite of this centuries which are passed between Aristotle and the contemporary. And this is certain historical background that he also tries to provide that comedy had no history and it was not at first treated seriously and he gives a sense of the past “It was late before the Archon granted a comic chorus to a poet; the performance where till then voluntary.

Comedy had already taken definite shape when comic poets distinctively so-called are heard of. When introduced mask, or prologues, or increase the number of actors - these and other similar details remain unknown. As for the plot, it came originally from Sicily; but of Athenian writers Crates was the first who are abandoning the ‘iambic’ or lampooning form, generalized his themes and plots.”

Alongside laying down the principles of different forms of (19:42). He's also giving us a sense of history. He's trying to outline map the trajectory of the different art forms that were prevalent during those times.

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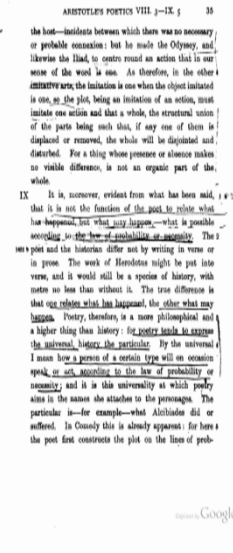
There is also discussion of epic poetry which he undertakes in this section. And what we today focus is also on section six when he talks particularly about tragedy. He defines tragedy in this way, tragedy then is an imitation of an action that is serious and complete and of a certain magnitude and embellished with each kind of artistic ornament. The several kinds being found in separate parts of the play in the form of action not of narrator.

Through pity and fear affecting the proper purgation of these emotions. By language embellished I mean language into which rhythm, harmony and song enter. By the several kinds and separate parts I mean that some parts have rendered through the medium of verse alone and others again with the aid of a song.

The (20:34) to clarify here is very very hard to miss and the section on tragedy is considered as the best written of all other actions in poetics. And I also find it very significant that the tone here is very very clear **as if a** as if a teacher is talking to his disciples and he is trying to give a definition, he is trying to give some kind of a clarity about the thing that they are dealing with, which is tragedy. And at the same time he is also trying to further elucidate, the phrases that he is using and try to explain some of the abstract terms which have got into this rather comprehensive definition.

I will strongly encourage you to go through section 6 it would give a sense of how we look at tragedy and as a comeback in the next session we should also look at the different parts of a tragedy and engage with them in of (0)(21:28) detail.

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So it's a very short section, section 6 where he talks about tragedy and it also talks about plot and the various other things which are part of a tragedy. So, it would be useful if you go through sections six, seven and eight which is where he talks about tragedy in particular.

So, in next class we shall come at to take a detail look at these principles and also see how the effect of tragedy is at work and how efficiently Aristotle had curled out the crocs of the argument in spite of the datedness and the (0)(22:04) of this text. I thank you for listening and I look forward to seeing you in the next session.