

Literary Criticism
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The Foundation of Western Philosophy

Hello and welcome to today's session of the course on literary criticism. In today's session we look at how the foundations of Western philosophy were laid during the Greco-Roman times.

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And for setting the stage for introducing this period I find this work by M.A.R Habib particularly useful. This is called *Literary Criticism: From Plato to the Present*. It provides a very detailed background to the foundations of Western philosophy and how they relate from the classical times onwards.

One is familiar with Greek history and how their literature and their culture had laid the foundations of Western philosophical as well as critical and literary thought. We know that we need to begin with the Homeric epics, with *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Those were the texts that sort of inaugurated the idea of literature and the idea of how literary texts also represent the cultural and the political milieu of various time periods.

And in terms of literary criticism, we begin with the three Greek masters: Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. And the time during which they lived, as we know, it is also known as the Classical period and it is also the time when the dramatists, primarily the writers of tragedies, such as

Euripides, Aeschylus and Sophocles lived and there was also the comedies written by Aristophanes.

So, this is the background during which Socrates, Plato and Aristotle lived, it is largely termed as the Classical period. And this Classical period comes to an end with the death of Alexander the Great. This happens roughly about 323 BC. And after this, we also enter a period known as the Hellenistic period.

So, during this time, it is important to note that creative act was almost equivalent to critical act. There is no distinction between the creative act and critical act. In that sense, in archaic Greece which roughly about 800 years before Christ- this is the classical period that we are talking about. The dramatists: Euripides, Aeschylus, Sophocles and the philosophers: Socrates, Plato and Aristotle; their works were considered complementary to each other, a way in which creative act and the critical act had seemed to be quite in the same forte, so to speak.

And the schools of rhetoric which were prevalent during those times, if you are familiar with Greek history and how the rise of the Athenian democracy and power was also instrumental during that time, you would know that, that was the sort of background in which the foundations of Western philosophical thought, the foundations of Western critical thought were laid. And soon after this, we entered a Hellenistic period, where a diffusion of Greek culture happens across the Mediterranean and the Middle East. And there are also the conquests of Alexander the Great, there is the founding of the city of Alexandria.

And this period also comes to an end by 31 BC, which is through the Battle of Actium, an event known as the Battle of Actium. Having said this, and having noted how the democratic setup of that period, how the political setup of that period was also acting in complimentary with the critical and the creative productions of those times, it is important to notice that the first recorded instance of criticism happens within a creative work itself.

And this used to happen during the dramatic festivals which were held in Athens, and Aristophanes' work *The Frogs* which was performed in 405 BC is considered as one of the first, earliest recorded instance of criticism. And this is the crux of this play, *The Frogs*, which was also characterized as a comedy. There are these two competing poets Aeschylus and Euripides and there is a sort of a competition going on between them. And the competition is between them to see whose side is more meritorious.

So, we find that Aeschylus represents the traditional, the hierarchical, conservative virtues of heroism, of hierarchy, of martial powers, of socially-engendered hierarchy. And Euripides on the other hand, he represents, he stands for more recent sort values, such as democracy, and his attitude is seen as more secular, more contemporary. We are talking about the earliest recorded instance of criticism in the history of Greek literature, discourse, this engagement between Aeschylus and Euripides has a critical element infused into it. But primarily it is a creative work, it is a comedy.

And it is in this fusion that we find that literary criticism begins to find its enactment. So, *The Frogs* primarily is like a contest in poetic art and it is featured, it is presented like a quarrel between poetry and philosophy. And it also poses a literary critical dilemma, which in various ways, informs, determines and lays the foundations of the critical thought and shapes the ways in which literary criticism goes ahead in the following centuries.

It is important to notice at this point that in order to stage the sort of a quarrel within a creative piece of work, the quarrel between poetry and philosophy, the quarrel between the traditional and the modern, the quarrel between social hierarchical models and new democratic secular virtues. And to stage this sort of quarrel, this sort of contestation within the space of work, which is primarily creative, also indicates that poetry was a very, very important element in the educational process of early Greek society. And this also had poetry and its engagement, the engagement with poetry, engagement about poetry, it also had its ramifications on morality, religion, civic responsibility. There were no distinctions, it overlapped, and it seamlessly informed one another.

And during the time of Plato and Aristotle, which is the critical engagement that we also are beginning to focus on, during their time, poetry held a very considerable status, it had a kind of an authority which no other art form, which no other kind of rhetoric or no other kind of philosophy had.

So, when Plato begins to reject poetry, we notice that this is an important moment, when Plato begins to be suspicious of the values inserted, the values imparted by the poet, when Plato begins to raise the suspicions about how a poet could also in various ways corrupt the society, could perhaps thwart the perfect model that a democratic society proposed, we also begin to notice that Plato is going against the grain. And this is the foundation of Western philosophical and critical thought.

Greek philosophy, if one may say, it begins as a challenge to the monopoly of poetry. In this way, it makes perfect sense to begin with the argument that Greek philosophy begins as a challenge to the monopoly of poetry, and which is what we find Plato doing right at the outset.

And Habib in his introduction, he puts this across very beautifully, he states that Plato's opposition of philosophy to poetry, and the quarrel that he stages between philosophy and poetry and the various ways in which his arguments are being pursued sets the stage for more than 2000 years of literary criticism and literary theory and this is something that we would also see over the course of this discussion from Plato till the early 20th century.

The significance of Plato in formulating the foundations of Western philosophy could be imbibed in the statement made by one of the recent critics that the entire Western philosophy could be read as a series of footnotes to Plato. So that is a way in which he signalled a departure from the conventions of those times where poetry had a monopoly, where poetry was seen as an integral part of the educational process, where poetry was seen as a competent device to pitch against philosophy itself.

Before we go into the details of how Plato and Aristotle had laid the foundations of this critical philosophy, it is important to see how they looked at literature, how they looked at poetry, which was the only form of literature available there. Plato, as we know, was the disciple of Socrates and Aristotle was a disciple of Plato.

At this point, before we go any further, it is important to see how we can differentiate between Plato and Aristotle. This will also form a fundamental understanding to the various things that we shall be discussing in the days ahead.

Plato was an idealist; vis-a-vis Aristotle who was a realist. And in Plato, we find him focusing on virtues such as the significance of the state, and how the state also has the impressionable quality of formulating citizens and ideas- the only real thing as far as Plato is concerned. But Aristotle, on the other hand, being a realist, he believes only in the physical reality, the only real thing for him is reality itself.

And we find Aristotle rejecting Plato's idealism. And Plato's idealism to begin with is extremely significant for us because it begins by focusing on points against poetry. And that is how he locates his ideal by going against something which he thought was disturbing the ideal world, was disturbing the possibility of an ideal state. And this is what we find Plato

discussing in his significant work the Republic. In fact, there are two works in which we find Plato engaging with poetry and formulating his arguments, primarily against poetry: it is the *Ion* and *Republic*.

And in Republic, he focuses on how to build an ideal state, the ideal state, the state of idealism that always remains very significant and very important to all his formulations. And he also talks about the need to transcend human selfishness. And he also puts forward this argument that if there is no human selfishness, there will be socially unity.

And in his ideal state, where there is no role or no function for any kind of human selfishness which is also a very ideal state in that sense, the society does not have any sense of family, no sense of private property, and it does not perform any gender roles. And this is very ideal and also very utopian.

And Aristotle being the realist that he is, he realized the flaws in this ideal state. Not that he did not recognize inherent value in this proposition for idealism, not that Aristotle did not realize how significant it is to have in a technical way, in an ideal way, to have this perfect system of a state where private property, gender roles and all kinds of family affiliations could be overruled in multiple ways. But Aristotle was very aware that this cannot be a possibility at all.

So, we find Aristotle rejecting Plato's idealism and focusing on politics, a working government. Polity is something that he begins to focus on vis-a-vis the idealism, vis-a-vis the ideal state that Plato puts forward. So, Aristotle talks about a working government, the need to have a sense of polity, a sense of politics and the need to maintain private property. Because human nature, human behaviour is fundamentally also very selfish in nature.

So, he acknowledges human selfishness, and that is a way forward for him, by acknowledging the limitations and by acknowledging the challenges, he also tries to figure out how to work the state's way through it, how to equip human beings to deal with these inherent problems, which will also in turn affect the system, affect the society, affect the state itself.

And he also gives these very powerful arguments, such as if there is no family and if there is no sense of private property, who will take charge, who will have the sense of responsibility, who will raise kids, who would be accountable? So, these are some of the practical problems that Aristotle also tries to deal with being the idealist that he is. At some level, we find

Aristotle arguing for a sense of balance, because we live in a real world and not in the ideal utopian world that Plato dreams about.

So, fundamentally, when we break it down to the elements, we understand that Plato's work, Plato's propositions, Plato's formulations are about imagining an ideal state. On the other hand, Aristotle talks about a design within which our government can work effectively, a design which would work on the basis of experience, on the basis of knowledge. And here we find two fundamental binaries also being created- reason as well as experience.

So, we begin to get a sense of how two different strands of critical thought begin to get formulated from the earliest Greek time onwards, with Plato as well as Aristotle. So here we are not going to the details of their works at this point. The important thing is to understand how there is a certain kind of a distinction which is being focused upon, which is being formulated during these times, based on how philosophy and poetry could be dealt with, how the real and the imagined could be dealt with, how the ideal and the real could be dealt with.

So, these are some of the foundations which will also help us to deal with the various ways in which criticism and theory begin to shape itself, in the following centuries. When one looks at the work of Plato, he was not primarily a literary critic, he lived from 427 BC till 348 BC. And he lived during a period which was an age of inquiry and analysis.

And until then, it was dominated by creative activity, which is why we also find the play, such as Aristophanes' *The Frogs* where we find an infusion of critical as well as creative activity, where we find the society, the largely learned society of Greece engaging with things in a very systematic, in a very polemic manner.

And Plato comes in at that point of time, at that turning point when an age of inquiry and an age of analysis is also being inaugurated. He is not a professed critic of literature, as we know, and there are only scattered references. And in terms of the manuscripts and the works which are available and which are attributed to Plato, it is important to understand that what he says is as much that of Socrates. And it is very difficult to differentiate one from the other because there are also notes and there are also discussions which are part of his works.

Plato's view of art is something that we need to look at right at the outset. Plato's view of art was bound with his theory of ideas. And with this, we begin our discussions about how literary criticism began to shape itself from the time of Plato onwards. And this was a clear departure from the works of Aristophanes, where both the artist and the critic were present at

the same work. And this division, it is a later development and from Plato onwards, we look at this development, where the critic and the artist are two different segments, where the critic and the artist are beginning to be separated one from the other.

So, it is with this distinction that we begin discussing Plato and we shall be taking a look at this in greater detail in the following session. I hope this also gave you a succinct introduction, a background to the understanding of how the Greco-Roman times were significant in identifying the monopoly of poetry and how philosophy was pitched against poetry in such a way that one was considered as being of a corruptive influence and the other was seen as something that would help the state to perform in an ideal way.

Having said that, we also wrap up today's discussion and in the next session, we shall be looking at how Plato's ideas, his theory of ideas became very important in signalling a departure from the conventional ways in which poetry and literature was looked at and how it also then went on to lay the foundations of Western literary critical thought itself. I thank you for listening and I look forward to seeing you in the next session.