



A CRITICAL STUDY OF SHAKESPEARE'S HAMLET IN THE LIGHT OF ARISTOTLE'S CLASSICAL THEORY OF POETICS



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Abstract

Aristotle (384-322 BCE) - a Greek Philosopher and a man a polymath in multidisciplinary branches of knowledge wrote an epoch-making book named 'Poetics' in the realm of literary theory and criticism. The present study sought to analyze Aristotle's theory of poetry and drama in the light of Shakespeare's Tragedy of Hamlet which deals with the aspects of tragedy discussed by Aristotle in his Poetics. It focuses on Aristotle's argumentative nature in concern with the principles of the poetry. It discusses Aristotle's views on the tragic flaw which plays dominant role and by nature it is reasonable and realistic. It focuses on the constituents like plot, character, thought, diction, melody and spectacle. It delineates with Aristotle's

notion of ideal tragic plot. He discusses plot should be complex and should incorporates the journey of protagonist from good fortune to disaster. The study focuses on the Aristotle's concept of tragic hero who should be moral and inherently good. The present study not only as part of mere understanding of a set of theories for the interpretation of any literary text but it attempts to explore the systematic framework of his critical theory for the exploration of new avenues of literary texts. It concentrates on the major issues related to the classical texts of his contemporary art and literature.

Key Words : Tragedy, Critical, Constituents, Theory, Classical etc]

RESEARCH PAPER

Introduction:

Shakespeare's Hamlet doesn't reflect elements of critical theories. Even it doesn't exhibit any more aspects of Plato's and Aristotle's classical critical theories. Even, it is also firm that Shakespeare hadn't intentionally framed this play on the basis of classical critical theory of Aristotle and Plato. But there is one major aspects Shakespeare had imitated the classical models of tragedies and comedies from Greek and Roman literature. The classical dramas are the creation of old earlier culture which was the outcome of contemporary society. There are controversial views about the Shakespeare's familiarity with Aristotle's '*Poetics*'. It is crystal clear about the Shakespeare's imitation of *Hamlet* from Norse legend which was created by *Saxo Grammaticus* in Latin around 1200 A.D. This play deals with History of the Danes which narrates the rise and fall of the great king of Denmark and the story of prince named Amleth. Apart from this, many theorists and critics have considered it as the close replica of human nature and unresolved riddles in the human life. Many writers appreciate the artistic creation of Shakespeare but simultaneously it has framed in the critical perspectives of Aristotle, especially on the notions of tragic hero and concept of tragic flaw. Aristotle's theory becomes an integral part of the study of dramatic constituent, naturally cultivated by Shakespeare to create this masterpiece. After the grand success of this play, many critics began the study of this play in the realm of the critical theories of Aristotle framed in his classical book '*Poetics*'.

Objectives of the Study –

The present study is based on the major objective which adds the dimensions to the school of literary criticism by applying the methodology of interpretation and analysis.

- To interpret and analyze Shakespeare's Hamlet in the realm of Aristotle's classical theory of '*Poetics*'.
- To explore the major Aristotle a tragic constituent in the context of Shakespeare's Hamlet.
- To review the works done by research scholars and academicians in the context of Shakespeare's tragedy.
- To focus on the new dimensions of the play in the emerging new schools of criticism.

Hypothesis or Assumptions:-

- It assumes that Shakespeare's play Hamlet contains constituent of Aristotle's critical theory of poetics.
- It seems that Shakespeare has imitated the Greek models of tragedies which were the similar incorporated by Aristotle for his critical theory in the book Poetics.
- It seems that notions of Aristotle used in his theory are akin to the dramatic properties of Shakespeare.

Review of Literature in the Context of Hamlet's Study in the Aristotle's Theory of Poetics:

Many critics and research scholars have carried out the research on Shakespeare's Hamlet with different perspectives. The present topic takes reviews in concern with Hamlet's study with major critical theories.

- **Jeffery R. Wilson**, in his popular essay '*Tragic Foundationalism*' puts theory of fudationalism which is taken from Alain Badiou's Theory of Toundationalism. He applies this theory n the context of Shakespeare's Hamlet to theorize the tragic mistake as concept of tragic foundationalism.
- Academician **Peter Goldman** from Princeton University in his book *The Purgatory Perspective of the Character of Hamlet* which was theorized by Stephen Greenbelt.
- **Joan E. Blederstedt** interprets *George Wilson Knight's Interpretation on the Characters from Shakespeare's Plays*. He gives symbolic interpretation on the Hamlet's character and other elements of the play.
- **A. C. Bradely** a Shakespearean critic gives three dimensions in his lecture series on the *Shakespearean Tragedies*. He gives first dimension as the psychological turmoil that the hero of the tragedy undergoes. According to him the second dimension is the role of chance and luck in the tragedies. The third dimension is the heroes of the tragedy are of high stature.
- **Jock, Peter Monro** discusses in his work *The Imagery of the Great Tragedies of Shakespeare* in his The New York Times Book Review.

- **Comparative Perspectives between Aristotle's Theory of Poetics and Shakespearean Tragedy:-**

Tragedy is genre of literature since the Greek tradition of drama. The seeds of the Greek dramas were deeply rooted in the festival of Dionysus. Later it was enriched by the Aristophanes and Aeschylus. In the next phase it established independent place due to the Aristotle's theory of Poetics and the contribution made by the pre-Shakespearean dramatists which were known as university wits. The study focuses on the independent aspects of Aristotle's Theory of tragedy and Shakespearean elements of tragedy.

Aristotelian tragedy incorporates with single plot. It intends to bring single effect on the audience. It doesn't bring complication to the audience to understand the plot of the tragedy. He might be influenced by the Aeschyleus or Aristophanes. Shakespearean tragedy only deals with sub-plots or plot within plot which we call mouse trap plot in the Hamlet. Protagonists in the Aristotle's Tragedy face death or reversal of fortune, on the contrary Shakespearean heroes face tragic death. To alleviate the tensions of the audience Aristotle used Chorus, on the contrary Shakespeare uses comic scenes. In Aristotle's tragedy protagonist becomes aware of the turn of the situation and it creates realization about himself. Shakespearean protagonist doesn't gain a self realization.

Theoretical Discussion on the Various Elements of Aristotle's Critical Theory from poetics in the context of Shakespeare's Hamlet:

Tragic Hero: Aristotle in his foundational text **Poetics** deals with element of tragic hero in the chapter XIII. He discusses to arouse pity and fear among the audience the protagonist must evoke pity and fear amongst the audience. He might have applied this principle in the context of Greek tragedy. The span of literary creation by Shakespeare and Aristotle's creation of poetics differs a lot. We don't find direct influence of Aristotle's poetics but Shakespeare was influenced by the Greek tragedies. He imitated the same from Greek tragedy and Aristotle's observation in his poetics is applicable to Shakespeare's Hamlet as Tragic Hero. It focuses on the psychological perspectives behind the fall of Hamlet. According to Saluja Ritu a critic and research scholar comments that "in the Freudian framework, Freud considers Hamlet as Oedipal relationship as general event in Hamlet's childhood which explains gripping power and enigma of Hamlet's

personality. He becomes tragic hero because of his power of indecision.”(Saluja, Ritu, p-23). This play has admired for the artistic skill of Shakespeare and the effective tools to create everlasting effects on the audience.

Catharsis :

Aristotle introduced this concept of *Catharsis or Katharasis* in his book *Poetics*, in the chapter VI. He interprets this element at multiple levels. He uses purgation, purification and clarification as alternate / substitute terms to the catharsis. It deals with process of way out to the suffocated emotions as fear, pity and joy. Mind gets purgated by enjoying the scenes from artistic creation. It may be tragedy or it may comedy. The scene of Hamlet's tragedy itself provokes the cathartic feelings amongst the audience. It fits to the Aristotle's notion of catharsis used in poetics. Hamlet's death gives insights to the audience to purgating the feelings of sadness. This concept establishes spiritual or practical level of principle. According to great scholar A. C. Bradely in his IV lecture on Shakespearean tragedy discusses that “there are major three factors which are responsible to create tragedy, viz. are mental turmoil, role of characters and luck and heroes high stature” (Bradely, A. C. p.-9). These all elements are minutely presented by Shakespeare. Classical critical theory of Aristotle helps to modern critics to discuss the major elements from Shakespeare’s plays.

Tragi flaw :

Tragic flaw is very significant term used by Aristotle in his book *Poetics*. The term tragic flaw implies innate quality of the hero towards his own downfall. When we discuss the play Hamlet in the framework of Aristotle's concept of tragic flaw, the character of Hamlet inherits the same qualities which are akin to the concept of hamartia. Hamlet's downfall is taken place due to his lack of decision making power. Critics like A. B. Kulkarni and A.G. Chaskar comment that “Aristotle's chapters I to V deal with medium of imitation, object of imitation and state of imitation. Aristotle discuss about natural tendency to enjoy works of imitation” (Kulkarni A. B. and Chaskar A. G.). Here lie the true art of Shakespearean tragedy which amalgamates the worldly wideness.

In the realm of classical theory by Plato, Hamlet is considered as superior work of art form. It is blending of different human psychologies. Hamlet's uneasy mind and intellectual questioning, Ophelia's grief and confusion, Claudius's guilt and hunger for self preservation become area of artistic study and creativity. It reveals the psychological traits of human nature. Hamlet is true and realistic vision of human behavior.

Anagnorosis is Greek term used for the word recognition by Aristotle in his book Poetics for the transformation of the character from ignorance to knowledge. The protagonist gets self-realization about his or her identity or actions which accompanies the reversal of the circumstances.

Peripetia is also new terminology which goes back to the earlier Greek Tragedies of Sophocles and Aeschylus. The term itself suggests that the hero's dealing with new situation. In the context of Shakespeare's play Hamlet, the protagonist tries to resolve his mental dilemma by facing the new circumstances. Critics like Patrice Waugh discusses that "Aristotle's approach to literature anticipates formalistic approach which deals with cultural and ideological issues. He deals with formal and technical aspects of literature. Aristotle in his poetics deals with typology of literature such as plots, Characters and styles" (Waugh, Patricia p.- 45).

Critics studying Hamlet through the perspective of Aristotle also praise the manner in which play moves from good fortune to disaster and ultimate to self realization. A critic concentrates on Aristotle's theoretical crux of theory of drama in his poetics. According to many critics argue that Shakespeare's Hamlet violates some of the basic principles of Aristotle's theory of tragic drama. According to Peter Alexander in his book 'Shakespeare' comments on John Keats views on Aristotle's concept of tragedy that he like Aristotle's paradox in the genre of tragedy". (Peter Alexander, p-205-206).

Conclusions:-

The present study establishes the reciprocal between Aristotle's theory of **Poetics** and Shakespeare's creation of Hamlet. The study finds out the major constituent from Shakespeare's Hamlet in the light of Aristotle's *Poetics*. It also discusses the major tragic elements in the light of Aristotelian concepts of Tragic Hero.

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