CHAPTER 3

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The Sixth Chapter of the 'Poetics' begins with the famous definition of tragedy. It may be the core of the 'Poetics'. Aristotle begins with a promise that he would speak later on about comedy and then gives the definition of the tragedy: "a tragedy, then, is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, therewith to accomplish its Catharsis of such emotions".¹

In this famous definition of tragedy Aristotle resumes what has been said already in the first five chapters, and devotes almost all the following chapters to explaining it further. Except the last part of the definition, every term and concept has been stated in, or prepared for, in the preceding chapters. The definition emerges out of the essence, "which was in process of realisation in the history, as he summarised it".²


The subject of the *Poetics* is "the art of Poetry both generically and in its species Epic-Poetry, and Tragedy, as also comedy, Dithyrambic Poetry, and most flute-playing and lyre-playing are all viewed as a whole, modes of imi-
tation".\(^3\) Here Aristotle introduces his master-concept of 'mimesis'. He says that the mimetic-process is the activity involved in poetry and its species. It is obvious that Aristotle took this concept of 'mimesis' as the common charac-
ter of 'Poetry' (Poiesis) from Plato, and it was then a current literary term in Greece. It was Plato, who first described poetry as 'the shadow of a shadow, twice removed from the reality'. Aristotle accepts this general term, describing poetry, but what he means by it is not explicitly mentioned by him. We have many theories, which try to explain the term, by the later commentators and critics, with various meanings ranging from reproduction, representation to creation. Thus the first part explains tragedy as an imitative art. It is an imitation, 'mimesis'.

How this particular 'imitation' differs from the other species of the same genre poetry? Aristotle gives three independent differences. "They differ from one another in three ways, either by a difference of kind in their means, or by a difference in the objects or in the

\(^3\) Poet. 1, 1447\(^a\) 15.
Aristotle distinguishes arts which imitate by means of form and colour, and the arts which imitate by means of voice. Aristotle then classifies arts which imitate by voice according to the three means of imitation: 'rhythm, language and harmony'. These may be employed either singly or in certain combinations. Having just spoken of (1) imitation in melody and rhythm (instrumental music), (2) imitation by rhythm alone (dance), Aristotle passes on to (3) imitation by language — whether alone or in combination with rhythm or metre (prose) and finally (4) imitation by melody, rhythm and language (lyric and drama).

“There is further an art which imitates by language alone, without harmony, in prose and in verse, and if in verse, either in some one or in a plurality of metres. This form of imitation is to this day without a name”.

Thus the instrumental arts and the nameless art are contra distinguished; the arts which use melody but not language from the art which uses language and harmony.

In the second chapter, Aristotle proceeds from the means to the objects of imitation in the poetic arts. “The objects the imitator represents are actions, with agents who

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4 Pocc, 1, 1447a 15.
5 Pocc, 1, 1447b 3.
are necessarily either good men or bad — the diversities of
human character being nearly always derivative from this
primary distinction, since the line between virtue and vice
is one dividing the whole of mankind. It follows, therefore,
that the agents represented must be either above our own
level of goodness or beneath it or just such as we are."6

Thus Aristotle says that the object of imitation
is men in action, either good or bad men. Aristotle empha-
sizes 'men in action' because he believed that character
development depends upon action — we become what we do —
and character goes with action in literature even more than
it does in life. So the antithesis of good and bad is derived
from the concept of action. All men who act i.e., all men
engaged in the practical life are necessarily either good or
bad. The distinction is not exclusively moral, but political
and social elements are also included, which becomes clear
later on, when he describes tragic hero.

The men in action are (1) better than ourselves or
(2) worse than ourselves and (3) as we are.7 This is explained
by an analogy from painting and Aristotle proceeds to say,
by way of a corollary, that the same distinction is to be
seen in the poetical arts, in epic, lyric and dramatic poetry

6 Post., 2, 1448 ι. 1.

7 Here, according to some Aristotelian exegetes
the third alternative 'such as we are' is an interpolation.
and that it constitutes also the essential point of difference between tragedy and comedy. Aristotle has particularly in mind the characters of Homer and tragedy on the one hand and characters of Hegemon of Parody and comedy on the other. These two categories are essentially derived from the ideals of Greek life as they were embodied in the literature of that time.

The third chapter of the 'Poetics' describes the third differentia. "A manner in which each kind of object is represented. Given both the same means and the same kind of object for imitation, one may either (1) speak at one moment in narrative and at another in an assumed character as Homer does; or (2) one may remain the same throughout, without any such change or (3) the imitators may represent the whole story dramatically, as though they were actually doing the things described".3

Thus having shown that the arts differ, one from another, in the objects 'imitated', in the means employed and in the mode of imitation, Aristotle now shows (in the definition) that

1. the 'object' imitated by tragedy is an action or piece of life of a serious nature, complete in itself, and 'having magnitude', i.e. long enough and serious enough to be more than trivial;

Foot, 2, 1443-3 18.
2. that the means employed is language with pleasurable accessories - like rhythms and harmony i.e. poetic diction;
3. that the manner/mode of imitation is dramatic i.e. the story is told not by narration but by persons acting in character;
4. who excite in the auditor's pity and fear;
5. and by - (Katharsis) - providing an outlet for these and similar emotions, produce a sense of pleasurable relief.

As we noted before, the first three clauses of the definition of tragedy are explained before, but the concluding clause of the definition has not been prepared for. It is not merely that the terms are new, but that nothing has been said with which we could possibly associate them. "The isolation and difficulty of the Katharsis - clause are indeed notorious; for the word 'Katharsis' does not occur again in the Poetics".\(^9\) Aristotle regarded one part of it 'Fear and Pity' - as self-evident, but the rest is presumably an anticipation of a point worked out at length in a possibly lost Second Book of the 'Poetics'. So we can assume this because in his 'Politics', Book 8, while talking about Cynic and Epicurean Aristotelian promises to explain the word in his work on 'Poetics'. But "this concluding clause is an

\(^9\) Ills, P.225.
integral part of the definition, since the end of the thing, to be defined cannot be ignored in any logically complete statement of its nature. 10

Aristotle, then, describes six parts of tragedy arising from the means, manner and object of the dramatic imitation. He says,

"There are six parts consequently of every tragedy, as a whole, that is, of such or such quality, viz. a Plot or plot, characters, Diction, Thought, Spectacle and Melody; two of them arising from the means, one from the manner, and three from the objects of dramatic imitation; and there is nothing else besides these six". 11

Diction and melody arise from the means of the imitation. Aristotle explains them as

"Here by 'Diction' I mean merely this — the composition of the verses, and by 'melody', what is too completely understood to require explanation". 12

Spectacle comes out of the "manner of imitation. "As they act the stories, it follows that in the first place the spectacle (or stage-appearance of the actors) must be some part of the whole". 13

The remaining three parts of tragedy result from the

10 Bywater, p. 150.
11 Poet, 6, 1450a 10.
12 Poet, 6, 1449b 35.
13 Poet, 6, 1449b 32.
object of the imitation. "But further: the subject represented also is an action; and the action involves agents, who must necessarily have their distinctive qualities both of character and thought, since it is from these that we ascribe certain qualities to their action. There are in the natural order of things, therefore, two causes, character and thought, of their actions, and consequently of their success or failure in their lives. Now the action (that which was done) is represented in the play by the fable or plot.\[14\]

Aristotle defines these three parts, Plot, Character and Thought as "The Fable in our present sense of the term, is simply this, the combination of the incidents, things done in the story; whereas character is what makes ascribe certain moral qualities to the agents; and thought is shown in all they say when proving a particular point or, it may be enunciating a general truth.\[15\] Aristotle is concerned to point out and explain the rules for the construction of these six parts of tragedy in the major part of his work.

The excitement or arousal of emotions of pity and fear is the end of tragedy, though Aristotle emphasizes that this is in truth, only a means to the ultimate end — the Catharsis of such emotions. This end alone determines the
structure of plot, action and thought and the structure is always subservient to function. Now let us understand the nature of the tragic emotions of pity and fear. Aristotle takes them as self-evident and does not explain their nature in the 'Poetics'. He simply informs us when these emotions are aroused at their highest.

In Chapter 13 of the 'Poetics' Aristotle says,

"we assume that, for the finest form of Tragedy, the Plot must be not simple but complex; and further, that it must imitate actions arousing pity and fear, since that is the distinctive function of this kind of imitation."\(^{16}\)

While describing the conditions on which the tragic effect depends, he further adds,

"Pity is occasioned by undeserved misfortune, and fear by that of one like ourselves."\(^{17}\)

He further informs us that these emotions are aroused at their highest when they are an integral part of the construction of the Plot. "The Tragic fear and pity may be aroused by the spectacle; but they may also be aroused by the very structure and incidents of the play which is the better way and shows the better poet."\(^{18}\) He further says,

"The tragic pleasure is that of pity and fear and the poet has to produce it by a work of imitation; it is clear, therefore that

\(^{16}\) Poet, 13, 1452^b^ 32.

\(^{17}\) Poet, 13, 1453^a^ 5.

\(^{18}\) Poet, 14, 1452^b^ 1.
the causes should be included in the incidents of his story. 19

All these show that Aristotle has surely chosen pity and fear as the tragic emotions. 20 Why he has done so has always puzzled the Aristotelian scholars. Are these terms employed off-hand, as the chief or the most striking samples of the various emotions aroused by tragedy or is there a precise, deliberate intention behind the choice of these two specific terms, and an essential connection between the one and the other?

19 Poet, 14, 1453 b 15.

20 Besides pity and fear, Aristotle has described some other basic emotions "that so change men as to affect their judgments," in the 'Rhetoric', Book II, 1373 a 20 Aristotle defines emotions as: "The emotions are all those feelings that so change men as to affect their judgments, and that are also attended by pain or pleasure." The emotions are (1) anger, (2) Joy, (3) Friendship, (4) Enmity, (5) Fear, (6) Shame, (7) Shamelessness, (8) Kindness, (9) Unkindness, (10) Pity, (11) Indignation, (12) Envy and (13) Emulation.

He considers these emotions from the three different points of view. He says, "Take, for instance, the emotion of anger: here we must discover (1) who the people are with whom they usually get angry, (2) what the state of mind of angry people is, and (3) on what grounds they get angry with them." (Rhet, II, 1373 a 25) Thus Aristotle describes a particular emotion in these three aspects: (1) what frame of mind, (2) with what persons and (3) on what grounds. Some of these emotions may be compared with the 36thYikhyau described by Murata. See p. 176 of this study.
It is customary among the Aristotelian scholars to explain the nature of these emotions, pity and fear from his 'Rhetoric'. Here pity and fear in their relation to real life are reckoned by Aristotle as 'disquieting elements' and each of them is 'a form of pain'. In the 'Rhetoric', Aristotle defines fear as "Fear may be defined as a pain or disturbance due to a mental picture of some destructive or painful evil in the future. Of destructive or painful evils only; for there are some evils, eg. wickedness or stupidity, the prospect of which does not frighten us: I mean only such as amount to great pains or losses. And even these only if they appear not remote but so near as to be imminent: we do not fear things that are a very long way off; for that are a very long way off: for instance, we all know we shall die, but we are not troubled thereby, because death is not close at hand. From this definition it will follow that fear is caused by whatever we feel has great power of destroying us, or of harming us in ways that tend to cause us great pain. Hence the very indications of such things are terrible, making us feel that the terrible thing itself is close at hand; the approach of what is terrible is just what we mean by danger".  

after explaining what 'we fear', Aristotle sums up, "Consequently, when it is advisable that the audience should be frightened, the orator must make them feel that they really are in danger of something, pointing out that it has happened to others, who were stronger than they are, and is happening, or has happened, to people like themselves, at the hands of unexpected people, in an unexpected form, and at an unexpected time".  

Aristotle then notes how close fear is to pity, "Speaking generally, anything causes us to feel fear that when it happens to, or threatens, others, causes us to feel pity". He defines pity, "Pity may be defined as a feeling of pain caused by the sight of some evil, destructive or painful, which befalls one who does not deserve it, and which we might expect to befall ourselves or some friend of ours and moreover to befall us soon. In order to feel pity, we must obviously be capable of supposing that some evil may happen to us or some friend of ours, and moreover some such evil as is stated in our definition or is more or less of that kind." He further says, "And generally we feel pity whenever we are in the condition of remembering that similar misfortunes have happened to or ours, or expecting them to happen in future".

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22 Rhetoric, II, 1363a 10.
23 Rhetoric, II, 1362b 25.
24 Rhetoric, II, 1365b 10.
25 Rhetoric, II, 1366a 1.
After mentioning the psychological situations in which we feel pity, Aristotle enumerates the things or 'evils' that cause pity. He says,

"All unpleasant and painful things excite pity if they tend to destroy and annihilate; and all such evils as are due to chance, if they are serious. The painful and destructive evils are: death in its various forms, bodily injuries and afflictions, old age, disease, lack of food. The evils due to chance are: friendlessness, scarcity of friends (it is a pityful thing to be torn away from friends and companions), deformity, weakness, mutilation; evil coming from a source from which good ought to have come; and the frequent repetition of such misfortunes".26

Aristotle then gives an example of the difference between pity and terror: "The people we pity are: those whom we know, if only they are not very closely related to us — in that case we feel about them as if we were in danger ourselves. For this reason Anaxim did not weep, they say, at the sight of his son being led to death, but did weep when he saw his friend begging (Hesod: iii.14): the latter sight was pitiful, the former terrible, and the terrible is different from the pitiful; it tends to excite our pity, and often helps to produce the opposite of pity".27

26 Rhetoric, II, 1386a 5.
27 Rhetoric, II, 1386a 15.
Aristotle comes very close to describing the pity that is caused by the great Greek tragedies when he says,

"Most piteous of all is it when, in such times of trial, the victims are persons of noble character: Whenever they are so, our pity is especially excited, because their innocence, as well as the setting of their misfortune before our eyes, makes their misfortunes seem close to ourselves." 23

This description of pity and fear in the 'Rhetoric' points out the interdependence of these two emotions. Some exegetes of Aristotle have discussed the relationship and the nature of these tragic feelings of pity and fear differently. For example, I. K. Richards gives an interesting interpretation when he says,

"Pity, the impulse to approach and Terror, the impulse to retreat, are brought in Tragedy to a reconciliation which they find nowhere else, and with them who knows what other allied groups of equally discordant impulses. Their union in ordered single response is the Otho-thesis by which Tragedy is recognized, whether Aristotle meant anything of this kind or not. This is the explanation of that sense of release, of release in the midst of stress, of balance and equipoise, given by Tragedy, for there is no other way in which such impulses, once awakened can be set at rest without suppression". 24

23 Rhetoric, II, 1336b 5.
We have seen that the aim of tragedy, according to Aristotle is to arouse the tragic emotions of pity and fear and thereby cause their 'Catharsis'. How this is to be achieved is explained by Aristotle in his description of the tragic plot and the tragic character. The best tragedy is that which arouses these emotions in their highest intensity, and these emotions are aroused by the plot which is 'an imitation of action'.

Aristotle says in the Sixth Chapter,

"The most important of the six is the combination of the incidents of the story. Tragedy is essentially an imitation not of persons but of actions and life, of happiness and misery. All human happiness or misery takes the form of action; the end for which we live is a certain kind of activity, not a quality, character gives us qualities but it is in our actions - what we do - that we are happy or the reverse. In a play accordingly they do not act in order to portray the characters; they include the characters for the sake of the action. So that it is the action in it, i.e. its fable or plot (muthos), that is the end and purpose of the tragedy; and the end is everywhere the chief thing", 30

Now what particular action is imitated in tragedy?

From the historical facts before him Aristotle surmises,

"We assume that, for the finest form of Tragedy, the plot must be not simple but complex; and further, that it must imitate actions arousing pity and fear, since that is the distinctive

30 Poet, 6, 145a 17.
function of this kind of imitation". 31

The literary principles of the tragic plot are outlined in the chapters 7-9 and they serve primarily as a foundation for the super-structure which Aristotle builds in Chapters 11-14 - the theory of the complex-plot. In Chapter 7 Aristotle considers the "proper construction of the Fable or Plot, as that is at once the first and the most important thing in tragedy. We have laid it down that a tragedy is an imitation of an action that is complete in itself, as a whole of some magnitude, for a whole may be of no magnitude to speak of. Now a whole is that which has beginning, middle and end. .... Again to be beautiful, a living creature, and every whole made up of parts, must not only present a certain order in its arrangements of parts, but also be of a certain definite magnitude." 32 Aristotle further adds that as "beauty is a matter of size and order". 33 "So a story of plot must be of some length, but of a length to be taken in by the memory". 34 He further defines this length as,

"a length which allows of the hero passing by a series of probable or necessary stages from misfortune to happiness, or from happiness to

31 Poet, 13, 1452 b 30.  
32 Poet, 7, 1450 b 22.  
33 Poet, 7, 1451 a 1.  
34 Poet, 7, 1451 a 7.
Then Aristotle adds, that the plot must have unity and "the unity of a plot does not consist, as some suppose in its having one man as its subject". The truth is that, just as in the other imitative arts one imitation is always of one thing, so in poetry the story, as an imitation of action, must represent one action, a complete whole, with its several incidents so closely connected that the transposal or withdrawal of any one of them will disjoin or dislocate the whole. In Chapter 10, Aristotle gives us the formalistic distinction between the two kinds of Plots. He says,

"Plots are either simple or complex, since the actions they represent are naturally of this two-fold description. The action, proceeding in the way defined, as one continuous whole, I call simple, when the change (Metabasis) in the hero's fortunes takes place without poripoty or Discovery; and complex, when it involves one or the other, or both. Those should each of them arise out of the structure of the plot itself, so as to be the consequences necessary or probable, of the antecedents." 

The last paragraph of Chapter 9 prepares the way for the concept of the complex plot. It derives the idea of the

35 Poet, 7, 1451a 10.
36 Poet, 8, 1451a 16.
37 Poet, 9, 1451a 30.
38 Poet, 10, 1452a 12.
complex plot, from the premise, that tragedy is an imitation of fearful and pitiable events - that is from its special emotional content. He says,

"Tragedy, however, is an imitation not only of a complete action, but also of incidents crossing pity and fear. Such incidents have the very greatest effect on the mind when they occur unexpectedly and at the same time in consequence of one another; there is more of the marvellous in them than then if they happened of themselves or by mere chance." 39

Pity and fear are most effectively aroused or rather fearful and pathetic happenings are most effectively brought about - when they come about unexpectedly but logically. This is one of the most pregnant remarks in the entire 'Poetics'. It is in fact the key to Aristotle's conception of the complex plot and his doctrine of 'hamartia', and thereby a key to his view of the tragic.

The complex plot involves one or both, Peripety or Discovery. Aristotle defines peripety as "A Peripety is the change from one state of things within the play to its opposite of the kind described, and that too in the way we are saying, in the probable or necessary sequence of events" 40 and 'discovery or recognition' as "A Discovery is, as the very

39 Foot, 9, 1452a 1.
40 Foot, 11, 1452a 22.
word implies, a change from ignorance to knowledge, and thus
to either love or hate, in the personages marked for good
or evil fortune." 41

Thus the complex-plot operates by means of peripety
and discovery both of which are the special varieties or
structural elements of the tragic 'change'. The complex
plot is more beautiful because it serves effectively its
function of arousing the emotions of pity and fear and thereby
to cause their Catharsis.

Aristotle then describes the men or the charac-
ters and the situations fit for the proper emotional effect of
tragedy. The qualities requisite to such characters are
deducted from the primary fact that the function of tragedy
is to produce the Catharsis of pity and fear. Aristotle
describes four types of situations where there are two types
of men — good and bad and two types of outcome from happiness
to unhappiness and from unhappiness to happiness. He says,

"There are three forms of plot to be avoided.
(1) A good man must not be soon passing from
happiness to misery, or (2) a bad man from
misery to happiness. The first situation is
not fear-inspiring or piteous, but simply
odious to us. The second is the most untragic
that can ever be; it does not have any of the
requisites of Tragedy; it does not appeal either
to the human feeling in us, or to our pity, or
to our fear. Nor on the other hand, should

41 Foot, 11, 1452 c 30.
An extremely bad man be soon falling from happiness to misery. Such a story may arouse the human feeling in us, but it will not move us to either pity or fear; pity is occasioned by undeserved misfortune, and fear by that of one like ourselves; so that there will be nothing either piteous or fear-inspiring in the situation. There remains, then, the intermediate kind of personage, a man not pre-eminentl virtuous and just, whose misfortune, however, is brought upon him not by vice and depravity but by some error of judgment, of the number of those in the enjoyment of great reputation and prosperity; e.g. Oedipus, Thyestes and the men of note of similar families.  

Here Aristotle explains which situations and characters are most effective in producing these emotions of pity and fear and thereby its catharsis. Aristotle points out that we feel pity and fear in accordance with two inter-locking judgements. (1) that the hero is like ourselves and (2) that he does not deserve his misfortunes.

But this is not enough. Aristotle further adds,

"The change in the hero's fortune must be not from misery to happiness, but on the contrary from happiness to misery; and the cause of it must lie not in any depravity, but in some great error on his part; the man himself being either such as we have described or better, not worse, than that."  

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42 "Poet, 13, 1452b 30 to 1453b 10.

43 To must take note of this fact that Aristotle describes the hero 'as one like ourselves': This points that Aristotle failed to see the difference between men in real life and the portrayed of men in a work of art, and the consequent difference in the nature of their emotions and feelings.

44 "Poet, 13, 1453c 12."
So not only that the hero does not deserve his misfortunes but still there is some 'hamartia' - flaw or error in his character which brings his downfall.

Aristotle then, again emphasizes what kind of incidents strike us as the most effective situation or so pitiful. He says,

"In a deed of this description, the parties must necessarily be either friends, or enemies, or indifferent to one another. Now when enemy does it on enemy there is nothing to move us to pity either in his doing or in his meditating the deed, except so far as the actual pain of the sufferer is concerned; and the same is true when the parties are indifferent to one another. Whenever the tragic deed, however, is done within the family - philia - blood-relationship when murder or the like is done or meditated by brother on brother, by son on father, by mother on son, or son on mother - these are the situations the poet should seek after".45

Thus Aristotle's hero is basically a good man. He is like ourselves. He does not entirely deserve his misfortunes. There is a flaw or error or a mistake in his character or action. He murders or mediates murder of a dear one - near relative - a blood kin and that is why his deed is full of horror and it brings his downfall.

Aristotle further adds some more requisites necessary in a tragic hero. He says,

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45 Poet, 14, 1453b 15.
"In the character, there are four points to aim at. First and foremost, that they shall be good. There will be an element of character in the play, if (as has been observed) what a personage says or does reveals a certain moral purpose, if the purpose so revealed is good. Such goodness is possible in every type of personage, even in a woman or a slave, though the one is perhaps an inferior, and the other a wholly worthless being. The second point is to make them appropriate. The character before us may be, any, any; but it is not appropriate in a female character, to be any, any, or clever. The third is to make them like the reality which is not the same as their being good and appropriate, in our sense of the term. The fourth is to make them consistent and the same throughout; even if inconsistency be part of the man before one for imitation as presenting that form of character, he should still be consistently inconsistent".46

Aristotle further says,

"The right thing, however, is in the characters just as in the incidents of the play to ever and ever always after the necessary or the probable; so that whenever such-and-such a personage says or does such-and-such a thing, it shall be the probable or necessary outcome of his character; and whenever this incident follows on that, it shall be either the necessary or the probable consequence of it".47

The above description, in short, of plot and characters of tragedy is more or less a description of the tragedies before him. Aristotle lived when these great

46 Post, 15, 1494\* 18.
47 Post, 15, 1494\* 33.
tragedies had already been written and performed on the Greek stage. It is obvious that he derives his notions from the actual evidence of great Greek tragedies before him. Thus we see in this discussion of the structure of the most effective tragic plot and characters, that the underlying principle or the motives of tragedy is the arousal of pity and fear, and thereby to cause their Catharsis. Everywhere in this presentation of the canon of construction, Aristotle keeps before us constantly and emphatically this prime function of tragic drama.