

## PLATO: THE PIONEER OF LITERARY CRITICISM

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### **Abstract:**

Plato, the great philosopher of ancient Greece flourished in the 4th century B.C. When he was young, he himself was a poet. When he came in touch with Socrates, he destroyed his poetic works and became a regular philosopher. There were two Platons inside him, Plato the philosopher and Plato the politician, When judged poetry from philosophic point of view, he gave priority to reality and declared poetry thrice removed from reality. When he judged political point of view he gave priority to morality and declared poetry as immoral and non conducive to promote moral character of people. In spite of his charges against poetry, he allows hymns of gods and praises of great heroes. Infact Plato was not an enemy of poetry but he was against the evils of poetry.

**Key Word:** Mimesis: imitation, Devine frenzy: inspiration, Transcendental: Reality of Idea

### **Introduction:**

#### **Plato: The first literary critic**

The ancient world of criticism began with Plato There are countless critical references scattered in different books poems, dramas, dialogues etc. Thus there are many lines of critical Significance in the epics of Homer, and the Frogs of Aristophenes has several passages of penetrating critical inquiry. However it was only with Plato that critical work became a vital force in the ancient world.

Plato was the first systematic literary critic who has put his ideas in a systematic way in his 'Dialogues'

#### **Plato's Career and works:-**

Plato was born probably in 427 BC. His parents were distinguished Athenians. When Plato was a young man he was introduced to Socrates. Plato used to write Poems but he destroyed his poetic works under the influence of Socrates and became actively interested in Philosophy and Mathematics. He travelled extensively

and took part in several Athenian wars. Plato founded his Academy in 387 BC and taught his pupils Philosophy, Mathematics, Natural Sciences\_ Jurisprudence and Practical legislation. Plato wrote the following great books.

- (1) The Dialogues, Ion
- (2) Lysis
- (3) Gorgias
- (4) Symposium
- (5) Phaedrus and
- (6) Republic

He was highly honoured by his countrymen. He died in 347 BC. Plato's views on art and literature are scattered all over his works in the form of stray references. His Ion and Republic (Book X) are the two works in which he has expressed his views on these subjects forcefully and at length. His views on:

- (a) Poetic inspiration
- (b) Imitation and
- (c) His condemnations of poetry are not only interesting but also of great historical importance.

#### **Plato's theory of Poetic Inspiration:-**

As regards his poetic views on Poetic inspiration, they have been expressed most poetically and at great length in his Ion, As Plato says

“For the poet is a light and winged and holy thing and there is no invention in him. until he has been inspired and is out of his senses and the mind is no longer in him . When he has not attained, this state he is powerless and unable to utter his oracles”.

Many are noble works in which poets

speak concerning the actions of men. but like yourself when speaking about Homer, they do not speak of them by rules of art, not by art does the Poet sing but by power divine. Had he learned by rules of art he would have known how to speak not of one thing only but of all, and therefore God takes away the minds of poets and uses them as his minister as he also uses diviners and holy Prophets in order that we who hear them may know them to be speaking not of themselves who utter these priceless words, in the state of unconsciousness, but that God himself is speaker and through them he is conversing with us.

This is the most elaborate presentation in ancient world of notion of poetry as pure inspiration, a notion which survives even today with modification. The poet speaks divine truth; he is divinely inspired like Prophets. Whatever The poet writes, he writes under some “divine frenzy”. Poetry is not a craft- which can be learnt and practised at will; it is the result of inspiration, the divine speaking through the poet. Plato here says nothing about poet's lying and it would seem that he praises poetry as being divine truth.

However, the implication of the view is that poetry is nothing rational and that is why even the poets themselves do not often understand what they write in a moment of divine frenzy. Therefore poetry cannot be relied upon as it is not the result of conscious, considered judgement but an outcome of the irrational and

impulsive within us. Further, poets may express divine truth, but often by their very nature, such truths remain beyond the comprehension of ordinary mortals.

### **Plato's theory of Mimesis**

Plato was an idealist. He believed that Ideas alone are true and real and earthly things - beauty, goodness, justice - are mere types of copies of ideal beauty goodness etc, which exist in heaven. He regards imitation as mere mimesis or representation of these Ideal Forms and not expression which is creative. Republic Book X gives us a reasoned and elaborate statement of his views on imitation. To put it briefly, if true reality consists of the Ideas of things, of which individual objects are but reflections or imitations and so producing something which is still further removed from ultimate transcendental reality. David Daiches rightly says." It is significant that Plato develops this argument first with reference to the painter and that he takes a simple representational, view of painting. Here the representational view of painting is an imitation of a specific object or groups of objects. and if it is nothing but that if reality lies not in individual object but in general Ideas and Forms, From Philosophic point of view whose main interest lies in apprehending reality, the painter is not doing anything particularly valuable- though on the other hand, what he is doing is not necessarily vicious. Just as the painter only imitates what he sees and does not know how to make or use what he sees. He could paint a bed but not make it. So the poet imitates

reality without necessarily understanding it. Thus all arts are imitations of imitations and are thus not once or twice but thrice removed from truth. They are also the products is futile ignorance. The man who imitates or describes or represents without really knowing what he is imitating, is demonstrating both his lack of useful purpose and his lack of knowledge.

Such is Plato's theory of Imitation. It did not occur to him that the painter by painting the ideal object could suggest ideal form and thus make direct contact with reality in a way denied to ordinary people. Moreover, he did not realize that what the Painter Paints is not the exact production of reality. It is the artist's impression of reality and not a mechanical representation of it.

"Poetry is not servile imitation or; copying it is creative. It is the Poet's view of reality that we get from him, and not reality itself. Plato failed to understand the nature of poetic truth or truth of Idea"

### **Plato's Utilitarian View of Poetry**

Plato himself was a teacher, he had his own Academy to which pupils came from distant parts of the country and his ideal was to turn out young men of well formed personalities fit to become the leaders and rulers of an Ideal state. In order to assess correctly Plato's theory of poetry and his attack on it, we must remember that the aim of his literary criticism is frankly utilitarian, that educating the youth and moulding them in to good citizens of an

ideal state. It is from this Practical point of view that he judges. poetry and finds it wanting and hence he attacks on poetry.

### **Contemporary Social Conditions**

In order to understand Plato's views on Poetry, it is essential to know the contemporary states of affairs in Athens.

(1) It was a time of political decline and dissolution. Education was in a sorry state. The epics of Homer formed essential part of school curriculum. They were honoured by the Greeks almost like the Bible. But in Homer there are many stories which represent Gods in unfavourable light. They are often presented as revengeful, lustful and waging war with other Gods. So they were the common objects of hostile criticism on the parts of the philosophers and educationists. Allegorical interpretations of these stories considered unconvincing and difficult to Understand

(2) Courage, heroism, magnificence, skill in the use of arms were the virtues prized highest by the Greeks. Their conception of Virtue was different from the later Christian conception.

(3) The wonderful flowering time of Greek art and literature was immoral, corrupt, and degenerated. Poetry was decadent and so was the object of much hostile criticism.

(4) This degeneration had resulted in

much heart searching and reflection. As a Result Philosophers and orators were regarded as leading spirits. They were regarded as superior to poets and artist and so to some were inclined to assign to them a higher status. Confusion prevailed in all spheres of life, intellectual, moral, political and educational. There was a constant debate between the Philosophers and poets regarding their respective significance.

### **Plato's charges on Poetry**

#### **(1) Attack on moral ground**

Plato's attack on poetry must be judged with reference to its Political and social context for all his efforts were devoted to staying the deterioration of character and to the restoring of health in both individual and the state. He judges poetry from this point of view. He finds poetry and drama lacking in this respect and therefore attacks them on moral, emotional and intellectual grounds. On moral ground he attacks them as follows.

(a) Poetry and drama are not conducive to social morality as poets pander to the popular taste and narrate tales of man's pleasant vices. This has a demoralising effect. This is more so in the case with of drama which depends entirely on popular patronage.

(b) Poets tell "lie's about gods! Gods and great heroes descended from the Gods are represented as corrupt, immoral, dishonest, indeed subject

to all the faults and vices of common humanity, even by Homer. They, thus, deprave public taste and morality and militate against reverence for Gods. Works of poets, like Homer must not be prescribed for school study for this reason. Children tend to imitate doings of Gods and other heroes as told them by their mothers. They fashion their own conduct on what they read. As regards the allegorical interpretation of poetry say the tales of Homer; Plato argues that the hidden meaning, if there is any such, is certainly beyond the reach of the young. Homer, therefore, cannot be suitable medium of education. Philosophy alone is the proper subject of study.

- (c) Drama is even more harmful. Judgement in dramatic matter is left to many, and the result is lawlessness and licence both in theme and expression. Poets and dramatists appeal to the baser instincts of men, their love is of the sensation and melodramatic. The vulgar and morbid is thus fostered and a “sort of evil theocracy has taken place of old aristocracy with disastrous consequences to national well being”.

#### **Plato’s attack on emotional ground**

Plato also criticises poetry on emotional ground. He brings out some inherent weaknesses in poetry and drama as following:

- (a) Poets are ‘divinely inspired.’ It means that they do not compose poetry as

craft but by virtue of some impulse of mysterious, non rational kind coming from super natural sources outside their own personality. They utter unconsciously what the Muse impels them to say: like fountains, they allow to flow out freely what comes to it. Hence their pronouncements are unreliable and uncertain. The inspiration may cease at any moment. There might be some truths in them, for they are divinely inspired but such partial and imperfect truths must be carefully examined. Such truths can be no substitute for knowledge based on reason.

Moreover their meaning is not always clear. They are often full of obscurities and contradictions. The poets with their emotional frenzies and lack of moral restraint can afford no safe guidance, moral or intellectual.

- (b) The Poets cannot often themselves explain what they write for their frenzy is non rational. Allegorical interpretations may be clever but they are useless as they are beyond the reach of the young and the immature. Allegorical expressions cannot justify even stories of baneful nature. Atkins rightly says that “In poetry he saw something less than the whole of wisdom, a wisdom moreover that was uttered vaguely and obscurely and that rested on no sure foundation.

- (c) Except lyric poetry which is purely narrative, all other poetry- epic,

tragedy and comedy-is imitative wholly or partially and all imitative poetry according to Plato is pernicious. In imitative poetry, the poet and the reader as well, identifies himself completely with the fictitious character of poetry and such absorption in other personalities is weakening and unhealthy. It enfeebles character and personality and inspires the single mindedness and integrity of individual. Imitation soon becomes the second nature and the actor who imitates tends to behave like the object of his imitation. Thus one who imitates a female part tends to grow effeminate. Imitation will make him cowardly, knavish or clownish if such roles are imitated.

(d) It is easier to imitate the lower or baser part of the soul that is the passionate element. Plato divides the soul into three Parts

(1) Rational (2) spirited (3) desirous or appetitive- and such imitation of the baser non-rational elements gives greater pleasure at the moment. Hence the poets whether epic, tragic or comic abound in the vulgar, the sensational and corrupt. Reason is kept in abeyance and emotions are given the full sway. People gave way to emotional disturbances of which they should be ashamed in real life. Poetry thus has a debilitating effect. It leads to loss of balance with feelings unrestrained by either reason of principle. He condemns poetry in

Republic X for the poets" feed and water the passions instead of drying them up and let them rule instead of ruling them as they ought to be ruled, with a view to happiness and virtue of mankind.

(e) In Republic X there is a discussion of the emotions pity and grief. These emotions should be restrained but in tragedy we give an uncontrolled outlet to these emotions and thus play a woman's part .Now pity and grief are gentle, humane emotions not violent and antisocial like sex and revenge. Plato is against not only to violent and anti-social emotions but to all emotions as such.

#### **Plato's attack on Intellectual ground:-**

Plato attacks poetry on intellectual grounds as well. Poets have no knowledge of truth. They simply imitate the appearance and not the truth of things, illusion instead of reality. poets like painters imitate the surface or the superficial aspects of things. Beyond the world of senses, there is another world, the world of ideal reality where concepts like truth, virtue, beauty etc exist in an ideal form. The phenomenal world is a mere illusion, a reflection or shadow of the Ideal world. The poets have no knowledge of reality; they simply imitate the shadowy or illusionary. Poetry is thrice removed from reality. it cannot be a source of Knowledge and truth. It can tell us nothing about essential reality.

#### **Plato's attack on utilitarian ground:-**

According to Plato, Poetry is the product of futile ignorance. The poet who imitates without really knowing what he imitates, is demonstrating both his lack of useful purpose and his lack of knowledge. Plato says “ there are three arts which are concerned with all things, one which we uses another which we make and a third which we may imitate them”.

The poet stands the lowest, for neither does he use nor does he make, he merely imitates. “Poetry can serve no useful practical purpose; it must not be a part of school curriculum”

He ends his charges against poetry by saying that in ideal state “no poetry should be admitted save hymns to the gods and the praise of famous men” The poets are to be honoured but they should be banished from his ideal state.

### **Conclusion:-**

Thus Plato is the pioneer in literary criticism. “with him begins that larger and more philosophical criticism which aimed at viewing literature in relation to life and at arriving if possible at the innermost laws of its being” (Atkins)

He was the first critic to recognize the mysterious power of poetry, its divinity its vitality and its power of communicating truths. He regards poetry as an influence moulding character rather than as a means of imparting moral instruction and doctrines. He believes in art and morality rather than in art for art’s sake.

As Atkins says “With him literary theory really begins, he set men thinking, he gave inspiration and direction to critical effort and at the same time he supplied ideas for generations to come. It was in this way that he made later criticism possible”. Many of his utterances are of challenging nature and thus he gave a stimulus to literary criticism. His Influence has been subtle and enduring more so because of the grace and beauty of his language. His glowing fancy, his idealism, the subtle irony and his humorous style are beyond praise.”  
The very dart of his writing is Gold”

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