

Literary Theory and Literary Criticism
Prof. Aysha Iqbal
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras

Lecture - 05
Part – A
Classical Theory

Welcome to this lecture on Classical Theory and we trace its origins to classical Athens. Now, classical Athens is generally regarded as a period between 507 to 400 BC, it was a democratic city state, there were three developments that profoundly influenced the nature of literature and criticism. So, what were these three developments? The first was the evolution of the polis or city state, when Aristotle defined man as a political animal, it was this structure that he had in mind of city state polis, the concept of democracy, etcetera.

Even the internal structure of drama was influenced by the ideal of the polis. For example, the chorus, the chorus is generally regarded as the representative of the community or polis, whether it is a chorus in a group or a single choric character. It is clear that literature and poetry had a public and even political function which was largely educational. The second political development was the challenge posed by Sparta which was the other major power in the Greek world.

So, Athens and Sparta, the struggle between the two powers was political, as well as ideological. While Athens tried to establish their brand of democracy everywhere, Sparta tried to establish their own style of government and policy. The issues raised by the conflict between Athens and the Sparta shaped Plato's thoughts in many ways including his literary theory. Now, this is what we are going to talk about today, in classical theory Plato and Aristotle at the center.

(Refer Slide Time: 02:37)



So, classical Athens we have already talked about period is between 507 to 400 BC Plato. Now, Plato and Aristotle and their concepts especially Plato is associated with forms, poetry, representation, allegory of caves and then we will also talk about Aristotle his theory of mimesis and drama. We will also be talking about Aristophanes comedy, the Greek playwright Aristophanes his comedy, the frogs and the way the two great Greek dramatists, Aeschylus and Euripides make an appearance in the frogs and in one in what context.

So, we are taking about the Greek police state, the conflict between the ideological political conflict between Athens and Sparta. And let us talk about Panhellenism which was the third factor that shape the evolution of literature in classical Greeks. Now, Panhellenism is referred to as the development of certain literary ideals in standards among the leads of the various city states of Greece. A major consequence of Panhellenism was their standardization of literature and literary ideals. It also led to the establishment of a certain group of canonical text into the status of classics.

And one major offshoot of Panhellenism was the development of the concept of imitation or mimesis into a concept of authority. So, all this leads us to arrive at certain conclusions what are these. So, the idea is that from the times of Homer, Homer who wrote the mortal epics Iliad and the odyssey. So, from the times of Homer poetry had

acquired an increasing authority and it has found its place into a canon of important text, it has also acquired a prominent educational role.

So, the assumption was that poetry presented a vision of the world, not just this world. But, also the other world including the Gods and also poetry influenced the ethics and morality that was true, that was believed to be true. Now, Plato's opposition to poetry sets this stage for subsequent literary theory and literary criticism. As you would know that this vision that whatever poets and poetry represent is true, it has to be taken at its face value, this idea this notion was challenged by Plato.

And therefore, here we are interested in his theory of poetry which has come to set the stage, which has influenced subsequent literary theory and literary criticism and thoughts. At this point, I would like to introduce you to Aristophanes and his comedy, the frogs. Now, the play relies by the way the play was written in 405 BC and the play relies on the notion on the assumption that poetry can produce an ethical effect, there it is a wonderfully comic play which discusses who is the greater playwright.

The classic playwright is Aeschylus or the more according to those times, the more recent Euripides. So, who is the better the greater of the two, so the idea itself suggests that the frogs dealt with the problems of making a literary judgment and it is sought of a stages, a contest between two literary theories as represented by two very distinct playwrights, Aeschylus and Euripides.

So, these two poets are competing here and Aeschylus represents the more traditional values of the ancient era, while Euripides is the voice of a new generation which is more democratic, more secular. The frog reveals that for the ancient Greek's poetry was an important element in the educational process and its influence as I have already talked about extended over the moral thoughts, the morality, religion and the entire sphere of civic responsibility. So, poets and poetry had an important role to play in all these realms.

Now, this was the significance attached to poetry and poets, now we come to Plato. Plato the great philosopher and thinker who lived between 428 to 347 BC. Now, Plato is widely believed to be the philosopher, who laid the foundation of western philosophy, it is often said that western philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato, who raised

questions such as how can we define goodness and virtue, how do we arrive at truth and knowledge.

So, these are the questions that positive, Plato also asked what is the ideal political state, and most importantly to what we are doing in relation to our course of what use are literature and other arts. So, Plato was a disciple of Socrates, he came from another Socratic family and at age 20. Like, many other young men at his times he fell under the or he came under the spell of Socrates. After Socrates death Plato founded an academy with a capital A in Athens.

Now, most of Plato's philosophy is expounded in dialogue form using a dialectical method of perusing truth by a systematic questioning of received ideas and opinions. Now, some of the later dialogues that is Plato's thoughts, they examined problems of an internal interrelations between the forms and here again forms with a capital F forms as well as examining questions of knowledge science, happiness, political issues and also moral and religious issues.

Now, one interesting thing about the dialogues is that the figure of Socrates appears there and he seems to change from a representation of the historical Socratics in the early dialogues to a mouth piece for Plato in the middle dialogues and later on he appears as a minor character in the later dialogues. So, what are forms coming to forms, this is a the philosophy Plato's philosophy in his so called middle period which is based on his theory of forms. Plato's tells us that knowledge is possible only if there are absolute and changeless objects of knowledge and these are forms or ideal realities, such as justice itself, beauty itself and equality itself.

(Refer Slide Time: 12:14)

“Theory of Forms” explained

The empirical world for Plato does not represent ‘real’ knowledge. The appearance of things is continually changing. The observed world is not truly dependable as a source of knowledge. The only way to arrive at true knowledge is to apply the principles of pure reason in order to understand the world of the forms. This is illustrated in one of Plato’s Dialogues where Socrates leads a boy through a sequence of logical reasoning, resulting in the boy understanding the problem. The purpose is to suggest that the boy has an intrinsic understanding of the problem, but is unable to use this until he is helped to do so by Socrates.

So, the empirical world for Plato does not represent real knowledge. The appearance of things is continually changing, the observed world is not truly dependable as a source of knowledge. The only way to arrive at true knowledge is to apply the principles of pure reason in order to understand the world of the forms. This is illustrated in one of Plato's dialogues where Socrates leads a boy through a sequence of logical reasoning, resulting in the boy understanding the problem.

The purpose is to suggest that the boy has an intrinsic understanding of the problem, but is unable to use this until he is help to do, so by Socrates. Plato seems to conceive the forms as ideal exemplars that provide standards of judgment by Plato's time it is important to note that the theatre had become the primary medium of poetry and it also included the components of epic, as well as lyric.

Tragedy too had come to acquire a very prominent position, it is also at this point interesting to note Socratic's beliefs on poets and poetry and according to Socrates a poet is a light and wing thing and holly and never able to compose until he has become inspired and beside himself and reason is no longer in him. So, notice this there is no reason, there is no rationality in poetry and in it is creator for Socrates even literary criticism is irrational.

Now, against all this background, against this kind of a historical background you know you have the frogs where poetry is really given an exalted position and then you have

Socrates and where do we fit Plato's concepts and theories of a poetry. So, we have to understand that Plato had written a number of great books for the purpose of this course for our specific purpose, we are going to be concerned only with his the republic which was written in 360 BC.

So, Plato's theory of poetry is largely included in the republic, the main subject here is whether it is best to be just or unjust. Especially, since the latter you know the idea of being unjust seems to profit more or it is more profitable than the former. Now, in book three of the republic, there is an exchange between Socrates and Adeimantus, Adeimantus is Plato's brother, his oldest brother and Plato starts by discussing stories of the gods and suggest that in the ideal city or republic.

Children should hear only good fables that poets compose and not the bad, they should not be exposed to the tales of how gods plot and fight, because this will encourage them to behave in the same manner. So, children according to Plato must learn that citizens should love one another and poets should set a modeling which; obviously, according to Plato they were doing. So, for Plato the purpose of a stories is to implant virtue and bravery is one such virtue for Plato any poetry that weakens the warriors no should be banned and these are a strong words.

The idea is if a hero weeps at the death of a loved one someone his close to him, then young men would follow his example and moaned freely without any same without inhibitions. So, a poet has a responsibility in other words which he was not fulfilling and if that is not happening, then poetry should be banned from the republic altogether, it is also interesting to note that this is perhaps one of the earliest examples of literary criticism and it is contained in a book which is more about political theory, the republic continuing Plato also mentions the other names different literary genres.

So, narrative is the first one where the poet tells a story in his own voice, imitation this is tragedy and comedy. And here for Plato the poet pretends that someone else is speaking, you see imitation and epic this is a mixture of narrative and imitation. So, these are the categories, these are the literary categories according to Plato. Plato then reflects over which form would be most beneficial to the well being of the republic.

Now, this is important that you know there should be some kind of a use of poetry, it should not be what later we come to term as arts for art's sake, just it is a poetry and it is

a beautiful work of art. So, it should be that was not the case according to Plato, who believed that poetry should have a kind of a responsibility and it should be for the well being of the people of the republic.

So, in the ideal state, in the ideal city individuals trained to perform one particular function and if they are moved to imitate others by being exposed to poetry. So, if they are moved to imitate others, who perform different functions, then their expertise will disappear it will vanish. So, that should not happen for Plato, the poet cannot even emitted one thing well consequently it is impossible for anyone to improve themselves by listening to poetry particularly drama.

So, Plato suggest that epic is more ethical than tragedy or comedy, because it offers less opportunity for imitation as compared to drama. Now, Plato's greatest fear as he expresses in the republicans that if poets are allowed to operate freely, they will produce inappropriate models and this is important to note who what are these inappropriate models. So, we have a women we have slaves and we have drunks and cowards and if people watch these people playing such a roles, then people the general public may be tempted to imitate these people who are very inferior models.

Therefore, in order to avoid such an eventuality banning all poets from the public is the only solution and according to Plato, there are very few high minded poets and except them all other should be banned or banished from the republic. So, this brings us to some very important key ideas that for Plato, poetry performs a functions in two ways, first it is a way of shaping public behavior and second it is a means of communicating knowledge.

Plato concludes that poetry neither improves nor enlightens us, I will repeat Plato concludes that poetry can neither improve nor enlighten us. The reason lies poetry's mode of expression that is imitation, Plato argues that poetry is a poor copy of this world with itself is a poor copy of a perfect world. So, copy of a copy this is a very important phrase from given to us by Plato and several 1000s years down the line, we also come we keep coming across this particular phrase in several context.

Now, Plato's theory of poetry tells us that it cannot tell the truth, because after all it is a imitation copy of a copy. And, but more importantly it includes a very new element into criticism which is how well poetry represents the world. So, therefore, I have highlighted

this term representation, this is important this brings me to Plato's very famous allegory that is his allegory of caves, where Plato likens he compares people intuited in the theory of forms to he according to him, these people who are not well versed in the theory of forms.

They are like prisoners chained in a cave unable to turn their heads, all they can see is the wall of the cave and behind them burns a fire between the fire and the prisoners there is a parapet along which puppeteer can walk. The puppeteer's who are behind the prisoners hold a puppets that cast shadows on the wall of the cave. Now, the prisoners are unable to see these puppets, the real objects that pass behind them, what they actually see and hear other shadows and echo's cast by objects that they do not see.

For Plato such prisoners would mistake appearances for reality, they would think the things they see on the wall that is the shadows, were real and they would never know the real causes of the shadows. So, what is Plato trying to prove, the entire point is that the prisoners are mistaken for they would be taking, the terms in their language to refer to the shadows that passed before their eyes, rather to the real things that cast their shadows.

So, what actually Plato is trying to do is to give us the concept of representation and imitation and all this leads us to a sustained discussion of mimesis which we will be doing in a subsequent lectures.

(Refer Slide Time: 25:15)

Assignment

- Name any one play by Euripides.
- Name any one play by Aeschylus.
- Who wrote the play Oedipus?
- Mention any 3 works by Plato.

So, before we wind up for today I would like to draw your attention to this particular assignment please submit it by the deadline. So, this is what these are the questions and I want you to post the answers, name any one play by Euripides, we have already been introduced to Euripides also name any one play by Aeschylus. Third question who wrote the play Oedipus and the last question mention any 3 works by Plato, you already know one work the republic and I want two more names. So, mention any 3 works by Plato.

Thank you very much.