

PLATO

Plato was the first scholastic philosopher who had given a systematic shape to criticism. He lived in the fourth century B.C. He was the most celebrated disciple of Socrates. By his time the glory of Athenian art and literature began to fade and was taken by philosophy and oratory. The great philosophers of the period discussed a great variety of matters including the value of literature of society and its nature and functions. The fourth century B.C. was an age of critical enquiry and analysis.

Plato was not a professed critic of literature and there is no single work that contains his critical observations. His ideas are expressed in several books, chief among them being the "Dialogues" and the "Republic"

PLATO'S VIEW OF ART:

Plato's view of art is closely related to his theory of ideas. Ideas, he says are the ultimate reality and things are conceived as ideas before they take practical shape as things. The idea of everything is therefore its original pattern, and the thing itself its copy. As copy ever falls short of the original, it is once removed from reality. Art – literature, painting, sculpture- reproduces but things as mere pastime, the first in words, the next in colours and the last in stone. So it merely copies a copy; it is twice removed from reality. Art takes men away from reality. The productions of art helped neither to mould character nor to promote the well-being of the state-. He was however not aware of its potentialities for good. Rightly pursued, it could inculcate a love for beauty and for whatever is noble in character and life.

PLATO'S ATTACK ON POETRY

In Plato's opinion, poetry cannot shape the character of the individual nor can it promote the well-being of the state. It is a copy of the copy. It is twice removed from reality. He condemns poetry on three grounds.

1. Poetic inspiration
2. The emotional appeal of poetry
3. Its non-moral character.

Poetic inspiration

The poet writes not because he has thought long over but because he is inspired. It is a spontaneous overflow or a sudden outpouring of the soul. No one can rely on such sudden outpourings. It might have certain profound truth, but it should be suspected to the test of reason. Then only it will be acceptable. Otherwise they are not safe guides. So they can't

be substitutes to philosophy which is guided by the cool deliberation. Poetry, on the other hand, is created by the impulse of moment. So it cannot make a better citizen or a Nation.

The Emotional Appeal of Poetry

Poetry appeals to the emotions and not to the reason. Its pictures of life are therefore misleading. Poetry is the product of inspiration. Hence it cannot be safe guide as reason. Plato illustrates this with reference to the tragic poetry. In tragedy, there is much weeping and wailing. This moves the heart of the spectators. It is harmful in its effect. If we let our own pity grow on watching the grief of others, it will not be easy to restrain it in the case of our own sufferings. Poetry feeds the passions and let them rule us.

Its non-moral character

Poetry lacks concern with morality. It treats both virtue and vice alike. Virtue often comes to grief in literature. Many evil characters are happy and many virtuous men are seen unhappy. It is seen that wickedness is profitable and that honest dealing is harmful to one's self. Their portraits of Gods and Heroes are also objectionable. Gods are presented as unjust or revengeful or guilty and heroes are full of pride, anger, grief and so on. Such literature corrupted both the citizen and the state.

THE FUNCTIONS OF POETRY:

Plato says that although poetry pleases, mere pleasure is its object. Art cannot be separated from morals. Truth is the test of poetry. Pleasure ranks low in Plato's scale of values. A poet is a good artist in so far as he a good teacher. Poetic truth must be the ideal forms of justice, goodness and beauty.

HIS COMMENTS ON DRAMA

Plato's observation on poetry is equally applicable to drama. But he says a few more things about drama in particular.

Its appeal to the Baser Instincts

Drama is meant to be staged. Its success depends upon a heterogeneous multitude. In order to please them all, the dramatist often introduces what they like. This is likely to lead to the arousal of baser instincts. It may affect morality. Hence such plays should be banished.

Effects of Impersonation

By constantly impersonating evil characters, the actors imbibe vices. This is harmful to their natural self. Acting, says Plato is not a healthy exercise. It represses individuality and leads to the weakness of character. However, Plato admits that if the actors impersonate virtuous characters, the same qualities are stimulated in them by the force of habit. These tragedies that represent the best and the noble are to be encouraged.

Tragic and Comic pleasure

Plato tries to answer what constitutes tragic pleasure. But his explanation is not scientific. He says that human nature is a mixture of all sorts of feelings such as anger envy

fear, grief etc.; these feelings are painful by themselves. But they afford pleasure when indulged in excess. It pleases a man to be angry or to go on weeping, otherwise he would not do so. In comedy, the pleasure takes the form of laughter when we see a coward behaving like a brave man, a fool as a wise man, a cheat as an honest person and so on. The source of laughter is the incongruity between what he is and what he pretends to be. Such a pleasure is malicious as it arises from the weakness of a fellow man. We derive pleasure from such a man only if we love him. If he were one whom we hate, he fails to arouse any laughter but contempt. Plato says: "no character is comic unless he is lovable".

Observations on Style.

Plato lays down a few principles of good speech. They apply equally to good writing. The first essential of a speech is a thorough knowledge of the subject matter. The speaker should also know the art of speaking. The presentation must have an organic unity. i.e. it must have a beginning, middle and an end. The speaker must also have a thorough knowledge of human psychology. These principles are equally true in the case of written word.

The Value of Plato's Criticism

Plato is a discerning critic in both poetry and drama. In his attack on poetry, he exhibits a thorough insight into their nature, function and method. He insists on truth as the test of poetry. He says that poetry is twice removed from reality. He disapproves of the non-moral character of poetry. He makes a distinction between the function of poetry and that of philosophy. He also derides the emotional appeal of poetry. He makes valuable observations on the source of comic and tragic pleasure. He was also, perhaps, the first to see that all art is imitation of mimesis. He divides poetry into the dithyrambic or the purely lyrical, the purely mimetic or imitative such as drama and the mixed kind such as the epic. He makes valuable observation on style of good speech and writing.