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## From Catharsis To Crisis: The Evolving Face Of Tragedy

Dr. Nishi Tak

Assistant Professor (Guest Faculty)

Government College Kudi Bhagtasani, Jodhpur (Raj.)

**Abstract:** Tragedy is one of the most popular forms of drama. The process of showcasing human vulnerability and emotional turmoil appeals to the audiences' sensitivity, accounting for the genre's popularity. It has overcome the tests of time by continuously evolving its subjects, characters, environment, as well as the challenges that it portrays. The present paper traces this multifaceted journey of tragedy with its ancient Greek origins to the diverse dynamics of the modern world, from power struggles, murder conspiracies, to existential crisis and emotional vulnerability. The research aims to analyze major shifts perceived in its form, the broader approach in the themes, and the progression in character palette. It illuminates the enduring power of this dramatic style to create a panorama of suffering and loss, to reflect on the human understanding of these emotions and shape them in a manner to be perceived as epitome of emotionality across millennia.

**Index Terms** - Tragedy, Ancient Greek Drama, Modern Drama, Aristotle, Suffering, Existential Crisis

### I. INTRODUCTION

"You that live in my ancestral Thebes, behold this Oedipus,- him who knew the famous riddles and was a man most masterful; not a citizen who did not look with envy on his lot- see him now and see the breakers of misfortune swallow him!/Look upon that last day always. Count no mortal happy till he has passed the final limit of his life secure from pain."

- Sophocles *Oedipus Rex*

"To be, or not to be—that is the question/ Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer/ The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,/ Or to take Arms against a Sea of troubles,/ And by opposing end them: to die, to sleep."

-William Shakespeare *Hamlet*

"I'm also like a half-drowned woman on a wreckage — no one to mourn for, no one to care for."

-Henrik Ibsen *A Doll's House*

"The tears of the world are a constant quantity. For each one who begins to weep, somewhere else another stops."

-Samuel Beckett *Waiting for Godot*

All of the above statements carry the ethos of human suffering and the tragic reality of its cyclic nature. The dramatists encapsulate the perennial pains and agonies of the world that drown the minds and souls of all- mighty or feeble, king or pauper, man or woman. Haunted by the questions of existence and its purpose in a world wrought with pain and conflict, the frailty of human life becomes apparent. Tragedies become realistic with their raw display of emotional turmoils and vulnerabilities. In reflecting the despondent nature of suffering and its universality it provides its audience with a chance to face their own ghosts and outlive the experience. This core of human emotions bestows upon tragedies with a quality of eternalness, never losing appeal across millennia. Let's explore this form as it evolves.

## II. TRAGEDY: THE HIGHEST FORM OF DRAMA

Drama has been a source of entertainment from the ancient times given to the fact that it is a representation of human behavior and psyche. The immersive experience for the audience adds to the charm and appeal of this form. It generates a connection between the actor and the audience by stimulating a bond rooted in a shared experience. Drama essentially provides its viewer to be a part of its characters' journeys and undergo the emotional turmoil along with them. By being a reflection of human action and emotion, drama provides a mirror to society. It explores various temperament in varied situations and presents a study of character through their actions.

Tragedy has been a popular form of drama and considered the most highly developed form of poetry by Aristotle. His study of the great Greek tragedies written by the dramatists Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides enable him to define tragedy as, "the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in appropriate and pleasurable language; in a dramatic rather than narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, and wherewith to accomplish a catharsis of these emotions" (Aristotle 544). This definition is one of the most powerful, perceptive and influential critical ideas in the history of literature and arts. The definition states the true purpose of a tragic drama, that is the achievement of catharsis, a process of purging oneself of all the suffering, anger and grief.

Apart from this Aristotle talks about six important elements of a tragedy, namely- plot, character, thought, diction, spectacle, and song. He firmly believed in arranging the incident in a logical manner that clearly defined the beginning, middle and end. Moreover, his intimation of a tragic hero constitutes certain qualities, including nobility of birth, virtuous but flawed, undergoing hamartia i.e., an error in judgment and as a consequence triggering peripeteia i.e., reversal of fortune to reach his tragic end. These Aristotelian principles hold true for all the Greek tragedies and the followers of the classics. However, the English dramatists did not strictly adhere to all of Aristotle's principles.

## III. RISE OF THE ELIZABETHAN TRAGEDY

The Medieval period does not hold account of any exceptional tragic work. Nevertheless, the Renaissance adored the form. Tragedy developed with an interplay between English and continental, medieval and classical imbibing it with traits of both classical as well as contemporary Italian and French drama. The major influence observed is that of the Roman writer Seneca. His artwork provided the model for poetic expressions, five act play with a complex plot and elaborate formal dialogue including the use of chorus.

Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton's *Gorboduc* (1562) is an earliest English example. The era also saw the development of the concept of Revenge Tragedy or Tragedy of Blood which derived from materials of murder, revenge, ghost, mutilation and carnage. Elizabethan dramatists usually represented on stage to satisfy the appetite of contemporary audiences for violence and horror. Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (1586), Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* (1592) are the tragedies associated with this category. Moreover, from this prototype came one of the greatest tragedies of all time – Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Noteworthy works also include John Webster's horror plays – *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The White Devil*.

Many of these dramas revolve around a protagonist who is exceptional in mind and character, yet fatally flawed in judgment, keeping with the Aristotelian idea of a tragic hero. A. C. Bradley in *Shakespearean Tragedy* observes, "when the prince is triumvir, or the general has a greatness and the dignity of its own. His fate affects the welfare of a whole nation or empire; and when he falls suddenly from the height of earthly greatness to the dust his fall produces a sense of contrast, of the powerlessness of man" (Bradley 10). However

Elizabethan dramatists are famous for the experimentation in their writings. The hero is not always the ideal man committing an error, as in *Macbeth* he is an ambitious man who becomes a murderer. Plus it is not always fate that leads to the downfall of the protagonist. Also interesting is the use of humorous characters, incidents or scenes which were relevant to the tragic plot, providing what was called a comic relief.

#### IV. A NOVEL PHENOMENON - DOMESTIC TRAGEDY AND PROBLEM PLAY

The Puritan regime saw a standstill in the development of drama at large, and Restoration was more focused on the comedies. It wasn't until the 18th c. that a new era began for tragedy. The focus shifted from the rich and elite to the lower- or middle-class protagonist suffering from common domestic disorder and inner turmoil in office. Thus, giving birth to the Bourgeois or Domestic Tragedy. Since then, most of the successful tragedies have been in prose and represent middle class working heroes and heroines.

It was not until the second half of the 19th c., with the plays of two great European writers – Henrik Ibsen from Norway, Anton Chekov from Russia and August Strindberg from Sweden that something of the vision returned to inspire the tragic theatre. These dramatists presented the conflict between the alienated individual characters, who aspire to some alternative world of the imagination, and narrow social conventions, designed to crush such aspirations. Henrik Ibsen wrote tragedies that revolve around issues of general social or political significance, creating the popular style of Problem Play. Often the dramatist managed to propose a solution to the problem which is at odds with prevailing opinion. In their analysis of *A Doll's House*, Fulsas and Tore reinterpret Nora's exit as a transformative act of self-realisation and rebellion, they assert, "Nora's exit in *A Doll's House* is a decisive turning point, both in Ibsen's career and, as it happened, in the history of modern drama." (Fulsas and Tore 82).

#### V. THE REALISTIC APPROACH OF MODERN TRAGEDY

Modern Drama is realistic in nature, and it is also observed in Tragedies. Realism was achieved with the reduced number of characters with a more active role. The use of bloodshed was brushed and off-stage death became popular like Joe Killer's death in *All My Sons*. Further, the aimed effect on the audience is one of compassionate understanding rather than of tragic pity and terror. Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is one of the more notable modern tragedies. Abbotson, in his book *Critical Companion to Arthur Miller*, discusses how Arthur Miller, in his seminal essay *Tragedy and the Common Man*, asserts that "the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy as kings were." (Abbotson 330). It relies for its tragic seriousness on the degree to which Willy Loman is representative of the ordinary man whose aspirations reflect the false values of a commercial society. As Willy Loman declares in the play: "I am not a dime a dozen! I am Willy Loman!" (Miller 114).

In Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*, the tragedy is rooted deep in American history. It depicts the Middle Passage, the voyage of slaves from Africa to America, telling the story of Brutus Jones who has survived black oppression to become a dictator himself. Glenda Frank in her review of the play writes,

The eight brief, expressionistic scenes tell the story of a charismatic Pullman porter with a shady past who has recreated himself as the dictator of a Caribbean paradise. We follow him as he flees for his life during a native revolt. Brutus Jones carries the burden of black oppression within him, ghosts he can't exorcise. He is O'Neill's *Macbeth*, a man of promise and valour who is killed by the silver bullets that reflect his greed and ambition. (Frank)

His tragedy lies in the fact that a person who could have lifted his race from the injustices and atrocities, was lost to a futile quest of power and greed.

#### VI. THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD AND EXPERIMENTATION IN TRAGEDY

Tragedy since World Wars have been innovative also in inclusion of elements of farce – deliberate absurdity, bawdy jokes, and highly improbable events. They are associated with the theatre of Absurd. They carry in them the trauma of alienation where the present is an unstable relation between people and things, and the future uncertain. Samuel Beckett in *Waiting for Godot* depicts the purposelessness of human life. The play is dominated by a sense of despair, thereby making it tragic even though farcical situations are used. Martin Esslin in his *The Theatre of the Absurd* observes:

“At first sight these plays do, indeed, confront their public with a bewildering experience, a veritable barrage of wildly irrational, often non-sensical goings-on that seem to go counter to all accepted standards of stage convention...in Beckett it is melancholic, colored by a feeling of futility born from the disillusionment of old age and chronic hopelessness” (Esslin 3-4).

The era also saw experimentation with new versions of ancient tragic forms. Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*, is an adaptation of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* is a tragic drama written in verse, like Greek tragedy but also incorporating elements of Miracle play and Morality play. Mark Houlahan speaks in his book *Postmodern Tragedy: Return to John Ford*

The terms “postmodern” and “tragedy” lie uneasily beside each other, suggesting a generic hybrid that, in strict accordance with key assumptions of postmodernism, ought not to exist. This is so for two main reasons. First, a key trend in postmodern thought in the humanities and social sciences has been to question the stability of the human subject, presenting human beings as radically dispersed, decentered, unfathomable. (Houlahan 257)

This quote highlights the uneasy coexistence of postmodernism and tragedy, as postmodern thought challenges the very foundations of individual identity and coherent narrative—both central to classical tragedy. In postmodernism, human beings are seen as fragmented, not unified, and meaning is often dispersed rather than concentrated. Hence, traditional tragic form struggles to survive in a world that questions stability, logic, and emotional continuity. It reflects a shift from personal fate to cultural disarray, where suffering no longer stems from moral flaw but from existential uncertainty. Tragedy has long since evolved from its classical form paving way for new thoughts and ideas of expression, treatment of the characters and plot, but its essence of serious thought remains intact.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

Tragedy, having taken root in the classical ideals of fate, morality, and catharsis, has lived a chequered and long path through the ages. From Greek tragedy's kings and deities to fragmented, uncertain figures of postmodern plays, it has ever re-invented itself to mirror each age's anxieties and ethos. What remains unchanged is a passionate engagement with the human condition—our fallibility, our suffering, and our compulsive questing for meaning in chaos. Whatever it is in the stern lament of Oedipus, in the existential stasis of Vladimir and Estragon, or in Willy Loman's unobtrusive despairing, tragedy is forever showing us unvarnished realities of existence. It no longer relies on greatness or exalted origins but dwells on mundane banality, absurdity, and monstrosity itself. Tragedy is not therefore moribund—its classical guise simply shed and re-emerging in innumerable manifestations which remind us inexorably and consistently that human suffering in all its hues is both ageless and profoundly universal.

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