

## PLATO VERSUS ARISTOTLE: THEORY OF IMITATION

**Richa Sharma**  
Ph.D. Scholar,  
University of Jammu,  
Jammu & Kashmir

### Abstract

Plato was the first philosopher who gave criticism a systematic shape. He was the guide and Aristotle, his disciple. Both gave Theory of Imitation but their views are different. Plato viewed imitation as mere mimicry or copying, while, Aristotle considered imitation as a re-creative activity. Plato equated poetry with painting, while, Aristotle equated it with music. Plato attacked poetry by naming it as the mother of all the lies, but, Aristotle defends it by saying that poetry is the representation of the ideal reality.

**Keywords-** Imitation, Disciple, Mimesis, Ideal, Poetry, Creation, Rhythm, Phenomenal

The term ‘Criticism’ is derived from the Greek word meaning ‘Judgement’. So, criticism is the exercise of judgement, and literary criticism is the exercise of judgement on works of literature. Literary criticism is the play of the mind on a work of literature. The function of literary criticism is to examine the excellencies and defects, and finally to evaluate the artistic worth of the works of literature.

**Types of Literary Criticism-** The various types of literary criticism are as under:

1. Judicial Criticism
2. Legislative Criticism
3. Evaluative Criticism
4. Theoretical Criticism
5. Historical Criticism
6. Comparative Criticism
7. Descriptive Criticism
8. Biological Criticism
9. Impressionistic Criticism
10. Textual or Ontological Criticism
11. Sociological and Marxist Criticism
12. Psychological Criticism
13. Archetypal Criticism

The above definition of literary criticism implies that criticism would follow creativity. In general, this is true, but in ancient Greece, literary creation and criticism began almost simultaneously. In the fifth and fourth centuries B.C., Athens, the capital of Greece, was the centre of literary creation and critical activity. This is the earliest phase of literary criticism and this phase is called as Hellenic or Greek phase of criticism. This phase forms the setting to all consequent literary inquiry. Plato and Aristotle were the most significant critics of this phase.

## PLATO

Plato, an Athenian, was born probably in 427 B.C. When he was a young boy, he came in contact with the great philosopher, Socrates. It is believed that he first started writing poems, but he destroyed his poems under the influence of Socrates and began to take keen interest in politics, mathematics and philosophy. Plato was the first philosopher-scholar who was responsible for giving a formal and systematic shape to literary criticism. Though his critical observations, specially his observations on art and literature are scattered all over his works but his *Ion* and *Republic* contain his chief ideas on these subjects forcefully and in great depth. Plato's- a) Theory of Imitation b) Theory of Inspiration c) Views on drama d) Condemnation of poetry, are of great historical significance.

## ARISTOTLE

Aristotle was born in 384 B.C. at Stagira. Later on, he came to Athens, when he was seventeen years old. He was a disciple of Plato and he stayed with him till his death in 347 B.C. Aristotle was a voluminous writer and credited about 400 volumes. He is regarded as the first scientific literary critic. His work, *The Poetics*, is a large manifestation of his literary criticism. *The Poetics* is a short treatise of twenty-six chapters and forty-five pages, and is divisible into six parts.

### Theory of Imitation: Plato versus Aristotle

The word 'Imitation' was first used by Plato in connection with poetry. Plato considered imitation as mere mimesis or servile copying. Aristotle was not credited with the invention of this term but he breathed into it a new elucidation, so that poetic imitation must not be considered as mere mimesis or copying, but is considered as an inventive, artistic and creative activity which leads the poet to draw his material from the physical world and create something new out of it.

As Plato was an idealist, so, he believed in ideas and his belief was that Ideas alone are true and real in this universe and other worldly things like beauty, honesty, justice, etc., are mere copies of ideal beauty, honesty, etc., which exist in heaven. So, he considered imitation as a mere copying of these Ideal Forms, which is not creative. But, Aristotle was of the view that it is the principle of Imitation which must be credited for uniting poetry with all the other fine arts. All the fine arts are based upon imitation because of which these fine arts are differentiated from other categories of useful arts. Plato firstly equated poetry with painting by taking just a simple, depicted, photographic and representational view of painting. A representational painting is just a mimesis or copying of any object or objects. So, from the philosophical point of view, the painter's task is not important, worthy and useful. Like a painter, who only paints or imitates what he sees but he is unable to make or use the same (he could paint a chair, but could not make it or use it), so the poet too imitates or copies reality without having an understanding of it. While, Aristotle had equated poetry with music and he was of the view that poetry is not a mere copying of the appearance of things, but it is the representation of the sensations, feelings, fervour, zeal and the reality ingrained within it. These things are also imitated by music, so poetry has close affinities with music rather than painting.

Further, Aristotle makes his point more clear by differentiating poetry from painting on the basis of differences in their medium, the manner or mode of imitation and the objects of imitation. The poet imitates through rhythm, words and harmony, and the painter imitates through colour and form. So, their medium of imitation entirely varies. But, the mode of imitation of the musician is rhythm and harmony. Therefore, it is clear that poetry is more akin to

music than painting. Furthermore, the poet imitates through narration, as in the Epic or he represents through action, as in drama. Thus, the manner of imitation differs in different kinds of poetry. If it imitates characters as better, then the dramatic poetry is considered as a tragedy and if, it imitates characters as worse, it is comedy. In this way, the manners of imitation are different in diverse literary types. Aristotle views poetry as imitation or depiction of men either on a heroic scale, i.e. better than they are in real life as portrayed in tragedy or worse than they are, as depicted in comedy; or it may imitate men as they actually are. It means that according to Aristotle's Theory of Imitation, poetry is not a mere representation of photographic realism. In this way, the poet selects and orders his material out of chaos and hence, re-creates reality. No doubt, the poetry is an imitation of the creative process of nature, but the objects of imitation are "the actions done by the human beings in all their manifestations" or "men in action". Further, the action may be outward (external) or it may be inward (internal) which takes place within the soul of the individual. Therefore, Aristotle brings emotions, sentiments, passions, human experiences and even everything within the scope of poetic imitation.

Plato condemned poetry on the ground that the poet just imitates reality without having any understanding or idea of truth behind it. Plato views that the phenomenal world is not real but, a mere imitation of the reality that persists in the mind of the Supreme. The poet imitates this imitation and hence, poetry is not once or twice but thrice removed from reality, which depicts the poet's lack of ignorance, knowledge and usefulness of purpose. Aristotle dismisses the charge of Plato against poetry and tells that poetry imitates the ideal reality embodied in every creature and object of this universe. The poet not only imitates the phenomenal world, but creates according to his thought of it. So, this creativity is the reason that an ugly object becomes a source of pleasure if it is well-imitated.

## CONCLUSION

Plato was the guide of Aristotle and he had a great deal of influence on him. But, their views were different in definite respects. Plato attacked and berated poetry, Aristotle valued and admired it. Plato set forth to restructure or reconstruct human life, Aristotle to restructure human knowledge. Plato views the phenomenal world as an imitation of the idyllic or supreme world. But, Aristotle believed in the realism of the world of the senses. In this way, Plato stands at the opposite pole from Aristotle.

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