

**CATHARSIS AND ITS IMPACT ON WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S  
TRAGEDIES**

**Dr. Rashmi Gupta**

Asst. Professor

English Language & Communication Skills

Maharaja Surajmal Institute of Technology

Affiliated to Indraprastha University, Dwarka,

New Delhi

**Abstract**

Catharsis or Katharsis is a Greek word meaning “cleansing” or “purging”. The term Catharsis comes from Aristotle. The healing effect of Catharsis has been portrayed in literature, theatre, films and especially psychology. Although it takes different shapes, the essence of catharsis remains same: it is a release from some burden and further healing through its cleansing effect. Shakespeare’s concept of tragedy is largely Aristotelian. Shakespeare has left behind him a number of tragedies, written during different periods of his career. But the last four- Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth and King Lear- are his greatest creations and rank among the greatest tragedies of the world. All the four great tragedies are primarily concerned with the life and suffering of a single individual or central figure. The tragic hero is not only socially eminent, but is also conspicuous for his many qualities of head and heart. In the tragedy, their fall from greatness is an avalanche, a storm; they do not fall alone, but society at large is affected by his fall. Macbeth’s degeneration from a hero into a villain affects the fate of the entire nation (Scotland); so also is the case with Othello, King Lear and Hamlet. The catharsis of all these plays brings out an appropriate purging of the emotions befitting the time and place. In this context Shakespeare follows Aristotle. In this paper, the researcher tries to find how Shakespearean tragedies are closely linked to the Aristotelian concept of tragedy.

**Key Words:** Catharsis, tragic flaw, suffering, fatal death, tragedy, healing

### **Introduction:**

In Poetics, Aristotle says: Tragedy... is an imitation of an action that is serious; complete and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper catharsis or purgation of these emotions.

From this definition it is clear that the genus of tragedy is imitation and that its chief function is to create the feelings of pity and fear for the purgation of emotions. Broadly speaking Catharsis is a process of releasing strong through artistic activities and it consequently helps in maintaining a state of emotional balance in human beings. Literature is often used as a tool for catharsis and the creative artist through the expression of his powerful emotions in his creative output gets a relief from frustration, sufferings, tension, anger and other negative emotions. The text, he creates, frequently represents those characters who may easily bear the burden of his emotional state and may delineate the anguish, agony and woe of writer's mind. This process consequently results into catharsis on the part of the character. When this kind of text is enacted on the stage or read by the reader in a controlled situation, the spectator's/ reader's own anxieties are attached towards the tragic character. The emotional involvement of the spectator and reader to the character leads to catharsis of negative emotions and the ultimate realization of balanced and relieved emotional state.

### **Shakespeare and his Concept of Tragedy:**

The age of Shakespeare was an age of glaring contrasts. His plays distil the very spirit of the age. They are valuable social documents and we can learn much more from them about the life of the people than from a book of history. The period from 1600 to 1608 is the period of the great tragedies. Around the year 1600, some dark shadow seems to have fallen on the mind and heart of Shakespeare. The treachery of a friend, disappointment in love, or the death of his son, or the death of his father may account for it. His 'Dark Comedies'-All is Well that Ends Well; Measure for Measure; and Troilus and Cressida are comedies only because they have a happy end, otherwise, the atmosphere is tragic heralding the great tragedies. As a result, Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth and King Lear are the great tragedies of the world. There is no doubt that his concept of tragedy is medieval and Elizabethan- not modern as concept of Hardy or Galsworthy.

William Shakespeare's Hamlet is "the most famous play in English literature," Hamlet is introduced as a troubled man in deep depression. He was mourning the death of his beloved father and his mother's marriage to his uncle. In Act 1 Scene 2 Claudius gives Hamlet a speech to try and get him to stop bringing up his father, probably fearing that the more the late King was talked about, or remembered, the more likely people were to look into his death. It is understandable that he wanted Hamlet to move on quickly. Hamlet's problem is that of an innocent person who believed that God is in the heaven and everything is fine. He is unable to contain his frustration seeing his ideal universe dwindling by a never expected father's murder, mother's hasty marriage, and his beloved's acting as stooge to the conspirers. The following soliloquy, probably the most famous speech in the English language, is spoken by Hamlet in Act III, scene i (58-59). Hamlet examines the theme of the moral legitimacy of suicide in an unbearably painful world,

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,

So Hamlet had to avenge his father, saw his mother with murderous uncle and ended his life fighting the evil doers. Thus Northrop Frye's calling Shakespearean tragic heroes as fools of time is absolutely true. Their actions are obviously influenced by Time and Place and that generated a chain of actions and events that brought poetic justice to their actions and catharsis to the people watching out their actions.

### **Shakespeare and the Tragic Flaw (Hamartia):**

All the four great tragedies are concerned primarily with the life and suffering of a single individual. This individual or central figure, the tragic hero has personal eminence as well. Macbeth is praised as 'Valours', 'Bellona's bridegroom', and King Duncan has full faith in his loyalty and his military powers. Othello is a general indispensable for the state of Venice; Hamlet is noble and has all the princely virtues and King Lear is every inch a king. Ironically, all these tragic characters have a marked obsession. A.C. Bradley rightly calls this obsession the tragic flaw of his character. It is this dominant trait or flaw to act in a particular way which brings about his downfall. The tragic flaw of Macbeth is vaulting ambition and poetic imagination; Hamlet is reflective and hesitant; and Othello is rash, credulous and hasty. This 'tragic flaw' in his character makes him commit error after error and these errors spell his doom. He knows what he is doing, he has full freedom of choice, but he errs in making that choice. Macbeth fully knows the hideous nature of the crime he commits but still he commits it. As a result he becomes blood-thirsty and savage, a despotic tyrant, who makes his country a hell. A good example of 'hamartia' can be seen in *Hamlet* when Hamlet's ill judgment and failure to act lead him to his untimely death. He suffers from procrastination. He finds a number of opportunities to kill his uncle, but he fails because of his indecisive and procrastinating nature. Every time, he delays taking action. In one case he finds an opportunity to kill Claudius while Claudius is praying. Still, Hamlet leaves the best opportunity to achieve his goal with the excuse that he doesn't want to kill a man while he is praying. He wants to kill Claudius when he is in the act of committing a sin. It is this procrastination that ultimately results in Hamlet's death and leads Denmark into chaos.

Lear's tragic flaw at the beginning of the play is that he prefers appearances to reality. He wants to be treated as a king and to enjoy his kingship, but he doesn't think to fulfill a king's responsibilities to meet the demands of his subjects. Similarly, his test of his daughters illustrates that he values a flattering public display of love over real love. Later on, Lear's recognition of the error of his ways is an ingredient vital to reconciliation with Cordelia, not because Cordelia feels wronged by him but because he has understood the sincerity and depth of her love for him. According to Aristotle, the best kinds of surprises are brought about by 'hamartia', 'tragic flaw', or *peripeteia*, or reversal of fortune, and *anagnorisis*, or discovery. A good plot progresses like a knot that is tied up with increasingly greater complexity until the moment of *peripeteia*, at which point the knot is gradually untied until it reaches a completely unknotted conclusion.

### **Shakespeare and Aristotelian Catharsis:**

Shakespeare's concept of tragedy is purely based on Aristotle. The purpose of tragedy is catharsis that exactly means to arouse pity and fear –the two tragic emotions according to Aristotle. We must observe a hero who is relatively noble going from happiness to misery as a result of error on the part of the hero. The action of a Shakespearean tragedy always develops through conflict. This conflict is both external and internal. In case of internal conflict, the tragic hero is torn and divided within himself and suffers the agonies of hell. As we can see that there is conflict in Macbeth between ambition and loyalty to the king; Othello is torn within himself between jealousy and love; and Hamlet hesitates and broods and does nothing. Lear suffers terribly as a result of the ingratitude and treachery of his daughters. Their suffering is contrasted with their trivial happiness and their sudden downfall from the height of greatness to dust signifies a sense of powerlessness of man and omnipotence of Fate.

It is through internal conflict that the soul of hero is laid bare before us. This spectacle of suffering is terrible and heart-rending and arouses the emotions of pity and terror. Our pity and fear is aroused most when it is family members who harm one another rather than enemies or strangers. We compare our own sorrows and sufferings with those of the hero and realize the comparative insignificance and pettiness of our own troubles. Gradually, we are better able to bear with them. Consequently, it results 'inner illumination'-a better understanding of life and its problems. It is this serenity at the end that the readers are never left crushed or pessimistic, despite the tremendous tragic waste. In a sense, the Shakespearean tragedy is never depressing, rather it soothes, strengthens and enervates. This is so because just before his destruction, the tragic hero is regenerated, realizes his mistake that how much he has lost by his wrong choice or choices.

### **Conclusion:**

Catharsis is a remarkable feature of a Shakespearean tragedy. It actually helps cleansing of the audience's pent-up emotions. In other words, Shakespearean tragedies help the audience feel and release emotions through the aid of tragedy. When we watch a tragedy, we identify with the characters and take their losses personally. A Shakespearean tragedy gives us an opportunity to feel pity for a certain character and fear for another. The hero's hardships compel us to empathize with him. The villain's cruel deeds cause us to feel hatred towards him. Tears flow freely when a hero like Hamlet, Macbeth, Lear or Othello dies. At the same time we feel happy that Claudius and other villains have received their proper punishment.

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