

Drama: Its Origin, Elements and Types

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Abstract

Drama is one of the ancient forms of entertainment in human society. It is observed that drama has evolved through various stages during the course of its development. Its roots are found to be present in the 5th and 6th centuries B.C. in Greece. During the last around 2500 years, it has followed the tradition of relieving the audience of their routine lives and making them fresh and happy through the presentation of human life in its multicoloured complexities. Therefore, this paper attempts to deal with drama as a distinct literary form with an emphasis on its origin, elements and types.

Key Words: drama, tragedy, comedy, farce, melodrama,

Literature plays a very significant role in human life. It is considered to be the mirror of the society which reflects the image of the time in which it was created. It is a medium of expressing thoughts and ideas for the writer. It is one of the most ancient forms of entertainment in the history of mankind. At the beginning when there was no written form of language, literature was composed in the form of poetry and preserved through the words of mouth. In the history of literature, poetry is the most ancient form of literature. Then it developed into various other forms like drama, novel, and short story.

The term 'drama' originates from Greek language, which means 'to do'. (Brown, 1998:441) In a drama, we come across objective representation of the conflicts, actions, events and crisis from the lives of the concerned characters. Drama is the specific mode of fiction represented in performance. It is primarily a performing art. It is the most powerful literary expression as action is presented on the stage, engaging the audio-visual faculties of the audience.

History of literature shows the origin of drama in Greece in 6th century B.C. In ancient Greece dramatic competitions were held to 'celebrate the festival of God Dionysus'. (Brockett and Hildy, 2003: 13-15) The dramatists participating in this competition were required to present a tetralogy of plays consisting of three tragedies and a satyr play. The plays performed in this period were tragedy, comedy and the satyr play. Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes and Menander are the best-known dramatists of Ancient times.

Greek drama came in contact with the Romans after 'the Roman Empire expanded into Greece territories in the 3rd century B.C.' (2003: 13) Roman dramatists of this period like Andronicus and Naevius took drama all over Europe. During the 2nd century B.C. it had become one of the chief means of entertainment with many men of letters practicing it. The comedies

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written by Plautus and Terence became very popular, many of which have survived. The Roman tragedian, Seneca popularized tragedy so much so that it is called Senecan tragedy.

The drama of the Middle Ages dealt with Bible stories and allegorical mysteries. It was being written in the regional languages of the times. To help the laymen understand the teachings of the religion, the clergymen used to perform the incidents from Bible in dramatic form. The plays of this period are called Mystery and Miracle plays.

With the construction of Globe Theatre in London, drama as a major form of literature flourished in England. The main practitioners of this form in 16th and 17th century are Ben Jonson, Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe. The plays of this period were written on the themes like ancient history and Greek and Roman mythology, and contemporary socio-political issues.

Henrik Ibsen and Bertolt Brecht dominate the modern drama of 19th and 20th Century respectively. Ibsen started a new kind of drama by making an ordinary housewife as the heroine of his play, 'A Doll's House'. Anton Chekhov, Eugene O'Neill, Luigi Pirandello, Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, John Osborne and George Bernard Shaw are the important dramatists of this period.

Indian Classical drama originated from the Rig-Veda. The plots of these plays were based on the stories taken from the great Sanskrit epics, *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*. Our ancient writer, Bharata penned the theory of writing a play in his book '*Natya Shastra*'. Bhasa, Kalidasa, Sudraka, Asvaghosa and Harsha are the famous Sanskrit playwrights.

Elements of Drama: Aristotle, in his book entitled 'The Poetics' has discussed theoretical aspects of drama. Here he has given emphasis on tragedy and its elements. These elements are plot, theme, character, diction, music and spectacle.

Plot: According to Aristotle's theory of drama in *Poetics*, plot is the most important element of drama. Emphasizing the importance of plot in a tragedy, Aristotle says: "The plot, then, is the first principle, and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy." (Aristotle, *Poetics*) The plot can be either simple or complex. Simple plot is straight-forward, with continuous movements, whereas the complex plot has peripeteia and Anagnorisis. Peripeteia means the opposite results produced by the human actions. In such a plot the character goes on acting naively in certain way without realizing the effects of his actions. But these actions ultimately lead it to its doom. Anagnorisis means the realization of truth. The simple plot has only one story in it whereas the complex plot can have more than one story or episodes in it. The skill of the dramatist lies in knitting all these episodes in a single whole to create a singular effect on the audience.

An ideal plot can be divided into three parts-beginning, middle and an end. A good beginning is that which is not dependent on some previous incident or knowledge. A good middle is the outcome of the events which have taken place in the beginning and leads those

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events to their satisfactory conclusion. A good ending is the result of whatever has happened before the end. It is the natural conclusion of the events gone before.

Character: Drama is the representation of the conflicts of human life. And so it requires some characters in the happenings of life. As the dramatist represents a story, it is but natural that there should be some characters on whose life the story is based. The characters in a play are selected from the host of people according to the need of the plot. As the play has a limited canvas, he does not make his play over crowded with too many characters. There is no scope for a full length character study in a drama. So the writer selects only those incidents from the life of his protagonist that are necessary for the action of the play.

The characters are of two types - flat characters and round characters. A flat character does not grow with the development of the plot. It remains static from the beginning to the end of the play. On the other hand, round character grows with the action of the play. Another type of character is the stock character, a character that reappears again and again in various plays with the same attributes each time. Such characters are also called stereotypes or the stock characters.

While developing his characters, the dramatist uses the following methods: one method is to develop his characters by the help of the dialogues which the character speaks; the other method is to expose the character by through the speeches of the other characters: and the third method is the combination of the earlier two methods, i.e. developing the character partly through his/her own speeches and partly by what others say about him/her. Actually the last method is more convincing and so used by the greater number of writers.

One more aspect of the characters in a play is the selection of the hero or the heroine. The dramatist has to be very careful regarding this aspect because the success of the play is dependent on the proper selection of the characters. So the dramatist follows certain well-defined principles for this purpose. The Greek philosopher, Aristotle has laid down some rules for the proper choice of characters. According to Aristotelian canon the hero of a tragedy should be a 'good' person. It means the hero of a play should be of an intermediate type of person. He should neither be 'too good' nor 'too bad'. Similarly, the heroine of a play should also be selected as per the demands of the plot. The hero and the heroine should belong to the royal families or to the upper strata of the society because the fall of such a person from happiness to misery would create the cathartic effect on the minds of the audience.

Diction: As is mentioned earlier that there should be a proper selection of the characters, similarly there should be a proper choice of the language to be used in a play. Language or the diction is '*the choice of words made by the playwright and enunciation of the actors delivering these words*'. The dramatist represents only the selected incidents and events from the lives of the characters in the form of dialogue and action. Therefore the language used in the play should be decorative, stylistic and becoming to the specific class to which the character belongs. It means a king should speak like a king and a clown should speak like a clown. Otherwise the

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audience will not believe in whatever is happening on the stage. Shakespeare has closely followed this principle in his plays. The characters belonging to the upper strata of the society in his plays mostly speak in verse and the characters from lower classes use prose. As every word in a play helps the playwright to further the action so the diction is very important substance of the play.

Subject or the Theme: The various events of the plot are held together by some central idea. This central idea is called the 'subject' or 'theme' of the play. If the theme of a play is noble and dignified, it will make the play great and successful. A great work of art comes into existence if the theme is noble and worthy of artistic treatment. And so the dramatist must deal with noble and dignified action. It is possible that some plays with a good plot may be having a little or no theme in them. Such plays may become temporarily successful with the audience. This success is short-lived as the audiences forget about the play after coming out of the theatre. Therefore along with a well-constructed plot, there should be a good theme in a play to make it universal.

Music: The dramatist is relied on music to create a specific effect on the audiences. Music means the sound, rhythm and melody of the speeches. The history of dramaturgy shows that the performances of the plays were accompanied by music produced by the musicians. But with the development in the field of science and technology, modern theatre has introduced the use of recorded sounds. The dramatist is now able to make the play more realistic by the use of a variety of recorded sounds like the sounds of animals, wind, storm, rain and lightning.

Spectacle: The element of spectacle is also enriched in the modern times. Spectacle means the visual elements of the production of a play. It includes the stage, furniture, scenery, costumes and curtains.

A costume means the different things which the actors use on their body. A costume includes clothing, wigs, and masks and make up. Costumes help the audience to understand about the time and the place of the action. A mask is a special element of costume. Though mask is rarely used in modern theatre, it was indispensable in ancient India. Makeup is sometimes used to exaggerate and distort facial features. It also helps to conceal the signs of age or the colour of face. The scenery is a special element of stage properties. Its elements are balcony, trapdoors, elevators, and gallery. In modern theatre, lighting is used very effectively. It helps the dramatist to control the focus of the audience and create specific mood.

Types of Drama: Drama has following types:

1) **Tragedy:** The history of drama shows that tragedy originated in religious festival of the Greek God, Dionysus in 6th century B.C. Etymologically the word 'tragedy' is derived from Greek word 'tragodi' meaning 'a goat song' It came to be used for plays probably because of the practice of sacrificing a goat during the festival of Dionysus. The other reason may be that the winner of the dramatic contest was given a goat as the award. To participate in the dramatic

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contest, the contestants were required to present a tetralogy of plays consisting of three tragedies and a satyr play. In ancient Greek literature the concept of tragedy is different from the modern concept. The modern tragedy is usually considered to as a play with unhappy ending. However, many of the Greek tragedies end on a happy note.

Definition of tragedy : Tragedy is defined as:

“ Tragedy, then, 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; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish *ita catharsis* of such emotions...” (Aristotle: *Poetics*).

Plato considers ‘imitation’ to be an act of mimicry. But Aristotle has given a new meaning to this term. For him imitation does not mean servile copying but an imaginative recreation. Aristotle says that imitation is the basic principle of all fine arts. Tragedy is distinguished from other fine arts according to the object, medium and manner of imitation. On the basis of objects of imitation, tragedy is distinguished from comedy. Tragedy imitates serious actions whereas comedy imitates the non-serious. So far as the medium of imitation is concerned, tragedy is distinguished from the lyric, as tragedy uses several kinds of embellishments. Tragedy is differentiated from epic on the basis of its manner of imitation, as tragedy represents through action whereas epic narrates.

Aristotle has used the term ‘magnitude’ for the length of the action of a tragedy. In this respect, usually the tragedy is compared with the human body. As too short or too tall human body does not look beautiful, similarly, too short or too long tragedy is not good. As a tragedy is performed on the stage within two or three hours, the dramatic action should not be too long as the audience will forget about the beginning before the dramatic action reaches to its end. It should not also be too short as it would not allow the writer to develop the essential aspects of the plot and characters.

Any dramatic action must have a beginning, middle and an end. A good beginning is the one which is not dependent on any of the previous situation and from which further action flows out. A good middle arises out of the events which have gone before and leads the action towards its logical and convincing conclusion. A good end is the natural outcome of whatever has gone before without leading the action any further.

The function of tragedy, like any other work of literature, is to ‘delight’ or to ‘please’. While speaking about the function of a tragedy, Aristotle has used the term ‘catharses’. But Aristotle has not defined ‘catharsis’ and so there are endless debates on the exact meaning of the term. Some scholars consider that ‘catharsis’ means purgation. According to the theory of purgation, the spectators in the theatre are relieved or cleansed or purged of the harmful emotions of pity and fear. According to the other group of scholars Catharsis is the resolution of dramatic

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tension, within the plot. It means in his play, the dramatist represents the incidents which arouse the emotions of pity and fear for the fate of the protagonist. During the course of the action, the dramatist resolves the conflicts which help him to take the action to its logical conclusion along with creating the emotions of pity and fear.

Tragedies are further classified as heroic tragedy, revenge tragedy, Shakespearean tragedy, sentimental tragedy and melodrama.

2) Comedy: Comedy is:

“An imitation of characters of a lower type- not, however, in the full sense of the word bad, the ludicrous being merely a subdivision of the ugly. It consists in some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive. To take an obvious example, the comic mask is ugly and distorted, but does not imply pain.”
 (Aristotle, *Poetics*)

By presenting the character in a ridiculous manner, the writer of a comedy aims at producing laughter. Though the genre of comedy is practiced since the ancient times with the practitioners like Aristophanes and Plautus, the scholars have not paid enough attention towards the serious study of its nature and function. While speaking about the function of comedy, George Meredith says that comedy appeals to the intelligence pure and simple and aims not at our ribs or armpits but at our heads. It means, it is the business of a comedy writer to look on what ails the world. He observes his environment minutely and finds out its follies and exposes them. But while exposing those follies, the purpose of the writer is to ‘correct’ or ‘reform’ those follies. Some scholars are of the opinion that the function of a comedy is not ‘to reform’ or ‘to correct’ the follies of the world but to provide light-hearted mirth. But while creating mirth, the comedian encourages the audience to laugh with not laugh at the follies of the world. Such kind of play is purely meant for the entertainment of the audience.

Comedies are of following types:

Classical Comedy: This type of comedy is written as per the rules laid down by the ancient Greek and Roman masters. The function of such a comedy is ‘corrective’ or ‘reformative’. In this comedy some human folly is exposed and ridiculed. It follows the rules of three unities- unity of time, place and action. The writer of this comedy strictly avoids the mingling of comic with tragic.

Romantic comedy: Romantic comedy does not follow the rules of writing a comedy laid down by the ancient classical writers. The writer freely mingles the comic with the tragic. The unities of time, place and action are modified as per the requirements of the plot. The aim of such a comedy is ‘to produce innocent, good-natured laughter, thereby entertaining the audience without trying to teach anything.

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Shakespearean Comedy: Shakespeare is a great writer of comedies. His comedies are called romantic or sunny comedies. With the help of his creative imagination, Shakespeare creates a brilliant world of romance which is far away from the drab realities of the everyday life. These comedies are usually set in some distant, far-off places, where the inhabitants have no other business but that of love-making. The lovers of a Shakespearean comedy fall in love at first sight and get married at the end. But the course of their love is always full of difficulties. There are made a lot of misunderstandings, family feuds, tears and sighs. Shakespeare forces his lovers to face these difficulties in order to test their love for each other. But ultimately, these lovers are helped to overcome these difficulties but the intervention of Goddess Fortune. Then comes the Goddess Marriage who unites the lovers in the bond of marriage followed by music, dance and merry-making. However, it is often observed in Shakespeare's Romantic Comedies that:

“The young women are sure of who they are and whom they intend to marry; one cannot be certain that they ever really fall in love, since they begin by knowing what they want. The young men, conversely, fall all over themselves in their comically futile attempts to eschew romantic love in favour of more serious pursuits. They perjure themselves, are shamed and put down, and are finally forgiven their follies by the women. Shakespeare brilliantly portrays male discomfiture and female self-assurance as he explores the treacherous but desirable world of sexual attraction, while the verbal gymnastics of the play emphasize the wonder and the delicious foolishness of falling in love.”(Encyclopedia Britannica)

Comedy of Humour: The characters in a Comedy of Humour represent some ‘humour’. The actions and behaviour of the characters are governed by some kind of passion. As the characters represent some typical trait, there is a lack of individuality in them. Rather they become stereotypes. Generally, these characters are taken from low life. The purpose of the writer of such a comedy is to satirize the follies of the characters and correct them.

Comedy of Manner: The Comedy of Manners is also called Restoration Comedy. It focuses upon the mannerism of the upper classes of the society. The characters of this comedy belong to the upper class. Here the dramatist represents a fashionable men and women, with their manners, love-intrigues, scandals and affectations. These comedies attempt to imitate everything refined. So anything coarse or low is strictly avoided. The language of such a comedy is very witty and refined. The focus of the dramatist is not on the ‘individuality’ of the character but on its manners, so the characters become lifeless. This type of comedy was very famous during the Restoration period with the writers like William Congreve, William Wycherley and Oliver Goldsmith practicing it.

3) Farce: A farce is a comedy that focuses on physical humour. The dramatist aims at creating hilarious laughter by representing absurd characters and situations on the stage. To create his characters and situations, the dramatist makes use of exaggeration and extravagance.

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Exaggerated characters and situations, improbable coincidences, mistaken identities and miscommunication are the common techniques used by the writers to make his plot more complicated. All these instruments enable the dramatist to entertain his audience in the most direct way.

4) The Masque: The characters in a masque wear some masks on their faces. Initially, a masque was a series of dances, illustrating some story, but afterwards it developed into a play. The writer of a masque chooses his characters and story from mythology. These masques were written to be performed on some private occasions by a limited number of characters. There is abundant use of music, dance, costly costumes and elaborate scenery.

5) Tragi-Comedy: This play is a combination of the elements of both the comedy and the tragedy. Naturally, the play ends on a happy note for some characters and on a sad note for the others. Shakespeare is a famous practitioner of this kind of play. Though Aristotle had opposed the mingling of the tragic with the comic, scholars like John Dryden and Dr. Samuel Johnson have defended this type of play by saying that it is nearer to the human life. These critics argue that as the life itself is a combination of happy and sad events there is no harm in combining them in plays. Shakespeare's well-known tragi-comedies are *The Winter's Tale*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Tempest*.

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