

Plato's Republic – Attack on Poetry



Dr. Jayant S. Cherekar

(A) Moral Grounds

- The moral basis for Plato's attacks on poetry was his belief that:
- According to Plato poetry does not contribute to the social morality as the poet narrates the tales of the pleasant vices of men.
- Poets presented false ideas about Gods and heroes who represented Gods. Gods were shown to be corrupt, immoral and dishonest in the epics that poets created. Such tendencies were particularly noted in Homer's epics. The natural inclination of children and youth to follow Gods and heroes, therefore, accounted to immorality in the society.
- The poets are "divinely inspired" and thus their literature is quite non-rational. They give free play to their thoughts. Thus the poets, their emotional frenzies and the lack of moral restraint can afford no safe guidance moral or intellectual.
- Poetry makes the reader imitate the characters in the story. Thus one who tends to imitate a female part tends to grow effeminate.



(B) Emotional Grounds

- *Plato also held some objections to poetry on emotional grounds:*
- *“Poetry feeds and waters the emotions instead of drying them up and let them rule instead of ruling them up”*
- He objected to the claim that poets are ‘divinely inspired’. He stated that if the claim is to be believed, the views of the poets could not be relied upon. Their views are not based on reason.
- He believed that the views presented by the poets could not be explained even by themselves since their views were non-rational.
- He particularly condemned the forms of poetry other than lyric poetry. He believed that epic, tragedy and comedy were imitative by nature. Identification with fictitious characters on the part of poet or reader was inappropriate as per Plato’s views since imitation would soon become second nature.
- He believed that poetry abounded in vulgar, sensational and corrupt elements since imitation of baser aspects of human life was easier and also offered more momentary pleasure. Thus, poets preferred emotions over reason.
- As per his beliefs, tragic poetry gave uncontrolled expression to the emotions like pity and grief which actually were to be restrained.

•

(C) Intellectual Grounds

- On intellectual basis, Plato condemned poets by stating that:
- Poets imitated only superficial appearances and had no knowledge of truth.
- Poets never understood the world beyond the senses which was the world of ideal reality. Thus, they could not understand the concepts like beauty, truth and virtue.

(D) Utilitarian Grounds

- Plato considered poetry to be futile on utilitarian basis as well. According to him, poetry can serve no useful purpose to deserve to become part of school curriculum. It was so since he felt that:
- Poets imitated things without understanding them fully. The imitation based on lack of knowledge, thus, lacked purpose as well. So, poetry was not useful.
- He identified three arts in concern to all things- to use, to make and to imitate. He considered the art of imitation to be least in value and that is the art poets were concerned to. Poetry is the product of futile ignorance. The poet who imitates without really knowing what he is imitating is demonstrating both his lack of useful purpose and his lack of knowledge. Plato is not content with putting the 'imitator', of something below its maker; he also puts the maker below the user. He writes, "there are three arts which are concerned with all things : one which uses, another which makes, a third which imitates them." The poet stands the lowest, for neither does he use, nor does he make, he merely imitates. Poetry can serve no useful, practical purpose; it must not be a part of school curriculum.
- Keeping all these views in mind, Plato stressed that "no poetry should be admitted save hymns to the gods and panegyrics on famous men." Along with the grounds mentioned above, Plato also had personal interest in criticizing poetry. Being a philosopher himself, he had to take on the cause of the philosophers in general who were struggling to prove their superiority in comparison to poets. He has made his objections to poetry very clear in his attack on poetry.