Plato (427 BC - 348 BC)

**Introduction:** This period, along with the preceding one, was very rich in terms of artistic production in Greece, built upon the socioeconomic and political stability of the city states.

* The ideas of the pre-Socratics, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle et al. were a part of the continuing dialogue and discussions even though the works of those who preceded them are not available to us.
* Plato’s ideas about art occur scattered in his many works including *The Republic* which primarily deals with governance, polity etc.
* Plato took a moralistic approach to art and its role in society. He did not at all speak about the aesthetic aspect of art. That is, he did not discuss the elements of beauty and enjoyment but spoke about what art does to individuals and the social/political collective.
* Plato was strongly critical of the effect of art on individuals and the society. (According to him art / poetry corrupts people and society.)

**a. Theory of ideas and of art**

* According to Plato, ideas are the ultimate and primary reality. The things or events that we see around us are copies (or concrete forms) of the ideas. An artist copies this copy.

Ideas ---- visible reality------ art

* Thus, art is twice removed from reality. Therefore, art is a very imperfect and false copy of the ideas. Hence it takes people away from reality. Thus, even though art has charm it does not help build character or the well being of the state. (This is a highly moralistic position. Even though Plato concedes that art can promote love for the beautiful and noble, he says this is not often done in actual practice.)

**b. On poetry**

* Poetry pleases us. But pleasure is not the true aim of poetry. Truth is the test of poetry and it should promote virtue. In *The Republic*, he says that good poets are those who write about beauty and perfection (from the goodness of their own nature) and thus perpetually influence people for the good.

**c. Objections to poetry**

* As an art form, poetry is twice removed from reality. Therefore it takes people away from truth.
* Poetry is the product of inspiration of soul, not of deep logical reasoning. Such outpourings of the soul cannot be truth.
* Poetry appeals to emotions and not reason. It activates impulses and emotions. Plato illustrates this with the case of tragic poetry which makes people weak and emotional. Poetry thus causes emotions to rule us instead of our ruling them.
* Poetry is non-moral. It often celebrates evil and presents it as defeating virtue. Poetry creates the impression that wrong deeds are rewarded whereas goodness benefits others but not oneself.
* Heroes and even gods are often cruel, vengeful, intemperate etc. Such literature/poetry/drama does not build virtue but can only corrupt.

Conclusion: Plato’s objections to poetry/drama are based on his concept of good and virtue, and of the life, welfare and happiness, both of the citizen and the state.

**d. The functions of poetry**

* Poetry pleases but mere pleasure should not be the function or aim of poetry. Poetry should teach people virtue and truth. Art cannot be separated from the moral and the virtuous.
* Truth is the test of poetry. It should promote the good of the state by building character. A poet is a good artist only when he/she is a good teacher of virtue and morals.
* Poetry should embody the highest forms of truth, ideal forms of justice, goodness, beauty etc.

(It is obvious why Plato is considered a moralist critic. He is not concerned with the aesthetic aspects of art. This cannot be because Plato was a bore but because he must have been very concerned about some kind of laxity in Greek social and political life.)

**e. On drama**

* All the objections Plato raises against poetry are applicable to drama also.
* Drama appeals to emotions and instincts. In order to please a heterogeneous audience drama presents quarrels, sorrows, funny scenes etc. These arouse various feelings in people leading to bad taste and lack of discipline. (In other words, drama does not contribute to the strengthening of reason, characters and virtue.)
* Drama is mimetic art. An actor who impersonates bad or low characters repeatedly absorbs their traits.
* Impersonation suppresses individuality and weakens character. But presenting good characters and seeing good tragedies which represent the good things of life should be encouraged.

**f. Tragic and comic pleasure**

* Plato asks an important question: ‘What is it in a painful scene which causes pleasure?’ (This question interests us even today.)
* According to Plato excesses of emotions can give us pleasure. That is why we watch unhappy/ unpleasant scenes. (This is not a very convincing explanation.)

**Literary Criticism, Interpretation, Hermeneutics, Exegesis**

* But when we come to post-structuralism (which questions structure, center, system, elements of the system, structural unity, cohesion etc.) this interpretational project loses many of its certainties and becomes a very complex enterprise. From post-structuralism onwards, non-fixity of meaning, the tenuous/shifting relationship between the signifier and the signified, the death of the author etc. become important signposts on the road of enquiry and search.
* The Greek Sophists placed man and his senses at the centre of this enquiry.
* “An unexamined life is not worth living.” –Socrates

\*\*\*\*\* Biju Joseph’s class notes; typed by Sr Savitha \*\*\*\*\*