

Cathartic Egression of Emotions in Shakespearean Plays and Buddhist Jātaka Stories

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Abstract

Catharsis is a psychological stratagem used by people to purge emotions, especially negative emotions like fear, anger, and aggression. Catharsis is a natural mechanism adopted by people in their real-life situations to expel their emotions. The same mechanism has been adopted and integrated into literature, making literature more realistic and closer to human experiences. Introduced by Aristotle and later developed by different scholars, now catharsis has become a major aspect of character development particularly in tragedy. Different approaches to the purgation of emotions have been shown in the literature depending on cultural, social, religious and individual differences. Thus, this study aims to analyse the production of catharsis in William Shakespeare's *Othello* and Buddhist Jātaka tales. The two pieces of literature represent two different cultural, social and religious backgrounds and thus, the production of catharsis in them is also different.

Keywords: Catharsis, tragedy, pity, fear, play, Jātaka

Introduction

“Catharsis” is derived from the Greek word *catharsis* which literally means cleansing or “purgation and purification” (Anandawansa, 2012, 141). According to catharsis theory “acting aggressively or even viewing aggression” is a psychological stratagem adopted by a person to “purge angry and aggressive feelings” (Bushman, 2002). Scheff (1979) introduces catharsis as a “thrill-seeking” attempt. Thus, catharsis is a psychological stratagem that humans exercise to stay psychologically undamaged at difficult moments. Aristotle’s theory of catharsis has been extensively applied in literature especially in tragedy in exploring how the ‘fear and pity’ of the audience are cleansed through the characters on stage. (Anandawansa, 2012, 141). Accordingly, catharsis in tragedy is a form of “moral purification” (*ibid*) which tries to emotionally discipline the audience in their reaction to pity and fear. On the other hand, the production of catharsis is a strategic endeavour of the writers in developing the plot to a turning point of the tragedy giving an opportunity for tragic characters as well as the audience to change, develop and mature in terms of moral purification.

Catharsis has been prevalent in various genres of literature throughout history even before Aristotle introduced it in his treatise, *Peri poietikés* usually called *poetics* (Landa, 2004). The writers have traced the true human emotions in threatening, challenging, distressful instances and the therapeutic mechanisms followed by them in such instances into literature. One such right example is Buddhist *Jātaka* stories where the writer has used cathartic egressive instances in abundance.

Accordingly, this paper attempts to explore how the theory of catharsis has been employed in a selection of Shakespearean plays and Buddhist

Jātaka stories in terms of the portrayal of characters, major themes and narrative styles of the two genres.

A study of this nature which portrays cathartic egression of emotions in literature produced in two different religious and social-cultural backgrounds attempts to fill a long-existing gap in the field. Even though research on catharsis in literature has been conducted, a study that combines two different traditions in terms of catharsis is not found.

Accordingly, the current study intends to explore how catharsis is produced in these two different types of traditions of literature. In the analysis of the texts selected, the similarities and differences in conveying themes, characterization and techniques used in the production of catharsis will be discussed.

Methodology

The current study was conducted as qualitative research analyzing the content of a selection of Shakespearean tragedies of *Othello*, *The Winter's Tale* and the tragicomedy of *Much Ado About Nothing* and four tragic *Jātaka* tales *Chaddanta Jātaka* (No. 514) *Culla-paduma* (No.193) and *Mahā-Padhuma* (No.472) and *Mahā-Padhuma Jātaka* (No.472) as the sample. The sample was purposively selected based on one uniformity in conveying the theme of sexual jealousy. The basis of this selection of drama and *Jātakas* is sexual jealousy which appears as a common theme in each. All the dramas and the *Jātakas* have been written around the theme of sexual jealousy as a major focus and the selection of the sample was done based on this criterion. The rationale behind the number of texts from the two genres is the length of the

texts. As the dramas are lengthier than the *Jātaka* tales, from them, five have been selected.

Thus, the study utilizes content analysis which is introduced as “a research method for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context, with the purpose of providing knowledge, new insights, a representation of facts and a practical guide to action (Krippendorff 1980 cited in Elo & Kynga, 2008; 108). In addition to exploring how catharsis is produced in the said texts, comparative methods also have been used in data analysis.

Discussion

Any tragic story evokes pleasure based on fear and pity; the pleasure of mimesis and the pleasure of catharsis finally ends with an individualistic spiritual exercise:

Of all Shakespeare’s tragedies, not even excepting *King Lear*, *Othello* is the most painfully exciting and the most terrible. From the moment when the temptation of the hero begins, the reader’s heart and mind are held in a vice, experiencing the extremes of pity and fear, sympathy and repulsion, sickening hope and dreadful expectation (Bradley 2007, 129).

Thus, among all Shakespearean tragedies, *Othello* as a masterpiece is excellent in producing fear and pity mixed with other emotions that help to keep the audience in suspense which ultimately produces pleasure followed by catharsis in the audience.

Fu (2010; 31) analyses *Othello* based on four types of pleasures; confirmation of ideas, the unified pattern of difficulties that the

protagonist, the passions created out of Iago's plots, and the cathartic note on which *Othello* ends. Further, explaining the above four types of pleasures in *Othello*, Fu mentions that the first type of pleasure is derived from the systematic and coherent organization of thoughts in order to convey themes of a successful plot whereas the second type of pleasure is derived from lucid organization of characters, setting, events and incidents of the play which help to the smooth flow of the tragedy. The other type of pleasure that he applies to Dubos's theory, is the delight derived from Othello's ability to incite passion. And the final type according to him is the pleasure derived from the way the play ends with the death of Othello resolving all types of stratagems in the play. However, the pleasure derived from catharsis is the strongest that is genuinely equally felt by the hero as well as the audience.

About the pleasure of mimesis, the drama addresses common human experiences such as sexism, racism, love, and sexual jealousy which can be triggered at any moment of life, and they have been portrayed in a realistic manner in the drama. In both *The Winter's Tale* and *Much Ado About Nothing* too the pleasure of mimesis is produced by conveying common themes like love, revenge, sexual jealousy, deception, etc., that appeal to the common interest of the audience. The familiarity and universality of the experience of love and jealousy are the primary themes of the plays, and the audience feels them intensely and becomes passionately engrossed. Not only that, Shakespeare uses real incidents of war between Venice and Turkey in contemporary society at the outset of *Othello* but restricted to the outset making it a drama of common life. So, the drama can be enjoyed with the feeling that it is a common experience for the audience. Shakespeare has used common locales and real incidents of contemporary society that do

not appear in his sources and this Shakespearean technique magnify the pleasure of mimesis while enhancing a sense of authenticity in the audience.

The characters in the plays behave in a realistic manner in conveying this common theme of sexual jealousy that is experienced in different modes during different periods of life irrespective of gender, race, age, or any other differences based on imaginary or real causes. The audience feels happy about the realistic nature of the characters. Shakespeare uses the characters of the clowns and “Time” in *The Winter’s Tale* to distract the audience from the trances of reality, but it is a failure because the clown fails to do that function properly. Even “Time” interrupts the emotional contiguity of the audience while bridging the time gap of the play making it more realistic. In the plays under concern, there are no witches and other supernatural beings that make the play unrealistic. So, he introduces only the real characters with their natural behavior in natural life situations:

Tragedy, then, is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions (Aristotle cited in Elicker 2008).

Accordingly, almost all the characters of the plays are imitations of real characters in society. In *The Winter’s Tale*, Leontes, a very powerful king controls others. Shakespeare uses English seasons realistically and effectively making them closer to the audience.

Othello and Claudio play the roles of war heroes but both lack practical knowledge of life. Both destroy their personal lives caught by the machinations of villains in society. Othello is easily transformed by the well-informed, skilled, envious, jealous, and cunning Iago. Iago's process of forming suspicion in Othello includes conversation as below:

Othello : What dost thou say, Iago?

Iago : Did Michael Cassio, when you woo'd my lady, Know of your love?

Othello : He did, from first to last: why dost thou ask?

Iago : But for a satisfaction of my thought; No further harm.

Othello : Why of thy thought, Iago?

Iago : I did not think he had been acquainted with her.

Othello : O, yes; and went between us very oft.

Iago : Indeed!

Othello : Indeed! ay, indeed: discern'st thou aught in that?
Is he not honest?

Iago : Honest, (Act III, Scene iii)

This extract represents a real-life conversation between a General and a subordinate. Iago does not use witchcraft in forming jealousy but his own witticism as the above and fabricated stories. In this manner, in a general conversation being very careful enough not to create any doubt about his own riddling words, Iago incorporates this type of dialogue to inject suspicion into Othello about Desdemona's infidelity. When Iago first implants sexual jealousy in Othello, furnishing him with false information, Othello's behavior towards Desdemona just after

marriage betrays signs of suspicion. His psychological strife is clear in his dilemma. ‘Why did I marry? This honest creature doubtless/Sees and knows more, much more, than he unfolds.’ (Act III, Scene iii) A similar process but with less subtlety takes place in duping Claudio by Don John. Thus, having suspicion formed gradually in Othello and Claudio, Shakespeare shows how their minds work to the extent of murdering Desdemona at the climax of Othello’s mental insurgence and unexpectedly hate Hero, the one Claudio loved whole heartedly. Further, both Desdemona and Hermione born to rich and respectable families show elite characteristics in their behaviours. They are loyal, innocent, and honest which men exploit to achieve their target. In contrast to Brabantio’s claim that Othello has used witchcraft to attract Desdemona because it is quite unnatural to her manners to fall in love with a man like Othello, Othello points out very natural reasons for the origin of their love. The way Desdemona has fallen in love with Othello, especially pitying him for his hard life and Othello loving her sympathy that he had never received are quite natural for a young couple of this type. Further, the genuineness of the causes and the incident are proved by Duke’s claim. ‘I think this tale would win my daughter too’ (Act I, scene iii). Thus, the most critical incidents of the play are truly naturalistic and highly dramatic. Moreover, the incidents like Cassio’s brawl, Iago’s fabrications to Othello, Othello’s confused behavior, the brothel scene, the murder scene, etc. seem natural enough to create the pleasure of mimesis in the audience.

As a tragedy of excellence, the characters of the play show real human qualities in different characters in society which derive the pleasure of mimesis. This affects catharsis, the pleasure derived through the end catastrophe. Almost all the characters contribute to the pleasure of

the tragedy based on ‘pity and fear’. The female protagonists who are unaware of all types of plots are subjected to the deepest sympathy of the audience. Desdemona is highly and unjustly controlled by Othello when she is isolated in a strange place out of her country without any relation of her own. While these circumstances aggregate the audience’s pity towards her, the audience is struck with fear mixed with compassion when Othello plans to murder her in her ignorance. She pleads with Othello:

Desdemona : Kill me to-morrow: let me live to-night!

Othello : Nay, if you strive—

Desdemona : But half an hour!

Othello : Being done, there is no pause.

Desdemona : But while I say one prayer!

Othello : It is too late. (Act V, Scene ii)

It is really a brutal kind of murder that Desdemona undergoes. Against her high expectations of a happy married life, she is killed on the honeymoon bed by her own husband whom she keeps total faith even against her father. Othello is completely blinded by sexual jealousy and doesn’t listen to her last plea. The audience feels seriously distraught with the way she, the most innocent character of the drama, is being murdered:

Desdemona : O, falsely, falsely murder’d!

Emilia : Alas, what cry is that?

Othello : That! what?

Emilia : Out, and alas! that was my lady’s voice.

Help! help, ho! help! O lady, speak again!

Sweet Desdemona! O sweet mistress, speak!

Desdemona : A guiltless death I die.

Emilia : O, who hath done this deed?

Desdemona : Nobody; I myself. Farewell!

Commend me to my kind lord: O, farewell!

Dies (Act V, Scene ii).

This conversation between Desdemona and Emilia adds to the sympathy of Desdemona who tries to defend Othello from the charge of murder and displeasure of his degradation. ‘A guiltless death I die...’ These words increase the annoyance of the audience with Iago and Othello. The above statement establishes her innocence and loyalty which intensifies the pity of the audience. Despite the ill feeling the audience forms towards Emilia for giving Iago Desdemona’s handkerchief, parallel to Desdemona’s death, Emilia also is pitied at the end. The audience is satisfied with the great sacrifice she commits as an honest and obedient servant. The audience feels sorry for other characters like Roderigo and Cassio for they have been badly used by Iago. Even though Othello is condemned for his foolish and aggressive behavior at the end of the drama he earns pity from the audience as he repents for his sins. Then the cathartic relief advances with the purgation of the strong feelings of Othello with his attempt of murdering Iago and with his own death. Othello releases his strong feelings of remorse. ‘Are there no stones in heaven/But what serve for the thunder?—Precious villain!’ (Act V, scene ii) Iago escapes slightly injured and Othello repents of his folly:

I am not valiant neither,
But every puny whipster gets my sword:
But why should honor outlive honesty?
Let it go all (Act V, scene ii).

With this realization of the truth, Othello purges out his feelings by stabbing himself which is interpreted in terms of catharsis. He suffers the repercussion of the sins he has committed by ending his own life. This catastrophe mixed with pity and fear produces pleasure on one hand because the audience feels that he deserves punishment for his utter foolishness and on the other hand as he has finally understood his faults, he himself regards death as better than suffering throughout. It is a kind of remedy he adopts for his suffering. From his point of view that is a kind of spirituality, that he follows to end up his suffering as he has no other solution to end up the suffering. ‘No way but this/ Killing myself, to die upon a kiss’ (Act V, scene ii). In this manner, Othello’s purgative death redeems him from his suffering according to Christian values and offsets a sense of the tragic world of the audience which disconnects them from the emotional heaviness of the play. The ending of the play eases emotional heaviness, resolves calamity, draws play together and strikes the balance between gravity and peace so that this ending can be regarded as a form of cathartic egression of emotions both for the characters and the audience.

Catharsis in *The Winter’s Tale* is brought out in a similar manner to that of *Othello*. The pleasure of catharsis takes place with the purgation of fear and pity. The audience reaches the climax of their feeling of pity towards the death of Hermione, Mamillius, and loss of Perdita. The audience suffers from an emotional heaviness from the outset of the

play towards the way Hermione is treated. Without any fault in her, she is subjected to serious suffering. Other than insults what is most touching is removing her children including the newborn wasting her breast milk. Not only that, but she is also put to trial even before she recovers from the pains and anxiety born from her labour. Thus, she is brutally treated by her own husband, by his madness. With the sudden fainting of the queen and after that with no news about her, the audience is kept in absolute suspense. The emotional heaviness is expected to be loosened with the emergence of comedy and pastoral romanticism. But the audience truly purges out with the reappearance of Hermione though they are made to forget the pathetic incidents during the comedic scene. Even though Leontes realizes the truth with the death of the son, the audience does not feel much compassion towards him like for Othello, as it seems not true penitence. Mamillius is not much pitied as his illness and suffering are not fully revealed to the audience. But the audience feels sympathy for his sudden death. Out of all the characters Hermione is the mostly pitied character as her suffering is fully illustrated in the play.

Like a tragedy a comedy also produces catharsis purifying and purging out emotions. According to Giralaldi "...so comedy by means of laughter calls men to an honest private life." For Frye catharsis in comedy is the corresponding comic emotions of sympathy and ridicule and thus comic catharsis purifies the soul and body. (Cited in Nikulin; 2014, 7). Moreover "the ritual pattern of catharsis of comedy is the resurrection that follows the death, the epiphany or manifestation of the risen hero" (Grassen and Quinn (ed), 2002; 1025).

The above illustration of catharsis in comedies shows that Hermione's in *Much Ado About Nothing* resurrection supports in production of comedic catharsis. Not only that, the pastoral and highly romantic disposition in the later episode of the play seizes the audience in a spiritual enchantment filled with pleasure. That is the ultimate aesthetic and psychological combination that Aristotle wants the audience to experience in a comedy. Similarly, Hero's resurrection from the fake death purges out the heavy emotions of the audience as well as other characters purifying their souls. The laughter mixed with ridicule purifies the audience, taking them to a psychological state of calmness and happiness. Beatrice and Benedick engaged in witty and merry arguments console the audience. Even at the moments when the characters encounter hard conflicts of tragic occurrences, the comic characters relieve the audience from tragic emotions as Benedick lightens the audience with his ridicule intervention saying "How now...interjections? Why then some be of laughing as ah,ha,he!"(Act IV, scene i) at the most crucial moment of the play.

According to the above definitions and explanations, a successful plot in a piece of literature is one that is complex and subtle, and to Aristotle 'pity and fear' that is the form of pleasure in a tragedy are easily produced when the audience identifies the characters with themselves.

Buddhist *Jātaka* stories that include narrative, dramatic as well as prosaic characteristics demonstrate both comic and tragic qualities in them. The *Jātaka* story writer also as an interesting mechanism of the stories has produced catharsis, especially through the development of the plot and the life-like characters in a manner that sometimes looks

similar and sometimes different to Shakespearean plays. Among many examples of *Jātakas Culla-paduma* (No.193) and *Mahā-Padhuma* (No.472) *Jātakas* produce catharsis in a parallel way. In the tales, the audience feels fear towards the way that the heroes are treated unexpectedly and unethically by the women regardless of the nature of their relationship with the hero. In the first story, the audience is struck with a horrific fear of the easy manner the woman forgets all sacrifices of the prince, her sudden attraction to a man without limbs, her betrayal of a handsome and pious prince for the sake of such an ugly human trunk, and above all, the way she plans with her him the murder of the prince. Perceiving that the Bodhisatta, a person of sublime stature, does not deserve such wicked treatment, the audience pities the prince and is relieved by the way he is saved unexpectedly. This produces catharsis in the audience. The intellectual audience reflects on the commonness of similar incidents of women's disloyalty to their children and husbands in modern societies as well as in ancient societies. This reflection produces the pleasure of learning and the pleasure of mimesis. At the end of the story when the woman is punished by nature making her go begging the king and in contrast the prince's reception of kingship results in producing another type of pleasure in the audience about the fact that they have received what they deserve according to the *kamma* that they committed. Unlike Othello, the prince really learns a lesson from that experience, and he doesn't degrade himself to the state of punishing the woman:

But although the Bodhisatta could not swallow his anger, and ordained this punishment for them, he did not do accordingly; but he smothered his wrath, and had the basket fixed upon her head so fast that she could not take it off; the villain he had

placed in the same, and they were driven out of his kingdom (ed. Cowell 1901, 84-85).

Comparing the prince's behaviour with Othello's, it is obvious that he did not mature himself from that horrific experience because even by realizing the stratagem of Iago, at the last moment, he tries to kill Iago also as an immature man. Thus, the *Jātaka* tale produces pleasure after catharsis in an intellectual manner compared to the plays.

In Mahā-Padhumā *Jātaka* (No.472) the prince is also badly punished by his father who believes the lies of the Queen. The way the Queen, the stepmother of the prince, insinuates the prince to have coitus with her is horrific. On the understanding of its unacceptability and incest, the prince explains it to the stepmother but without considering that she plots to get him killed by the king. On the realization of the nature of emotion, he finds spiritual development by becoming an ascetic once he was saved by the serpent. When his father visits him in the forest, he enlightens his father on the truth behind the entire scenario:

Lust is the hook: fine elephants and horse by blood I show; These by renouncing I have drawn; this, chieftain, you must know (*ibid.*, 121).

Thus, O great king, to be king is nothing to me;
but do you see to it, that you break not the Ten Royal Virtues,
but forsake evil doing, and rule in righteousness (*ibid.*).

On hearing that the king, after punishing the woman, rules the country virtuously as per Bodhisatta's advice.

Chaddanta Jātaka (No. 514) also produces the pleasure of mimes by showing the natural behavior of human beings using animal

characters in the story. Sexual jealousy does not have boundaries. It penetrates all social positions, intellectual levels, ages, races, and economic strata. As human beings form jealousy through an imaginary suspicion Cullasubhaddā also forms jealousy towards Chaddanta and Mahaasubhadhā thinking that the former has a special interest in the latter. This nature of sexual jealousy in romantic relationships is exactly shown in the story through the character of Cullasubhaddā because she suddenly conceives a grudge against the great elephant based on very minor matters and at the moment of its climax, she makes a vow to a pacceka Buddha to be born as Queen Subhaddā in the next birth in order to avenge from Chaddanta. Further, the writer shows the destructive nature of the feeling that goes from birth to birth till the target of revenge is fulfilled. In this instance, the writer produces the pleasure of mimesis. In the next birth, the queen's desire to cut off the tusks of the elephant is fulfilled while achieving pity and fear in the audience:

The Great Being suffered excruciating pain and his mouth was charged with blood. The hunter, shifting about from place to place, was still unable to cut the tusks with his saw. So the Great Being letting the blood drop from his mouth, resigning himself to the agony, asked, saying, "Sir, cannot you cut them?" And on his saying "No," he recovered his presence of mind and said, "Well then, since I myself have not strength enough to raise my trunk, do you lift it up for me and let it seize the end of the saw." The hunter did so: and the Great Being seized the saw with his trunk and moved it backwards and forwards, and the tusks were cut off as it were sprouts (ed. Cowell 1905, 29).

The details are given in an awe-inspiring manner in order to show the power of *Pāramitā* that the Bodhisatta is in the process of fulfilling. At the same time, the writer creates fear in the audience by describing the effort of the hunter to cut off the tusks. Further, the elephant is highly pitied for his enormous suffering. When he dies, he is filled with the happiness of fulfilling *Dāna Pāramitā*:

I don't give you these, friend hunter, because I do not value them, nor as one desiring the position of Sakka, Māra or Brahma, but the tusks of omniscience are a hundred thousand times dearer to me than these are, and may this meritorious act be to me the cause of attaining Omniscience (*ibid.*).

Thus, the audience is delighted as he completes *Pāramitā* even at this painful moment which helps him in the process of spiritual development. Seeing the tusks, the queen is also reminded of her past birth as the wife of the elephant and touched with sympathy, she falls dead. As the seeds of vengeance were stored in the depth of her psyche, she wanted to have vengeance that she was forced from inside as a vow of the *saṁsāra*. The audience pities her at the end feeling sorry for the death because at that moment she is reminded of her husband in her previous birth as a she-elephant. Thus, the death of both the elephant and the Queen Subhaddā produces catharsis because the deaths relieve the audience of their emotional heaviness. On the other hand, the elephant completes a *Pāramitā* and as a result, he reaches a kind of spirituality, and it is not a type of spirituality for the queen but an accumulation of *kamma* in the *saṁsāra*.

A similar incident is brought out in *Culladhammapāla Jātaka* (No.358) which is full of tragic events that keep the audience in

suspense throughout the story. The assassination of the prince moves the audience with suspense till the end of the life of the prince. The audience is filled with pity and fear with the death of the prince, but his tolerance creates pleasure in them with the realization that he is the Bodhisatta. Moreover, the punishment that the father receives for his cruelty of murdering his own son relieves the audience on one hand as they feel that he should be punished for such a serious sin.

Conclusion

Both Shakespearean plays and Buddhist *Jātaka* stories display aesthetic and literal excellence as representations of classical literature. They are equally important in terms of literary value, having a rich display of egression of catharsis which supports the success of the plots. While the audience is exposed to an entire mastery of literary experience in the works of the two genres, finally removes the audience from their emotional heaviness. Thus, they are made to enjoy the pieces light-heartedly. The two genres show a disparity in the manner the characters purge their emotions, as well as the writers, make the audience do the same. In characters in the plays tend to take revenge on each other whereas the characters in *Jātakas* mostly tend to forgive their enemies. This illustrates the maturing process of the characters in *Jātakas*. On the other hand, they are highly didactic, and the audience is exposed to a lot of Buddhist values. Thus, cathartic egression differs in the two genres that are produced in two cultural, social and religious backgrounds.

Endnotes

- 1 A wide range of discussion on theatrical matters could be found in *Réflexions Critiques sur la poèsei et sur la peinture* by Jean Dubos (1670-1742). Dubos following Descartes claim that tragedy is a superior form of literature compared to comedy as it functions a stimuli to deep emotions like pity and fear that are superior to amusement and scorn in a comedy. According to Dubos the spectator must be identified with the hero who must never be an evil man but rather someone estimable who is excessively punished for his errors in order to feel these emotions. *Theories of the Theatre-Historical and critical survey from the Greeks to the present* by Carlson Marvin

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Biographycal Note

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