

An Interpretative Analysis of Aristotle's Ideal Tragic Hero in Contemporary Indian Hindi Cinema

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ABSTRACT

The enduring significance of Aristotle's narrative techniques in shaping the Ideal Tragic Hero resonates even in contemporary cinema. This paper critically investigates how Aristotle's framework for constructing the Ideal Tragic Hero, as outlined in *The Poetics*, has been adapted to shape male protagonists in the modern Indian Hindi films, *Aashiqui 2* and others. It explores the reciprocal relationship between literature and cinema and focuses on characters who exemplify Aristotle's traits of being neither impeccable in virtue nor wholly villainous but embodying the intermediate kind who undergo *hamartia* (tragic flaw), *peripeteia* (reversal of fortune), and *anagnorisis* (recognition). While certain modern limitations exist, the protagonists largely adhere to Aristotle's paradigms, illuminating how his classical theories continue to influence modern narrative forms.

Keywords: tragic hero, Aristotle, narrative, hamartia, peripeteia, anagnorisis, Indian cinema

I INTRODUCTION

This study aims to deepen understanding of Aristotle's critical theories by examining their impact on cinematic narratives, focusing on his concept of the Ideal Tragic Hero in two prominent Indian Hindi films: *Aashiqui 2* and *Raanjhanaa*. In today's interdisciplinary world, literature and cinema sustain a dynamic exchange. Aristotle's influence remains profound, particularly through his seminal treatise, *The Poetics*, which meticulously discusses tragedy as a literary form and articulates the characteristics of the Ideal Tragic Hero. This analysis concentrates on character portrayal along Aristotelian lines and deliberately sets aside socio-political and cultural expositions to focus on narrative and character study.

Aristotle and *The Poetics*

Aristotle (384–322 B.C.), a Greek philosopher and scientist from Stagira, Macedonia, authored *The Poetics* between circa 335 B.C. and 324 B.C. The treatise, encompassing 26 chapters over approximately 45 pages, dedicates chapters 6 through 19 to tragedy's definition and essential elements. Chapter 15 extensively discusses tragic characters, introducing Aristotle's influential concept of the Ideal Tragic Hero.

Aristotle defines tragedy as “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 the actions, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions” (Butcher, *Poetics* VI). Tragedy aims to project a serious subject, invoking pity and fear to purify such emotions in the audience, primarily through the actions and experiences of the Tragic Hero.

Concept of the Ideal Tragic Hero

According to Aristotle, the Ideal Tragic Hero must be a person of high standing: “one of those people who are held in great esteem and enjoy great good fortune” (Heath xlv). Examples include Oedipus, King of Thebes; Dr. Faustus, a revered physician; Hamlet, Prince of Denmark; Othello, the noble Moor of Venice; King Lear, ruler of Britain; and Macbeth, a distinguished soldier turned king. Tragedy fundamentally concerns individuals of high status and good moral character, although lower-class characters appear peripherally without central focus (Heath).

However, Aristotle stresses that an exceptionally virtuous person cannot be a

tragic hero as their fall evokes neither pity nor fear. Conversely, a completely wicked individual is unsuitable because their downfall merely satisfies a sense of justice. The ideal tragic hero is thus an “intermediate sort of person,” combining both good and bad qualities, enabling audience identification and evoking the required emotional response (Golden 3; Heath xxxiii). Such a figure’s fall affects not only themselves but often society, as in the case of Oedipus’s impact on Thebes. The internal struggle of this intermediate character reflects “common humanity” with which common people can easily empathize.

Hamartia, Peripeteia, and Anagnorisis

A critical requisite is *hamartia*, often interpreted as a tragic flaw but more accurately an “error in judgment” or “missing the right mark” (Golden 3). Examples include Oedipus’s ignorance of his parentage, Creon’s edict against Polyneices’s burial, Dr. Faustus’s necromancy, Hamlet’s procrastination, and King Lear’s misjudgment dividing his kingdom. Malcolm Heath elucidates that *hamartia* includes moral errors not implying wickedness (Heath xxxiii).

The tragic plot requires *peripeteia*, a reversal of fortune, and *anagnorisis*, a pivotal moment of truth or realization—a “flash of sudden light in darkness” (Lucas 95). Aristotle’s conclusions draw from Greek tragedies featuring men of high eminence, yet he simultaneously acknowledges shifts in modern sensibilities.

Modern Tragedy and the Common Man

Modern tragedy, reflecting intellectual changes by Copernicus, Darwin, and Freud, departs from emphasizing high eminence to highlight the common man. Larry Brown notes humanity’s shaken self-esteem over 300 years, shifting tragedy’s subjects to personal, not societal, impact. Contemporary playwrights such as Shaw, Miller, and Eliot exemplify this through characters like *Saint Joan*’s peasant girl, Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* and *The Crucible* featuring ordinary men confronting inner and social conflicts.

These narratives align with Aristotle’s emotional aims while accommodating changed contexts (Brown; Miller; Eekan).

II LITERATURE REVIEW

Aashiqui 2:

Rahul Jaykar as Tragic Hero

Aashiqui 2 (dir. Mohit Suri, 2013) portrays Rahul Jaykar, a celebrated singer battling alcoholism. Rahul embodies the ideal tragic hero’s traits: eminence as an artist and a flawed temperament marked by destructive addiction. His resolution to elevate Arohi Shirke’s career amid personal decline reflects his *hamartia*—passion tainted by self-damage. His confrontational behaviors early in the film reinforce his tragic complexity (Suri 00:07:47; 01:34:36).

Peripeteia unfolds as Arohi rises while Rahul sinks, a reversal illustrating tragedy’s fall and pride. Rahul’s *anagnorisis* arrives when overhearing comments indicating his presence harms Arohi’s success, leading to his tragic departure (Suri 01:04:49). Critics acknowledge this juxtaposition: “She shines while he stays in her shadow” (Times of India).

Raanjhanaa:

Kundan Shankar’s Tragic Journey

Raanjhanaa (dir. Anand L. Rai, 2013) explores Kundan Shankar, a son of a Tamil priest whose passionate love for Zoya Haider precipitates his downfall. Kundan’s status as commoner and his mixture of flaws and virtues align with Aristotle’s intermediate character. Instances of arrogance and deceit are balanced by deep loyalty and love (Ray).

Kundan’s *hamartia* is his impulsive revelation of Zoya’s lover’s true identity, triggering violent consequences. His acceptance of impending death, despite foreseeing betrayal, marks *anagnorisis*. The narrative’s tragic arc reflects Aristotelian components within a localized cultural framework (Ray).

Beyond *Aashiqui 2* and *Raanjhanaa*, several other Hindi films compellingly embody

Aristotle's principles of the Ideal Tragic Hero, enriching the discourse on modern tragedy in Indian cinema.

Tamasha (2015), directed by Imtiaz Ali, presents Ved, a protagonist whose internal conflict and *hamartia* stem from his inability to reconcile societal expectations with authentic self-expression. Ved is neither exceptionally virtuous nor malevolent; his tragic flaw lies in self-alienation and repression, which gradually alienate him from his own desires and relationships. His moment of *anagnorisis*—when he embraces his true identity and breaks free from social shackles—carries the reversal of fortune archetype, amalgamating Aristotle's tragic elements within a contemporary psychological frame (Ali). *Devdas* (2002), directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali, provides another potent example with its titular character, a nobleman caught in the throes of unfulfilled love and self-destructive tendencies. Devdas's *hamartia* is his excessive pride and inability to fight societal constraints for his love, culminating in a self-endangering spiral. His high social eminence combined with tragic flaws resulting in downfall echoes classic Aristotelian tragedy. Devdas's story effectively evokes pity and fear through his demise, reinforcing Aristotle's concept despite the film's melodramatic articulation (Bhansali).

Piku (2015), directed by Shoojit Sircar, deviates somewhat by focusing on familial and personal dilemmas anchored in ordinary life. The protagonist, Piku, portrays traits of the modern tragic hero who copes with internal conflicts and external pressures. While not suffering a conventional tragic downfall, her narrative introspection and moments of realization depict *anagnorisis*, capturing subtler shades of Aristotelian tragedy oriented around common humanity and personal catharsis (Sircar).

These cinematic narratives affirm the versatility and adaptability of Aristotle's tragedy framework, articulating both the classic traits of high status and modern emphases on individual psychology and social

context. Each protagonist epitomizes the intermediate character type, displaying *hamartia* that triggers *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis*, engaging audiences with timeless themes of human frailty and moral complexity.

III CONCLUSION

Aristotle's conception of the Ideal Tragic Hero, though formulated in an ancient context, endures in modern narrative forms exemplified by *Aashiqui 2* and *Raanjhanaa*. These films' protagonists embody the intermediate character who experiences *hamartia*, *peripeteia*, and *anagnorisis*, evoking pity and fear. By focusing on personal tragedy transcending societal rank, these narratives extend Aristotle's legacy, demonstrating its adaptiveness and thematic universality.

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