Classical Foundation of Rhetorical Scholarship and its Contributions to Contemporary Rhetorics

Bal Krishna Sharma, PhD
Sharada Vidhyapeeth, Mahendranagar, Nepal

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Corresponding Author: *Balkrishna Sharma**, Email:** balkrish34@yahoo.com; ORCID:0009-0001-6727-9902*

Abstract

Broadly, this article provides a three-fold synoptic sketch of rhetoric. A survey of the historical development of rhetoric that stretches as far back as the fifth century BC in Greece dominates the first part. The major issue, here, highlights the challenges and ambiguities that attend the attempt in defining the term rhetoric. Leading on from this historical survey, the second part casts light on how rhetorical practices advanced beyond the pale of Greek tradition. At the center of this part is a general description of the way rhetoric was practiced and applied in a diverse domain of academic disciplines. The last part focuses on the awareness that rhetoric should be reconstructed and theorized in a new light. Designed on qualitative methodology, especially as an attempt of library research, this paper draws on secondary sources. In addition to providing a general acquaintance, this article tries to carve out the changes that the scholarship of rhetoric has undergone, which might benefit the nascent researchers pursuing rhetorical scholarship in future.

Keywords: Rhetoric, Civic Discourse, Rhetorical Scholarship, Multi-model Composition

Introduction

If rhetoric is what is generally professed to be an art of speaking or expressions, this very characteristic provokes detractors to label it as a discourse that is full of sound, signifying nothing. For them, rhetoric is to be contrasted with action, which implies that rhetoric is an empty talk. Allegation does not end here. It is even associated with spins and lies. Political speeches are replete with accusations and recriminations, with each speaker alleging their opponents of merely saying virtually nothing. The evolutionary growth of the term rhetoric is actually punctuated with denunciation, on the one hand, and an attempt to establish it as an honorable discipline of study on the other. As a corrective response to the misconception that rhetoric promotes trickery and lacks forthrightness, it is imperative to make a general survey of the historical development and academic tradition of the term. This article is one of the gestures toward this corrective response. The article first addresses the context responsible for the narrow conception of rhetoric while tracing the debates that underpin the philosophical trajectory of the term rhetoric. Next, it sketches a map for expanding scope and prospects of rhetorical scholarship.

A number of prior studies have focused on the historical reconstruction of rhetorical scholarship, limited only to chronological delineation. While it is necessary to understand that rhetoric has a long academic lineage, it is equally important to know that its scope has expanded exponentially in the multi-model medium of communication in the modern age. This article attempts to correct the misconception— rhetoric is tantamount to deception— by highlighting its academic legacy, trends and characteristics, beginning from the classical period to the present. Under a qualitative research design, this paper, as an archival rendition, tries to bring out a historical overview of rhetorics by explicating secondary sources. Since this paper aims at making a survey, its reviews are confined to the books and journals of the history of rhetoric.

Classical Foundation

Despite rhetoric's inauspicious beginning, its academic lineage of civic discourse dates back to around the fifth century BC in Greece. Originally concerned with “the art of public speaking” rhetoric engages human faculty of communicative skills primarily with the purpose of persuasion or influencing

people's decision and action (Habib 65). It promotes a peaceful means of tackling an issue in a civilized way, allowing "people to make important choices without resorting to less palatable means of persuasion—coercion or violence" (Crowley and Hawhee 2). The first recorded use of rhetoric as a civic discourse "to help individuals reclaim confiscated property after warfare" (Brenda Lamb 108) in Syracuse on the island of Sicily in the fifth century BC resonates Lloyd F. Bitzer's defense of rhetoric as a discourse that "functions ultimately to produce action or change in the world" (4). As a means to "deter violence and coercion"(Crowley and Hawhee 2), rhetoric effects changes, "not by the direct application of energy to objects, but by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action" (Bitzer 4). Clearly, rhetoric then was deemed as peaceful means of negotiations and judgment.

Apart from long academic and honorable tradition, rhetoric has been shoved to defensive ever since it was pitied against what is called knowledge, truth and wisdom. The primary assumption that to use language rhetorically is to employ it unscrupulously dominates pervasively even today, drawing suspicions and grimaces in contemporary society. Reflecting the unfortunate scenario that rhetoric is associated with deceit and guile, George A. Kennedy expresses a concern that "in a popular usage, rhetoric often carries a negative connotation" ("Historical Survey" 4). Echoing Kennedy, Jim A. Kuypers and Andrew King consent that "[t]he words rhetoric has had some negative meanings attached to it throughout the centuries" (1). Foss concedes Kennedy, Kuypers and King, and adds that the term rhetoric is held to be synonymous with "empty, bombastic language that has no substance" (3). Unfortunately, rhetoric is widely perceived as a deliberate use of language to deceive and bewilder.

The act of assessing rhetoric in pejorative terms is, however, not a new phenomenon. Rhetoric has fallen into disrepute ever since the word first appeared in Plato's dialogue, *Gorgias*, in which Socrates confronting Gorgias, an eminent sophist of the time, questions him on various dimensions of rhetoric. Gorgias is alleged to have promoted what Socrates calls a bad rhetoric, a discourse that hides truth and forthrightness. Joining the fray, Aristophanes through *The Clouds* zaps sophists of his time along a similar line.

He likens sophists to the amorphous clouds that can take any shape and assumes treacherous forms. His main criticism is that through some subtle language manipulation, rhetoricians, like the shapeless clouds, are evasive in what they say. Aristophanes fears that this kind of knackery gravely undermines justice in the society, at least he thought so. Plato accuses sophists in the name of philosophy, asking them to prove rhetoric's epistemological and ontological positions. He calls sophists nomads and their rhetorics without domiciles. Plato denigrates them because they disseminate falsehood and trickery. He censures rhetoric as a “defective and incomplete art” for three reasons: it is “rooted in a false ontology” (“its reliance on appearance”), second, it is “epistemically deficient” (“its entanglement with opinion”) and third, “linguistic opportunism” (Gaonkar 5). Thus, Plato criticizes rhetoric for its shallowness and superficiality, and for him, it was indistinguishable from falsehood, lies, and trickery. That Plato and Aristophanes' indictment on rhetoric lingers on even today may partly be responsible for rhetoric's tarnished image, exposing it to public scorn or ridicule.

The denunciation of Aristophanes and Plato is, however, not the last verdict on rhetoric. Although rhetoric was branded as a specious form of discourse, promoting only falsehood and trickery, it was never out of practice, ranging from ordinary parlance to the serious academic and public discourses. Aristotle, disciple of Plato and staunch apologist of rhetoric, strongly takes up the cudgel in favor of rhetoric and establishes an organized body of theory, the first systemic explanation about rhetoric. Through his first treatise *The Rhetoric*, a rejoinder to Aristophanes and Plato, he lays a foundation of rhetoric as an organized and systematic means of public communication. Very early on in this book, Aristotle defines rhetoric “as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion” (1). Aristotle's defense of rhetoric as an effective means to influence rescues rhetoric from being dubbed pejoratively and restores to it the reputation that it had enjoyed during the time of sophists. That rhetorical discourse is related to affairs that concerned with civic life of the time, to show that rhetoric is beyond "ignoble flattery " ("Aristotle Defense of Rhetoric" 659), Aristotle divides it into three distinct discourses: forensic, deliberative and epideictic, and into three modes of appeals: logos, pathos and ethos. To a considerable extent, this formulation

helps Aristotle to answer Plato's criticism that rhetoric as a nomadic and lacks substance.

Two of Aristotle's counterparts are the Roman duo Cicero and Quintillian. Rhetoric's modern incarnation of speech and composition owes much to the five canons that Cicero devised: invention, arrangement, style, memory and delivery. The Roman contribution extends the scope of rhetoric beyond persuasion, establishing it as an important part of public discourse and its application expanding in as diverse a field as “popular assemblies,” “law courts,” “civil service and military” (Kuypers and King 2). For Cicero, rhetoric was “a means of serving the people” (Kuypers and King 2). As a rhetorician, his instructions “moved beyond merely regurgitating the precepts of the handbooks, insisting in his mature works that his ideal orator be equipped with all the noble arts . . .” (May 1). Cicero's appropriation of the Greek ideas of rhetoric to the needs of the Roman people establishes it as a pragmatic form of discourse.

Cicero's compatriot Quintilian lends new momentum to rhetoric. Quintilian, “Rome’s greatest teacher and codifier of rhetorical knowledge” (Kuypers and King 2), describes rhetoric not just an art but as a means to promote a politically astute, virtuous and vibrant citizen. He emphasizes the ethical dimension of rhetorical training. For him, rhetoric was “the art of the good citizen speaking well” (Herrick 107). St. Augustine, a professor in rhetoric in Milan, believes that the power of rhetoric should be used for righteous purposes, reasoning that “since the Devil had full access to all the available resources of rhetoric, others ought to study it if only for their protection” (Kuypers and King 2).

The unprecedented use of rhetoric proliferated during the middle-ages in diverse domains, ranging from cathedral schools to university and from composing sermons to royal proclamations. Beyond poetry and letter writing, even bureaucracies are guided by rhetorical rubrics (Kuypers and King 2). This transition of rhetoric from an art of public oratory to a wider domain of communication led to “a tradition of discourse that has been taught throughout Western history and continues to grow and to develop down to our own time” (Kuypers and King 2). Thus, since the time of classical antiquity rhetoric takes

on a new lease of life undergoing transformation in terms of its definition and application.

Rhetoric continues to flourish in various epochs. In the Renaissance period, rhetoric occupied “a high status it had enjoyed at the time of Cicero”. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, rhetoric was on the same domain as “philosophy, literature, and politics”. In the seventeenth century, the Italian rhetorician Giambattista Vico extended “the intellectual scope of rhetoric to include the study of language and the evolution of society”. With the proliferation of literacy during the late eighteenth century, rhetoric expands “beyond matters of political and legal conflict to areas of reading, criticism, and judgment”. Similarly, in the nineteenth century, rhetorical theorists approached rhetoric “as a form of individual intellectual training” with the purpose of informing, persuading and entertaining “any audience at any time on any occasion”. With the establishment of academic department devoted to the study of rhetoric in the early twentieth century, the practitioners of rhetoric revive “the full range of classical tradition and greatly expanded the study of rhetoric”. Thus, rhetorical scholarship encompasses not just public speaking; it includes “discourse in print, radio, television and the Internet in many different forms and settings”. The study of rhetoric cuts across “a whole spectrum of academic subjects, and has become one of the central disciplines of our time” (Kuypers and King 5). Over the centuries, the scope of rhetoric widens and is considered a broad and comprehensive mode of communications.

The classical form of rhetorical theory in the tradition of Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian describes rhetoric in the formal dimension of five canons and three genres. The canons are codified as invention, disposition, style, memory, and delivery (Selzer 284). The practice of rhetoric involves these five rhetorical activities, employed for the presentation of a discourse. The first of these, invention, refers to the careful consideration of resources, finding and selection of information for persuasive acts. This signifies the planning of strategies (Selzer 284). Disposition arranges rhetorical materials to make the arguments at hand strong and effective. It presents the materials into a “shape best designed to maximize the strong arguments, minimize the weak ones and flow as if inexorably to its conclusion” (Leith 81). Once the rhetorical material is shaped and the structure is determined, the next stage is concerned with

style. It exploits the stock of lexical, syntactic, and phonological structures by means of which a rhetor attempts to foreground the aesthetic aspect in a communication text. The last two canons, memory and delivery, are about the recollection of rhetorical resources, memorization of what has been invented and arranged and the last one involves the way a rhetorical message is presented or conveyed to the audience (Selzer 284). These five canons generally describe "the actions of a rhetor, from preliminary planning to final delivery" (Selzer 284). Classical rhetoric constitutes a clearly laid out five-fold methodological classifications for neo-Aristotelian rhetorical criticism.

The three genres of epideictic, forensic and deliberative rhetoric are the division of speeches into categories. In *A New History of Classical Rhetoric*, Kennedy states that this division is "still useful in categorizing forms of discourse today" (4). The first of these genres, epideictic, is characteristic of ceremonial discourse, reflecting public ceremonies and events dealing with the issues of praise and blame at a given present occasion. The forensic discourse, usually occurring in courtrooms, denotes the questions of guilt, justice, and innocence, about the actions done in the past. Lastly, the deliberative rhetoric addresses civic and social issues and is typically oriented toward the future course of action. Its goal is to establish policies and argue about the future good (Hill 49). This three-fold division represents both the settings and the purposes for which a rhetorical discourse is made.

Current State of Rhetorical Scholarship

Over the years, there has been a remarkable shift in the definition of rhetoric and its application, showing how the contemporary scholarship of rhetorical studies has expanded considerably--addressing a more multiple range of domains than was the case in the classical times. Most traditional rhetorical discourses were restricted to training speakers to be effective persuaders in public settings like courtrooms and assemblies. The contemporary applications of rhetoric, however, advance beyond the speaker-audience format of communications and investigate an array of human discourses like the natural and social sciences, fiction, history, and journalism. In the early 1920s, Hoyt Hopewell Hudson anticipated "broadening the paths of rhetorical study to include pamphleteering, newspapers, editorial writing, radio broadcasting,

advertising, propaganda, and others" (Hill 39). In *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times*, Kennedy sums up the proliferation of rhetoric: "rhetorical studies have enjoyed a renaissance in the last third of the twentieth century" (293). Similarly, Steven Mailloux highlights a broad application of rhetoric as it "provides a vehicle for crossing disciplinary borders to do critical work in various intellectual spaces" (2). Likewise, rhetoric has progressed into multiple areas of studies since its inception in the Greco-Roman world. Thomas, o, Sloane captures this ever-expanding feature of rhetoric thus:

> Rhetoric is one of the Western world's oldest disciplines. From ancient Greece and Rome to the modern era, the art of persuasion has been used, discussed, and debated for over twenty-four hundred years. In recent times, scholars in such areas as philosophy, literary theory, and communications have renewed their attention to rhetoric as a way of understanding many areas of culture and social life. (1)

Sullivan argues that "rhetoric should not be thought of as a peculiarly Greco-Roman cultural activity, but as a global phenomenon, indeed as a universal function of language…" (103). This versatility of rhetoric reflects that rhetorical scholarship and practice moves beyond the Greco-Roman social life and incorporates diverse fields of human activity.

Reflecting on the state of rhetorical scholarship in the present time, another rhetorical theorist Krista Ratcliffe maintains that rhetorical studies have become "diverse" (185), cutting across an array of academic disciplines, including "advertising, anthropology, classics, communication, critical theory, economics, ethnic studies, philosophy, psychology, rhetoric and composition, theater, theology, transnational politics, and women's and gender studies" (185). The scope of rhetorical study also encompasses "art, architecture, cityscapes, monuments, handicrafts, and many more human-made objects" (Condit 371). Rhetorical scholarship is characterized as eclectic and has made inroads into such fields as feminist studies, religion, cultural studies, poststructuralism and technical writing. Of late, its methods of criticism have become rich since 1960s. Since then, there has been what Kuypers calls "an incredible expansion of perspectives". He recognizes "over 60 formally

recognized perspectives . . . with many more being used" ("Rhetorical Criticism" 17). Thus, a striking aspect of rhetoric is its expanding application in fields that incorporates a wide variety of subjects and disciplines.

New media and formats of communications such as print, audio, and video are emerging apace. In this context, rhetorical scholars have stressed the need of expanding the application of rhetoric to keep abreast with this changing scenario. Marouf Hasian addresses this new situation and states, "In a transnational world filled with mobile signifiers, commodities, and diasporic communities, our traditional ways of thinking about rhetorical theories, methods, and criticism will have to undergo massive changes" (24). Likewise, Barabara Warnick, an internet discourse researcher and pioneer to begin researching the internet rhetoric, argues that the traditional notion of rhetorical criticism "will need to be changed to suit new communication environments" (73). Warnick believes that traditional rhetoric cannot encompass what he calls "new media forms of communication" (61) and emphasizes the "interactive and web-based communication" so that "users could enter one environment, jump to another environment, construct their own identities in a text-based world, and play with all the possibilities of language use and interaction" (61). The shift of the focus from traditional rhetoric to that of the internet-based marks a major transition in the study of rhetorical scholarship.

New Trends

Two significant trends stand out in how rhetoric is conceptualized in contemporary rhetorical scholarship. One way is to perceive rhetoric as invitation. This view challenges the previously conceived view that rhetoric as a persuasive discourse involves a deliberate strategy of controlling human environment. That traditional rhetoric reflects deeply entrenched "patriarchal bias" (Foss and Griffin 2) is an attempt to think of rhetoric in a completely new perspective. In line with this view, an alternative rhetoric is "proposed, one grounded in the feminist principles of equality, immanent value and self-determination" (Foss and Griffin 2). Foss and Griffin maintain that persuasive rhetoric, characterized of traditional rhetoric, is essentially a conscious attempt to influence and control human affairs, which stymies the prospect of alternative worldviews. They propose a rhetoric that not only allows for

"choice" (3) but also invites alternative viewpoints. The second dominant view emphasizes identification as "the central concern within the new rhetoric" (Hansen 51). Kenneth Burke, the proponent of this new rhetoric, espouses the fact that human beings converge on a common ground because they identify with one another in a certain way. Burke argues that while classical rhetoric is concerned with persuasion, modern rhetoric is marked off by identification.

Recently, practitioners and researchers of rhetoric have turned their attention to the non-western tradition of rhetoric. This new trend comes under the broad category of comparative rhetoric. Practitioners have realized the need to unearth the "regretfully overlooked" area of the "rhetorical heritage of the East" (Jensen 135). Termed as "Asian rhetoric," this new classification shows a marked difference from the Greco-Roman rhetorical tradition, and its practitioners "have started to study Asian rhetorical practices in their own social, historical, and cultural contexts" (Wang 171). Against the "verbal expression" of the Western rhetorical tradition, which is its distinctive characteristic, the eastern tradition "honors non-expression, silence, the nonverbal, the softness and subtlety of ambiguity and indirectness, the insights of intuition, and the avoidance of clash of opinion in order to preserve harmony" (Jensen 135). This new attention to the eastern rhetoric illuminates the fact that rhetoric is not just "a unique product of Western culture" (Combs 10). The attention to non-western practice of rhetoric marks an important transition in the study of rhetoric.

Rhetorical scholarship has undergone changes over the years to keep abreast with the changing needs of human society. Each successive era has been characterized by a distinctive kind of rhetorical discourse. In the 21st century, rhetorical practitioners approached rhetorics from a perspective different from those prevalent in the classical periods. Traditionally, focus was on how rhetorical arts and techniques were employed to influence and move people's action or decision. As against this practice, scholars are now concerned with how "history and culture have shaped the practice of rhetoric itself" (Kuypers and King 4). Rhetorical scholars have also sought to establish rhetoric as a universal phenomenon rather than just a privilege of Greco-Roman worlds.

Conclusion

Rhetoric is a situated discursive activity concerned with practical issues and situations. Analogous to this aspect of rhetoric as a technique of deliberation can be found in antiquity. Although being embedded to civic life, it has not, however, remain immune to criticism. One scathing indictment comes from Plato, who along with Aristophanes censures rhetoric for promoting what he calls a bad rhetoric. Aristotle's cogent exposition of rhetoric as a distinct and specifiable subject provides a decent answer to Plato's denigration. Cicero and Quintilian, in the Roman period, broaden the scope of rhetoric. Their emphasis on the ethical and pedagogical dimension illustrates an additional contribution to rhetorical scholarship. More developments follow in the ensuing centuries in varied ways. Discussion on rhetoric advances beyond the pale of Greco-Roman culture, recognizing the fact that rhetoric is a global phenomenon. While civic discourse remains a sole concern of rhetoric in classical time, rhetoric in contemporary time is understood as underlying almost every human activity. Ever expanding territory of human knowledge necessitates re-conceptualization and re-appropriation of rhetoric, requiring scholars to develop new perspectives and theories of rhetoric. Hence, persuasion is not the key term of rhetoric now as it is for classical rhetoricians. Instead, identification (Burke) and invitation (Foss and Griffin) feature emphatically as the modern form of rhetoric. Very recently, there has been a renewed attention to draw a new boundary of rhetoric in a profound way. Along this line, twentieth century rhetorical theorists are trying to explore the non-western characteristics of rhetoric as distinguished from that of western ones.

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