

RHETORIC: A CATALYST FOR SOCIO – POLITICAL MOBILIZATION

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ABSTRACT

Rhetoric is concerned with the principal art of shaping and colouring of public character. It has the capacity to colour people's perceptions, attitudes, directions, beliefs, responses, choices, habits and all that make up public character. It largely depends on a skilful use of language in its oral or written form. Private and public situations are strictly guided by ethical standards for the purpose of influencing the behaviour of an audience of listeners or readers in observable, discernible and perceptible ways for their own good. In any society, one's ability to make a good, scholarly and befitting speech is in deed highly rated. In fact, the extent to which one is able to make a highly intelligent speech that is rendered or presented in a refined language has been regarded as a parameter for measuring one's academic excellence. In all spheres of human endeavours, acquiring the needed skills for the art (rhetoric) definitely enhances a tremendous success. It is for these reasons, therefore that this piece focuses on what rhetoric is its historical evolution, different delivery modes, why it should be studied by opinion moulders irrespective of divergence of disciplines, styles, among other things.

INTRODUCTION

Man's ability to make speech differentiates and distinguishes him from the brute lower animals. The desire to express one's heart feeling or thought and the ability to do it effectively determines, to a very significant extent, his success. Speech making is indeed very fundamental to man's existence. Our concern in this paper is to examine how rhetoric (oration) can be used as a means of political and social mobilisation. Thus, by giving the right word and accent, one can always move the whole world.

A Brief Historical Evolution of Rhetoric

The development of rhetoric as a liberal art in public speaking is traced and dated back to seven stages: Greek (500 – 300BC), Latin (300 BC – 400AD), Medieval (400 – 1300AD), Renaissance (1300 – 1750AD), Elocutionary and Classical Revival (1750 – 1915AD), Modern Scientific Behavioural (1915 – 1950AD) and Modern Philosophical Analysis (1950 1970AD) (Wilson and Arnold) (1974). It is imperative to note that each of these periods of the study and practice of rhetoric was dominated by prominent scholars and indeed influenced by political, philosophical and cultural learning of the day.

However, for the purpose and scope of this paper, we shall briefly discuss them under three major headings: -

- (a) The Greco–Roman Period
- (b) The medieval–Renaissance period and
- (c) The Modern Scientific Philosophical Period

(a) The Greco–Roman Period

The study of rhetoric originated with the Greeks. Its growth was said to have been aided by the influence of democratic forms of governments whose ordinary citizens could defend themselves. To enhance their chances of winning court cases, citizens enlisted or sought the services of speech writers and counsellors for fees. They were taught that their positions, that is, the position they advocated, was more true than their opponent's intention. Foremost and prominent among them were Corax of Syracuse together with his pupils Georgia and Tisias. Both Corax and Tisias were the first to analyze the important elements of an effective speech. Along with many rhetors, they formed themselves into a group of lecturers and writers known as sophist orators. The sophists were said to have placed the ability to argue persuasively above a regard for truth. They were particularly known for skills with which they could prove or disprove anything whether just or unjust. Wealthy and highly influential Greeks patronized them (the sophists) which actually necessitated why they flourished in the fifth and fourth centuries B. C. They trained young men who wished to know or receive instruction on how to speak and argue in public. They were the first to produce a handbook on the art of rhetoric and that they were usually called upon to speak on legislative, judicial and administrative matters. Farrell (1993:61 – 62):

Almost by any standards of judgment ancient or modern, Aristotle wrote the book on rhetoric (it) offers first and perhaps the only. Philosophical justification for what rhetoric must be if it is to be a fully realized, artistically significant human practice.

(b) The Medieval Renaissance Period

St. Augustine was said to have produced the greatest study on rhetoric during the late medieval period. Also, works of scholars like Francis Bacon, Fendon, Sheridan, Compbell and so forth. A prominent feature of the study and practice of rhetoric during this period was that, from time to time, a particular aspect would be projected far beyond others as constituting the heart of the subject. Sometimes, it was style, sometimes delivery and at another time, the problem was what to say. Wilson and Arnold described the work of rhetorist of this period as “the area of dressing logical argument with ornament of style”.

(c) The Modern Scientific Philosophical Period

Emphasis during this age in the development of rhetoric is on research to find what is true, adding it to what is commonly known and adjusting both to the desires of the audience. Here, image makers continue to speculate about the nature and impact of the speaker's character and reputation in rhetoric. It is understood here that some audiences and some subjects have more influence than the speaker himself. One thing is very spectacular here;

there is the emphasized need for public speakers.

Thus far, efforts have been made to elaborately define and fully explain what rhetoric presupposes. Its historical evolution and development have equally been looked at. It is imperative for us to examine how it can be effectively utilized as an effective tool for socio-political mobilization.

- Rhetoric enhances the ability to speak well either as teachers / lecturers, trainers, actors / actresses or even as chief executives in organized institutions.
- It helps in making us to become aware of the need to develop certain skills that will help us to attain personal goal and enhance career prospects. One's ability to perform brilliantly at a job interview, for example, depends on one's rhetorical ability.
- One learns to analyze, evaluate and avoid persuasive appeals that are daily confronting us from every angle (appeals to buy, behave, attend, vote, donate and avoid persuasive miscalculations).
- Socially too, rhetoric becomes very relevant in that it helps in improving one's ability to inform, motivate, explain and support one's aims and ideas.
- It also serves as a means of moving the nation forward by creating awareness on socio-political matters that affect people's lives and making them to reason along and giving their support.
- It prepares us fully and effectively to participate in the discussions of public affairs / significance.
- Prominent among political role is the fact that, it helps to develop leadership prestige and influence.
- With rhetoric, one is able to manage public business and avoid serious problems that could result from incompetent deliberations.
- With the knowledge of rhetoric, one becomes increasingly effective in the ability to look critically at the factual, emotional and logical aspects about any socio-political as well as economic issues.
- One's understanding of rhetoric will go a long way in enhancing one's sensitivity to critical issues.
- If effectively used, rhetoric shapes, influences and colours people's attitudes; directs their actions, sustains and changes their choices or habits as well as their beliefs.
- The knowledge of rhetoric will automatically enable one to speak convincingly and persuasively on legislative, judicial and administrative matters.
- Rhetoric is undoubtedly being used effectively by politicians to influence, change, and sharpen or affect behaviours especially in winning their political sympathy.
- Great labour leaders or unionists have used it in mobilizing and sensitizing their members toward a particular course of action.
- In schools and colleges, the relevance of rhetoric cannot be over stressed. It has also helped great ministers of God to pool huge crowds and win several converts.
- It is a powerful and highly effective tool for socio-political mobilization. It is greatly valued in many societies as a means of achieving consensus in a setting.

With rhetoric, one stands the chance to excel in education, politics sports, religion, entertainment, law and businesses.

What is Rhetoric?

Rhetoric has been described in a number of ways, depending on the aspect uppermost on the author's or writer's mind. The content, meaning, worth, practice and function of rhetoric in a society has undoubtedly continued to change for those who practise and study it. A few definitions of what rhetoric presupposes from various scholars or rhetors would be examined here so as to have a good understanding of the subject matters. For instance, when Aristotle (384-322 B.C) defines rhetoric as the skill of speaking persuasively in public situations, the term includes skills of speaking and writing but later when rhetoric came to include all forms of literary expressions, oratory developed as a separate but related discipline.

The emphasis on this definition is twofold. First is the materials of rhetorical inquiry, not the construction of a conversation, but the construction of a speech of some length in which speakers were given the opportunity to express themselves fully from start to finish depending on the particular speaking context. The second area of emphasis is the method or process of rhetorical composition: a small amount (breaking down) and a greater amount of building up were involved. In his own view, Hollander (1960) defines rhetoric from the view point of literary criticism. His definition underlies five principal components of rhetoric when "the study, not so much of what is said as of who is saying (speaker / writer / sender) how it is said (style), to whom it is said (audience reader / recipient) each thinks of his relationship to the other (tenor)". Writing on English composition, Braddock (1969:450) aptly describes rhetoric as:

Concerned with the effective choice of synonymous expressions, but as the effective suggests, it is concerned not with utterances only, the mere forms, but with some of their relations to other things . . . the speaker / writer, his utterance, his context (Occasion or medium), his audience (listener reader), his purpose the effect that he intends his audience to believe and the effect of his utterance upon his audience.

Braddock's extended definition stresses the significance of choice in speaking which is based on certain established relationships among the various components of rhetoric. These components form networks of interrelationships in which the selection of one invariably affects or dictates the selection of another. Not only that, also revealed in the definition is the need to harmonize all the expected effects, and the actual effects may be achieved fully, partially or not at all.

In his own view, Auer's (1969:221) definition of rhetoric regards relationship as its main theme. He sees rhetoric as the management of the spoken, symbolic interaction that links speakers and listeners together. What is paramount in rhetoric is the relationship

between participants in the rhetorical situation. The success of rhetoric therefore depends largely on how well the “linking” between the participants is affected. We can infer from the above that rhetoric or public speaking is an organized manner of presenting an organized speech to achieve an organized goal. It is an off-shoot of logic, the science of human reasoning.

Wilson and Arnold (1974:11) describe rhetoric as a complex of persons, events, objects and relations presenting an actual or potential exigency (that can be modified by) creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action. From these definitions, we learn or at least can deduce that a need must exist for rhetoric to fill. There must be a void to be filled by the intervention of a number of important components. The patterns of relationship existing among those components of rhetoric situations are illustrated by this diagram from Wilson and Arnold.

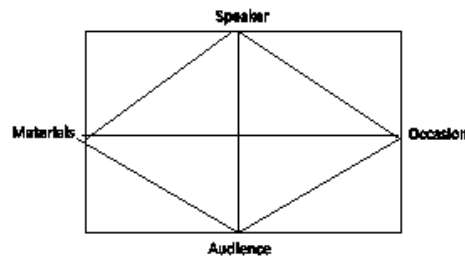


Fig. 1

Politicians and Rhetoric

Chateris Black (2005) observes that speakers, especially in political contexts, need to appeal to attitudes and emotions that are already within the listeners. When the listeners perceive that their beliefs are understood and supported, the speaker has created connections to policy that they wish to communicate. When putting forward arguments, opinions, and beliefs a speaker has to communicate at an emotional level and take standpoints that seem morally correct. Furthermore, the listener must perceive that the arguments, opinions and beliefs being advanced by the speaker are relevant to the issue. This cannot be done solely by lexical means, although linguistic performance is the most important factor (Chateris–Black 2005: 10).

Richard, Platt and Plait (1992) define rhetoric as “the study of style through grammatical and logical analysis”. It is therefore “the art or talent by which discourse is adapted to its ends”. Rhetoric can be differentiated from propaganda in the sense that while the former aims at persuading through the beauty of language, the latter seems to persuade through some negative manipulation of language.

We can infer from the above that rhetoric is the study and practice of effective communication, the art of persuasion, and an insincere eloquence intended to win points and get people what they want. Politicians get the audience's attention and vote through different rhetorical skills such as repetition, biblical allusions and citations, rhetorical questions, colloquialism, promise, use of pidgin, dressing, songs rendition, word coinage, classical, allusions, hyperbole, euphemisms and a host of others.

Furthermore, it is interesting to look at the interaction of various strategies as it is to look at each one separately (Chateris – Black 2005:11) Jones and Wareing (1999 : 34) argue that the ability to convey the message that the speaker and listener want plays a decisive role in the process of establishing an ideology.

To strike an equal balance between the audience and the speaker, politicians often make use of symbols to foster national unity. (Ball and Peters 2000:81).

Contemporary studies of rhetoric, according to *Wikipedia*, address a more diverse range of domains than was the case in ancient times. While classical rhetoric trained speakers to be effective persuaders in public forums and institutions like courtrooms and assemblies, contemporary rhetoric investigates human discourse. Rhetoricians have studied the discourses of a wide variety of domains, including the natural and social sciences, fine art, religion, journalism, digital media, architecture, along with the more traditional domains of politics and the law.

In the words of Arristole, in his essay on rhetoric, rhetoric is, “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion (4). According to him the art of persuasion could be used in public settings in three different ways. He writes in Book I, Chapter III, that “member of the assembly decides about future events, a jurymen about past events while those who merely decide on the orator’s skill are observers. From this, it follows that there are three divisions of oratory: (1) political (2) forensic and (3) the ceremonial oratory of display” Eugene Garver, in his critique of “Aristole’s Rhetoric”, confirms that Aristotle viewed rhetoric as a civil art. Garver writes, ‘Rhetoric articulates a civic art of rhetoric, combining the almost incompatible properties of techniques and appropriateness to citizens” (10). Each of Aristotle’s divisions plays a role in civic life and can be used in a different way to impact cities.

Hariman (1995) however, claims that questions of freedom, equality, and justice often are raised and addressed through performances ranging from debates to demonstrations without loss of moral content. White (1984) argues that rhetoric is capable not only of addressing issues of political interest, but it can also influence culture as a whole. He argues that words of persuasion and identification define community and civic life. He states that words produce “the methods by which culture is maintained, criticized and transformed”. In speeches, as well as in non-verbal forms, rhetoric continues to be used as a tool to influence communities from local to national levels. Rhetorical study has a broadened scope and is especially utilized by the field of marketing, politics and literature.

Pattern of relationship existing in a rhetorical situation

The above diagram in fig. 1 indicates at least twelve (12) interrelationships among persons, events and materials. The materials (message, content) affect and are affected by the speaker, occasion and audience. The audience influences and is influenced by materials, occasion and speaker; the speaker touches and he is touched by materials, audience and occasion while the occasion dictates and is in turn dictated to by audience, material and speaker.

Having examined some definitions offered by various scholars on rhetoric, we would like to describe rhetoric as the capacity to colour people's perceptions, attitudes, directions, beliefs and responses, that make up what we call the colouring of public characters. It must be exercised with every amount of responsibility and a high sense of morality. As an art, it entails the skills that can be taught and learned and expertise that can be developed. Rhetoric is an acquired competency which is a manner of thinking that invents possibilities for persuasions, conviction, and judgment. It must be developed, refined, critiqued and, of course, improved if it is to serve the society well in the invention of public opinion.

Being a process, an art, a finished work and a complex of relationships, it depends on a skilful use of language in its oral or written form in private and public situations. It is guided by a high ethical standard for the purpose of influencing the behaviour of an audience of listeners or readers in observable, discernible and perceptible ways for their ever-increasing standards.

RHETORIC: AN EFFECTIVE TOOL FOR SOCIO-POLITICAL MOBILIZATION

An adage says when a sieve is shaken, the refuse appears: so does a person's weaknesses when he speaks. The kiln tests the potter's vessels, so the test of a person is in his conversation and rhetorical ability. A fruit discloses the kind of a tree, so does a person's speech disclose his mind. Gray (1977) underscores the importance of rhetoric in speech behavior when he says:

“speech being a delicate, subtle and powerful form of behaviours, the way in which a thing is said is often as important as the message. Give me the right word and the right accent and I will move the whole world”.

CONCLUSION

One assumption implicit in the art of rhetoric is that people (even intelligent people) can disagree with each other. Sometimes they disagree with each other about deeply held beliefs. When such a disagreement becomes pronounced, there are two typical results – either they begin to fight, or they engage in a debate. The choice is up to every country and every citizen – do we resolve our differences by using a bullet or by engaging in rational discourse? Rhetoric removes disagreement from the arena of violence and turns it into a debate—a healthy and necessary step in any democracy.

From the foregoing, our conclusion is that rhetoric is indeed an effective tool for socio-political mobilization in that, man's actions have always been moulded, influenced and affected by lucid and highly powerful speeches.

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