

## “THE JOURNEY OF BRITISH DRAMA: FROM THE PULPIT TO THE STREETS

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### INTRODUCTION

In order to understand 20<sup>th</sup> century Drama it is necessary to have an understanding of the growth of British Drama. The history of British Drama can be traced far into the past from the Morality Plays that were a part of the Biblical fables given as Sunday lessons at church. But visual expressions of an idea can be more effective than the sermons from the pulpit its appeal being definite. (D.H.Lawrence, 1962) The Miracle Plays and the Mysteries were the result of this necessity. These plays continued to be popular till the 14<sup>th</sup> century when the Moralities took over. These Moralities were allegorical in nature with indicative names such as, ‘Repentance’, ‘Gluttony’, ‘Every Man’, ‘Pride’, ‘Avarice’, but they were presented dramatically. Moral values were presented as high points of human nature and while virtue was lauded, vice was taken to task. The public enjoyed it because it was not mere preaching but there also was entertainment through humour provided by the characters. Then came the Interludes which were now slowly approaching the New Drama but taking their cue from the Moralities. These were not actually staged in the church but during festivals when there was an interval. Farical in nature the famous author of these plays was the popular John Haywood who was known to be writing and performing at the court of Henry VIII.

The Englishman’s taste for dramatic entertainment was further encouraged by pageants. Poetry was used in praise of the Muses and classical personalities. *Gorboduck or Forrex and Porrex* written by Thomas Saquel became the earliest composition in the English language having almost all the necessary qualities of a play. Nicholas Udall, Master of Eton College, came on the stage in 1551, with his play ‘*Ralph Royster Doyster*’, the first English comedy. A vacuum followed and it was only after 15 years that another play appeared. Preaching has never been interesting to the audience for long. Being untrained and lacking the skills of language turned into an advantage with the element of humour. Though Poetry was the most prevalent form of literature of the period, drama peaked and the one and only Shakespeare overshadowed everyone who even wrote plays. Shakespeare dominated the era that injustice was done to others sometimes. In this context the University Wits need a mention. Even among them, the name of Christopher Marlowe shines most brightly so much so that critics of Shakespeare in later times have said that Shakespeare must have copied Marlowe. The plays of this period by these great artists of the theatre became almost reference points for later writers. The tragedy of this period was that hack writers without the genius of Shakespeare tried to imitate his style with the result that the whole theatre came to a standstill with Shakespeare leaving the stage in 1617.

Between this period and the arrival on the stage of the Restoration Drama there was a complete drought in theatre, thanks to the Cromwellian Rule where Puritanism made any kind of fun a sin resulting in closing of theatre and banning of any kind of entertainment by individuals or groups. The result was the Restoration of King Charles II on the English throne. Theatres opened with a burst and plays galore ruled the roost. It was for the first time that actresses adorned the English stage. This could be taken as the beginning or just the embryo of the movement for the emancipation of woman which flowered into what we today call empowerment of woman. This period of the theatre saw a plethora of plays written by a number of writers highly talented and also not so talented. They made the theatre of this time not only popular but also came up with themes borrowed from French plays. Many of them unashamedly copied Moliere of the French theatre and earned name and fame during this period. Laughter was the only thing they looked for and the audience of the time, starved for many years during the Puritanic rule, lapped up everything that was presented on the stage. The most popular character here was the cuckold who was seen with two horns on his head. The playwrights of this period knew the pulse of the audience and catered to their tastes, good, bad and indifferent, thus making them, not only popular but also rich.

The court and the king not only admired them but rewarded them profusely. The names that come uppermost to our mind are Congreve, Wycherley, Dryden, John Vanbrugh and George Etherege.

This period was followed by the Augustan Age in which prose writing dominated. There was very little dramatic literature and that too was confined to the earlier part of the period wherein we find the last plays of Congreve and John Vanbrugh. Otherwise prose writings, mostly philosophical in their tenor, dominated the scene. Names that come to our mind are John Locke, Descartes and Francis Bacon, the last named, often referred to as the Father of the modern essay. With the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads* the period of Romantic Revival in which poetry dominated was significant. Coleridge, William Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Byron shone on the horizon leaving an indelible mark as the brightest period of poetry in the history of English literature.

The Victorian period of literature lasted from 1837-1901. Long political essays, thoughts on logic and philosophy, novels, long winding novels being published in the periodicals of the time, essays on various topics, read and discussed around the fireplace by hosts and guests had become the rule of the day. In prose writings, works which are on everyone's lips even today are the novels of Dickens, Bronte sisters, Jane Austen and George Eliot. The Victorian era was dominated by prose writings, essays and most popularly the emergence of the novel.

The fact that the 20<sup>th</sup> century British theatre was started in Dublin, Ireland, with the starting of the Irish Literary Theatre by W. B. Yeats, J. M. Synge and Lady Gregory, could be called a literary irony. To provide a specifically Celtic and Irish atmosphere was their intention. New stereotypes came on the stage and the message was loud and clear as they satirised the characters of the well-made plays and showed their eagerness to move away from the Drama of frocks and frills that went before them. Until the late 1950s the Conservative Theatre opposed the encroachment upon the theatre by these 'New Ones'. 'England's Broadway', 'The West-End' produced musical comedies and well-made plays while smaller theatres and Irish venues took to new direction. Aristotle's theory of three unities suffered the most for it could not stand the test of modernisation and the movement towards which British Drama was travelling. At times the theatre went back in time to explore and conjure up the past. This came to be known as the theatre of Exorcism. Names that could be mentioned here are those of Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Andrew Lloyd Webber, Brian Friel, Caryl Churchill and Tom Stoppard. Towards the end of the century, there was a return towards realism and also significant was the founding of Europe's first Children's Cultural Centre.

The theatre movement in Britain saw various trends spearheaded by different writers who saw life and represented it as per their point of view. Psycho-analytical studies and Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung had an impact on the playwrights of the day. This gave playwrights a new opportunity to incorporate myths and realism in their plays. Writers mentioned earlier, J. M. Synge, W. B. Yeats and Lady Gregory were the persons who made this kind of plays popular. However, critics rejected much of this because of the unpleasant themes that they put on stage. Lust and love in their extremes supported by an unpleasant plot without connectivity brought down the value of these plays even amongst the audience. The wars affected the early theatre of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The fear and confusion before World War 1 gave rise to the Dada Movement which came before surrealism and expressionism.

The *AvantGarde* Theatre was another movement in which dramatists thought that everything was wrong in theatre as it then existed and something new, though may not be easily realised by many, was important and inevitable. Truth was sought to be found in symbols, images, legends, myths, fantasies and dreams. As part of the *AvantGarde* Movement came the Absurdist Drama, existentialist in nature. This kind of drama was a poetic lyrical theatre to express intuition through movement, situations and concrete imagery. With these movements, Symbolism and Aestheticism, was practised by some playwrights. Surrealism like Aestheticism was based on mysticism. The most famous British playwright in this form was Samuel Beckett. The theatre of cruelty is a part of the theatre of surrealism. Bertold Brecht has been credited with the creation of the Epic Theatre in English, based on Greek Epic Poetry. The presentation here is characterised by 'stark harsh lighting, blank stages, placards announcing changes of scenes, bands playing music on stage and long discomfiting pauses'. These movements in the development of the British Drama have been a continuous process. English Drama continued to be at very low ebb during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. On this scene arrived T. W. Robertson, a playwright and an actor. Realizing that drama at that time was at very low ebb and had poor artistic tone, he determined to set things right in his own way. In 1865 his play *Society* turned out to be a landmark in the revival of the English stage. In place of Romanticism that had ruled the roost till then he brought

in realism and also presented men and women in flesh and blood. Blank verse gave way to natural and human speech. Arthur Wing Pinero and H. A. Jones were two persons who made serious efforts to chase away Romanticism from the English stage. Pinero did away with the 'aside' and soliloquies from drama. Realism was what he was aiming at. His main thrust was that drama should not be based on sensationalism but should depend chiefly on representing English life. However, he could not in his plays run away from excitement and sensationalism and use of coincidence.

Henrik Ibsen, the Norwegian playwright, was one person who brought in real revolutionary thinking into English writings. He was introduced to the English theatre and audience by J.T. Grein a Dutchman in 1890. We now have Ibsenism in English Drama very much alive in Ibsen's characters, drawn from ordinary life. It can easily be said that with the coming of Ibsen on the stage the 'Renaissance' of Modern British Drama had begun. William Archer has been credited with having propagated the plays of Ibsen on the English stage. Victorian ideals and morals were brushed aside by Shaw and he zealously advocated rationalism and realism and in the process enlarged the vision and scope of the Drama of Ideas.

The Elizabethan Age with all its colourful personalities is yet today known as the Shakespearean Age. Moving a few centuries later one figure in another literary world altogether, the modern post industrial revolution world is that of George Bernard Shaw. From Romantic and Victorian periods to the Modern period, a revolutionary dramatical metamorphosis has taken place in the literary field. All the concepts inclusive of convention, techniques, structure, character, purpose as well as dramatic perceptions were reversed. The change of dramatic rudiments from imaginary romanticism to reality of life transformed the entire scenario with realistic approach to theatre and drama. By 1900, the theatre was a theatre of realism. The touch of reality was provided by staging, acting, and costuming as well as all the other aspects of dramatic production. Drama started reflecting a growing concern with the essentials leaving behind the superficialities of life. The new drama, the drama of serious artistic and realistic concern, began with T. W. Robertson (1829-1871). His work played an important role in the transition and transformation of drama from Victorian period to Modern period. Jones, Pinero, Gilbert, Wilde and even Shaw were Robertson's real heirs.

William Archer (1856-1924) the most influential drama critic of the New Drama movement and translator of Ibsen thought of the ages between the Puritans' closing of the theatres in 1642 and the creation of the New Drama in the 1890s as the dark ages of the drama with only a few rays of light along the way. Congreve, Wycherley, Goldsmith, Sheridan, Robertson offered a hopeful future. By 1930 the New Drama, the realistic social drama, including the Shawian Drama of Ideas, had triumphed to the extent that it was widely acknowledged that a higher drama existed exclusive of Shakespeare and the classics.

To make room for the New Woman, Shaw set out to undermine the female archetype of the passive and docile woman tied up with household duties. Shaw has argued, says Swapan Kumar, thus:

*The domestic career is no more natural to all women than the literary career is natural to all men; and although in population emergency it might become necessary for every able-bodied woman to risk her life in child-bed just as it might become necessary in a military emergency for every man to risk his life in the battlefield, yet even then it would by no means follow that the child-bearing would endow her with milk.....If we have come to think that nursery and kitchen are the natural sphere of the woman, we have done so exactly as English children come to think that a cage is a natural sphere of a parrot: because they have never seen one anywhere else.* (pp. 51)

Advancing from artificiality and superficiality inherent in the late Victorian Drama to a realistic and naturalistic drama, Shaw established and accelerated the problem plays and raised different social and political issues in his plays. His foremost objective behind drama was the reformation of society through imaginative thinking and scientific reasoning. The titles of Shaw's major plays indicate the essential importance of women. *Mrs. Warren's Profession, Candida, Major Barbara, St. Joan* etc. these titles suggest that the woman characters play a decisive role in the plays.

Thus, the history of British Drama can be traced far into the past from the Morality Plays that were a part of the Biblical fables given as Sunday lessons at church. But visual expressions of an idea can be more effective than the sermons from the pulpit its appeal being definite.

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