



DEVELOPMENT OF DRAMA FROM IBSEN UPTO PINTER

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ABSTRACT

The present paper is a part of my research entitled “**Non-Stage Plays After 1960 With Special Reference to the Radio and Screen Plays of Louis Macneice and Harold Pinter.**” In this paper, I have attempted to discuss the development of drama from Henrik Ibsen up to Harold Pinter and the contribution of MacNeice and Pinter as media dramatists. It includes the brief appraisal of the two major dramatic lines i.e. prose drama as well poetic drama and the factors responsible for the success or failure of the stage drama in both prose as well as poetry and the development of various dramatic techniques beginning with Naturalism, Expressionism, Surrealism, The Epic theater, and Absurd drama.

Moreover, we do find that with the new wave dramatists, new experiments were made within the parameter of naturalism. Pinter and MacNeice as media dramatists were fully alive to the demands made on their dramaturgy and felt drawn towards the electronic media for presenting their plays. I have selected Pinter and MacNeice as media dramatists because both were prominent figures in theater, radio, and TV. Pinter and MacNeice have been the torchbearers in the field of radio and television play production, and have opened before future dramatists to improve and improvise upon media drama along with the vistas of technology and its immense potential.

Keywords: Non-stage, media, naturalism, expressionism, surrealists, Epic Theater, Absurd Drama

INTRODUCTION

Factors of Decline of Drama in England after Shakespeare

The height of drama in England was represented by William Shakespeare in the Elizabethan age. Post-Shakespearean drama starting with Ben Jonson continuing with Beaumont, Fletcher, Dekker, Heywood, and others led to the decline of drama. This decline continued throughout the Restoration era, followed by the Romantic period and Victorian Age till the advent of the twentieth century. All the above-mentioned dramatists in their attempts to revive drama followed the Elizabethan tradition. The revival of poetic drama was attempted

by the Romantics and the Victorians, but their efforts resulted in failure. Tracing the general survey of the drama in mid-Victorian England, Edward Albert has pointed out that,

“From the dramatic point of view, the first half of the nineteenth century was almost completely barren. As we have seen, many of the major poets had tried drama, but none of them had achieved any success. The greater part of their work never saw the stage”.¹

Three factors can be considered responsible for the failure of drama: the dramatist, the audience, and the theater. In the nineteenth century, the poets tried their hands at dramatic works and produced plays like Cenci and Prometheus Unbound (by P.B. - Shelley), Manfred (by Byron), Beckett (by Tennyson), and so on. They failed because they could not create new techniques. Their plays remained cut off from the roots of life. All the major Romantics were essentially lyrical poets and could not keep the prerequisites of public taste. As J. Chiary has remarked, “The great romantic writers, particularly the English and the French were essentially lyrical poets, and their attempts at drama show clearly enough the predominance of this trait. In spite of Keats' wonderful assertion that the poet ought to be endowed with the "negative capability"... They sought to revive these passions, and the romantic hues through which they gazed at Hamlet were transferred upon Werther and Hernani, while Cordelia's were transferred upon Marguerite and Donsol.”²

As far as the nineteenth-century audience is concerned, it was predominantly middle class and desired a realistic presentation of life which was there in the novel. Victorian England was dominated by the middle class which had uncertain tastes and shallow roots. People did not lay stress on nobility, sacrifice, and ritualistic death. Instead of liking deep tragedy, they preferred petty individuals' sorrows. J. Chiary observes that the Victorian audience,

“preferred to have its senses titillated by ups and downs of melodrama.”³

Commercialization of drama led the theater managers to dictate terms to the dramatists, hence their creative art was at stake. David Daiches has aptly remarked.

The drama was never to recover the central position it held in the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods. The rise of the novel was partly responsible for this, as was the growing power of the theatrical manager... the man of letters, thus eventually creating a damaging divorce between the theater and the creative literary minds of the age.⁴

Yet another factor in the decline of the nineteenth-century drama was the rise of the star system i.e. professional actors in their own light and their hold on the minds of the audience as star performers. In this regard David Daiches further remarks: “The eighteenth century was an age of great actors and actresses, but their very acting skill had a blighting effect on the drama as literature, for they depended more and more on their virtuosity and less and less on the material with which they were provided, exploiting their abilities and personalities rather than the potentialities of the plays: it was beginning in a sense, of the star system, which had done so much harm in our own time.”⁵

However, the plays written by the Romantics and the Victorians were either not performed or rejected by the audience. Hence their drama remained at the level of closet drama. The attempts made by Victorians in their experiments to bring in new techniques and styles in theater in one way or the other remained a failure. Thus the three major factors responsible for the failure of the nineteenth-century drama were the lack of dramatic genius, the dictatorial failure of control by managerial defects, and the rise of the star system. Despite the efforts of the major Victorian poets in the nineteenth century till the beginning of the twentieth century, the revival of poetic drama on stage was not attempted. Rather prose drama was successfully being performed. But from the 1920s onwards a rebirth of poetic drama was attempted in an uncongenial atmosphere when realistic and naturalistic plays were being written by major dramatists like Pinero, Robertson, and G.B. Shaw. The attempts to revive poetic drama on stage posed certain problems whether to follow the Elizabethan tradition or the ancient Greek tradition or the new innovations with regard to character, theme language, and technique. There was no paradigm except the Elizabethans. Thus till the first decade of the twentieth century,

England experimented against the Elizabethan tradition. Criticizing certain limitations of character and plot in the Elizabethan drama, Raymond Williams has aptly remarked ⁵

There have always been problems in drama but in the greatest drama these are set in a body of specific experience which is not limited by the conventions of 'situation' and 'type character'.⁶

On the other hand, in Europe, in the twentieth-century drama underwent radical changes, innovations, and experiments yielding the growth of new schools and techniques. Before tracing the historical development of modern drama with brief reference of a few major dramatists from Ibsen to Pinter the brief appraisal of certain techniques used by them in their plays is necessary because they have affected modern drama. Raymond Williams observes in this regard that:

The crisis of performance, and of the theatre as an institution, itself affected by new means of dramatic performance in the cinema, in radio, and in television, has made the continuing problem of dramatic form especially acute. Certain orthodoxies have hardened, and many claiming gaps have appeared and continued to appear.⁷

Henrik Ibsen's Influence on The 20th Century Drama

Moreover, the innovations of dramatic techniques in Europe were numerous. The present century prose dramatists of England selected the Norwegian dramatist Ibsen as their model. People praised him as the father of modern drama. Raymond Williams regarded him as, "the consciousness of modern European drama."

Raymond Williams has observed that Ibsen's conventional and naturalistic setting influenced English drama in a significant way. In all his plays the subjugation of female characters is difficult to pinpoint. In Europe, the history of modern drama in regard to theme, technique, language, and characterization is traced to the Norwegian dramatist Ibsen. Ibsen's influence on the English stage was rather late. In his own country, he was more esteemed as a social crusader for the cause of women's emancipation and liberation from age-old conventions and constrictions as Raymond Williams has aptly remarked ⁸

".....The Ibsenite emphasis on the subject as something which could be considered apart from words of the plays, was characteristic, and it was very welcome to those many people who looked, not for the dramatist but for a moral leader.... on the emancipation of women, and the freedom of youth; on the "whited-sepulchers, of Christian fathers and gentlemen ... These things made the scandal, and in the way of scandals, they made the success; they made Ibsen." ⁸ In his attempt as a social reformer, Ibsen naturally concentrated more on the presentation of the reality of social political and economic scenario of Europe in the context of the capitalist expansion of out-look. His concern with deeper reality of life and the subtle erroneous psychic complexities of human beings which he presented through his whole dramatic career has somehow been overshadowed by his being associated with naturalism and slice of life presentation of drama on the stage.

Naturally, Ibsenism came to be mean to the European dramatists on this side of the British Channel as presenting life as it is, with all its problems, joys and sorrows ups and downs that we observe around us. Characters were to be types and if any dramatic development in their portrayal was exceeded to it was considered to be an artificial maneuvering then what happens in actual life. Everything was to be judged with reference to what the Italian and French Neoclassical Pseudo-Aristotelians called 'urai symbience' or verisimilitude. Language also was to tow the same line of realism Spiritual and psychological provocations were to be superseded by the more banal materialistic and surface level social, political and economic allusion. Ibsen apart even the dramatists in England T.W. Robertson, Henry Arthur Jones, Sir A.W. Pinero followed naturalist tradition. G.B. Shaw and Galsworthy also followed naturalist tradition. E. Albert observes ⁹

It was not until the nineties, when the influence of Ibsen was making itself strongly felt, and Shaw produced his first plays, that the necessary impetus was there to carry the serious drama over into the field of social domestic, or personal problems..... themes of drama became the problems of religion, of youth and age, of labour and capital, and above all, now that Ibsen had torn down the veil which had kept the subject in safe

obscurity of sex. In widening the scope of the drama, Ibsen and then Shaw, Galsworthy, and Granville-Barker were of paramount importance.⁹

European Technical influences on the 20th Century British Drama

What was happening in Europe could not be stopped in England. So the rigid minded British had to follow the new innovations in the dramatic sphere. Apart from Ibsenian influences, other major European influences that influenced modern British drama were in Germany, France and Spain. According to J. Chiary .

French and German drama had kept pace with the new climate of nihilism and despair, not so English drama which, in the early fifties, in the hey-day of the welfare state was still fully immersed in traditional middle class or upper middle class subjects, and in a fading interest of poetic drama, mostly based on religious themes, unable to meet the expectations of the increasingly politically conscious and dissatisfied the middle class which was still the main supporter of the theatre.¹⁰

In France the naturalist drama flourished under the noteworthy dramatist Billeldoux. French drama technically produced opera and Absurdist drama. The notable French dramatists include Maeterlinck, Max Reinhardt, Copeau and Gordon Craig. In Germany Expressionism flourished in the writings of Strindberg. As feminism heredity, and the fully furnished family play like Ghosts are associated with Ibsen so also anti-feminism, hysteria and the play of violent action or declaration like Lady Julie are associated with August Strindberg. Raymond Williams considered him, "The velvet-coated strindberg, his eyes fixed in 'the diabolic expression', his hand burned by the crucibles of his experiments in alchemy; the rages, the passions, the renunciations".¹¹

Strindberg wrote in revolt against 'the patent-leather themes' of the intrigue drama. In the preface to Lady Julie (1888) Strindberg wrote, "We have not got the new form for the contents, and the new wine has burst the old bottles." ¹² He strongly reacted against Ibsenian Naturalism which he considered a mere "photography." Strindberg explicitly experimented with Expressionism 'which is the manifestation of an inner, autobiographical drama, projected into characters which are posed in contrasted poles'.¹³ By rejecting pseudo biographical explanations of madness and obsession, Strindberg found against the grain of the dramatic methods of his time adequate forms of expression. He immensely influenced both in the conflict of his plays and in experiments of new dramatic forms in his plays. So far as the conflict is concerned, O'Neill was directly influenced by Strindberg in technique. In England, Sean O'Casey was influenced by Expressionist technique. Auden and Isherwood followed it in personal and social modes as in Ascent of F-6.

An examination of contemporary art with specific reference to nihilism and the Absurd along with the brief exposition of various present aspects of drama, from tragedy to Naturalistic, poetic and prose drama needs a brief appraisal. The theater of the Absurd is explicitly associated with Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Arthur Adamov, Jean Genet and a number of other avant-garde writers in France, Britain, Italy, Spain, Germany, the United States and elsewhere. Absurd theater primarily, French in origin, clearly exhibits the nihilistic and existential vision of life of Sartre and Camus. However, their plays are different from those of absurd plays but the absurd dramatists took from them the vision of human life not their dramatic techniques. The two chief sources of absurd theatre are existentialism and in-depth psychology. Another dominant factor of absurd dramatists drifting towards absurd theater is people's disgust with commercial theater and slice of life naturalistic plays and cheap opera type melodramatic plays. The absurdist aimed at a deep knowledge of human existence. However, absurd theater primarily flourished on the continent in the works of Beckett, Ionesco, Jean Genet and so on. In England the absurdist element is predominant in the plays of the New Wave of dramatists like Osborne, Pinter, Arden, Wesker Shelagh Delaney and others. In an essay on Kafka, Ionesco defined his understanding of the term "Absurd" as follows: "Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless".¹⁴ Camus laid emphasis on the notion of revolt and that of the absurdity of human condition. He explained these two notions in L'Homme Revolte and Le Mythe de Sisyphe". The notion of absurdity of human predicament spread like a wildfire embracing the whole world and casting its inherent roots from Shakespeare to the ancient Greek drama. Camus's oft quoted statement illustrates the absurdity of human condition:

"A world that can be explained by reasoning, however faculty, is a similar world. But in a universe in which he is suddenly deprived of illusion and light, man feels an exile. This exile is without hope for he is deprived of the memories of a lost homeland and of the prospects of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting truly constitutes the feeling of absurdity". (Le Mythe de Sisyphe),¹⁵

In the preface to his book The Theatre of the Absurd, Martin Esslin, puts "Theatre of the Absurd represents trends that have been apparent in the most esoteric kinds of literature since the Nineteen Twenties (Joyce, surrealism, Kafka) or in painting since first decade of this century (Cubism, abstract painting). This is certainly true. But the theater could not put these innovations before its wider public until these trends had time to filter into wider consciousness".¹⁶

By the last decade of the 19th century positivism and materialism dominated the whole scenario, the artists started their self explorations in less esoteric language. The works of Jarry, Apollinaire, Valery, Maeterlinck and Rostand gained universal fame. The outbreak of the First World War paved the way to irrationalism and artists depicted this shattered world through surrealist techniques. But the surrealist movement could not continue very long. It fostered new growths like post-symbolism, subjectivism, allusiveness which was apparent in the works of Valery, Eliot, Supervielle, Pierre Jean Jouve, Eluard and Emmanuel etc. Drama like other arts kept on oscillating between imitation and reproduction of reality with implied craftsmanship. As regards the new generation of playwrights emerging since the Theater of Absurd made its first astonishing impact, their work also clearly could not remain unaffected by it.

'For Look Back in Anger has a succes d' estimate, a succes de scandale, and finally just a success". According to J. Chiary, "John Osborne was hailed as the mouthpiece of his generation. Jimmy Porterism was born and in no time John Osborne was followed by Brendon Behan, Shelagh Delaney, Arnold Wesker, Willie Hall, and John Arden who voiced in their works the same restlessness and the description of rootless individuals unhappy and at war with the social order, either without knowing only too well the kind of political and economic changes that would like to make".¹⁷The New Wave dramatists predominantly had a working class audience. J.R. Taylor tracing the impact of Anger and after writes:

The time, obviously was ripe : 1956 was the year of Suez and Hungry, Protest was in the air, and the mood of the country, especially that of young England, veered sharply from the preciosity and dilettantism . . . the under forties, as well as the under thirties, found a rallying-point, though as subsequent events demonstrated this era. Thus the New Wave dramatists from Osborne onwards adopted an attitude of revolt, daydreaming and pursuits of underworld activities.¹⁸

John Osborne does not follow 'avant gardism' or 'technical novelty', but possesses over evident dramatic skill. Arnold Wesker, the perfect example of the new working class dramatist, owes his reputation to the steady support of the Royal Court Theatre. John Arden is yet another great supporter of Royal Court Theater. J.R. Taylor observes that :

"...Arden brings us face to face with it in its baldest form by writing plays which appear to be about general social, moral and political issues: colour prejudice and prostitution, social clashes on a housing estate, pacifism, the treatment of old age."¹⁹

Thus the development of drama in the first half of the 20th century has been along two major dramatic lines. One was the revival of the poetic drama starting with Stephen Phillips, through the efforts of the practitioners of this form like John Masefield, John Drinkwater, W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, Christopher Fry to Louis MacNeice.

Harold Pinter and Louis MacNeice as Media Dramatists

The advent of the New wave dramatists like, Wesker, Pinter, Arden and Shelagh Delany. Intermingled with this tradition has been the development of the dramatic techniques starting with Naturalism through Expressionism and the Absurdist drama reaching its climax in surrealism and the Epic theater. England in the twentieth century felt an onslaught of drama. They reacted against Elizabethan tradition and followed European

models and techniques with regard to their themes, techniques, characters, language and other aids. The successful dramatists went out of British traditionalism. The New Wave of dramatists including Osborne, Wesker, Behan, Pinter, Shelagh Delaney on the one hand followed selected various experiments in Europe and at the same they were reeling the impact of poetic dramatists starting with Stephen Phillips to Christopher Fry. It is against this background that Louis MacNeice and Harold Pinter have to be reviewed as dramatists. Their departure from physical stage to electronic media is no more a debatable subject. The attraction of the dramatists from MacNeice onwards towards electronic media poses a possibility of media drama as an alternative to the stage. Thus, the development of naturalistic drama from Ibsen through his various experiments to the revival of naturalism from Osborne to other new wave dramatists has been a growing emphasis on the individual as against the emphasis on ideas of social issues. The foregoing sketch the development of drama in England established two major points: one that English drama remained rooted in the naturalistic tradition and that its basic dramaturgical strategies remained wedded to the traditional dramatic conventions and devices. Secondly, English drama in spite of its hesitation to absorb European experimental techniques of the Absurdist, the Experimentalists, the Surrealists and Epic drama did come under their influence in an eclectic manner. But the dramatic innovative techniques practiced in Europe could never become the dramaturgical staple of the English theater. However, we do find that with the new wave dramatists new experiments were made within the parameter of naturalism. For example questioning the verbal medium as being satisfactorily sufficient for communication by Theater of the Absurd became an issue with the New Wave dramatists, who used the linguistic traits or devices of incoherence, disconnectedness and babbling as an effective verbal medium to communicate the deeper reality of the human psyche. We notice a significant shift with the new wave dramatists in regard to the choice of themes, dramatists like Wesker, Pinter and Louis MacNeice gave primacy to the exploration of the individual's predicament.

With the growing commercialization and materialism of the later twentieth century civilization the habit of regular visit to the theater proved inconvenient to people. There has been a growing tendency towards closed room existence and need for entertainment facilities. Television and radio came handy to people. We have seen a growing tendency towards presenting even old dramatic masterpieces on the Electronic media.

Pinter and MacNeice were fully alive to the demands made on their dramaturgy when they felt drawn towards the media for presenting their plays. The greatest demand in regard to Radio plays was in the language. Where long dialogue with involved syntactic constructions would certainly not succeed. Similarly the importance of stage props contributing to the significance and meaning of the plays got reduced. But the television would offer greater flexibility and scope than even a sophisticated stage.

CONCLUSION

In the present paper we aimed at exploring the causes for this recent shift in the development of the dramatic techniques in the present century and try to establish in a prophetic manner the future of stage drama in England. To substantiate our argument we have selected two dramatists i.e. Louis MacNeice and Harold Pinter, who wrote both for stage as well as for electronic media. This will enable us to work out the relative advantages and disadvantages of the two media of dramatic presentation and make some tentative forecast for the future of stage drama. In the relevant biographical and other details which contributed to the dramatic art of these dramatists. Harold Pinter, was born on 10 October, 1930 in Hackney, a working class neighborhood in London's East End. During the 1930s Germany and Italy were dominated by fascist governments whose racial politics favored by English fascists, threatened Jews in England. As a child he was haunted by England's war with Germany in 1939.

Pinter's works written originally for the stage were produced in 1960. They included The Room, The Dumb Waiter and The Caretaker. The screen version of his stage plays later on appeared on 12 September 1962, The Birthday Party was screened in 1968. Apart from the radio and screen plays and the plays written exclusively for the stage. Harold Pinter achieved international success as the most complex Post war dramatist. In his plays he has laid stress upon existential adjustment, absurdity of human condition and Menace, breakdown of

communication, understatement, seraphic small talk and silence, verification of identity and truth, horror, mystery, change of identity, deterioration of relationships etc.

Louis MacNeice (1941-1963) a significant poet of the twentieth century wrote dramatic works for more than twenty two years. He wrote about 120 scripts and was producer of plays. In 1941 he joined B.B.C. and he was associated with it till his death in 1963.

Louis MacNeice has focused on secondary world characters, fantasy world, allegorical representation, parables, theme of quest and death and has tended to bring the inner psychological states of the protagonist, dreams on the surface. He has made frequent use of the Greek convention of the use of chorus in his plays. He also has used colloquial language and background music. The problem of writing for a mass audience for entertainment on one hand and problem of solving propaganda at the wartime involved MacNeice's attention.

Fantasies, which include, The Dark Tower The Queen of Air and Darkness and The Mad Islands. Popular dramas including He Had A Date, Prisoner's Progress, The Administrator and Persons from Porlock. Satires include Salute to All Fools.

In conclusion, one can say that the dramaturgy of Louis MacNeice and Harold Pinter as media plays has not fully been explored and in this project a sincere effort is being made for future dramatists to explore its immense potentiality.

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