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Drama and Theatre: Shifting forms and themes in past and present

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Abstract

Ifor Evans has said “The beginnings of Drama in England are obscure”. However, from available sources, it is clear that Romans established theatres in England for production of plays. But when Roman departed, their theatres departed with them. Later on, theatre originated in church with the sole purpose of propagating religious teachings but gradually it came out from the shadow of church. After Mystery, Miracle and Morality plays, Marlowe introduced. Marlowe presented a vapor lamp in the hands of Shakespeare. He found the English drama hard, crude and chaotic but, he left it a great force in the history of English Drama. Marlowe introduced many changes in the theme and style of Drama. It is rightly said, “No Marlowe No Shakespeare”. Shakespeare improved the weakness of Marlowe and became a dramatist of all the time and all the places. During Eighteenth, Nineteenth and Victorian age Drama was at the back seat because readers did not come out beyond the influence of Poetry, Novel and Prose but in Modern age Drama of Ideas dominated the whole scene and it became very popular. Here, my attempt is to analyze the factors that had led to shifting the focus of Drama from age to age. The sources of paper is journals and going through the important books on Drama in different ages.

Keywords: Drama, Theatre, Form, Themes

Introduction

It would be wrong to say that drama is merely a part of literature. For, literature is a written work of art but drama is a type of play written for theatre, television, radio and film. In another words, a drama is a composition in verse or prose presenting a story in pantomime or dialogue. The term “Drama” comes from a Greek word meaning “action”. It is imitation of some action. Unlike other genres of literature which is dependent on writing materials and paper, a drama is dependent on the human factor and on machinery like players, audience, producer, director, stage, music, scenic effect etc. A drama is representation of life in action.

In words of M.H Abram

“Drama is a literary form designed for the theatre, where actors take the roles of the characters, perform the indicated action, and utter the written dialogue”.

The purpose of this research paper is to analyse the factor that had led to shifting the focus of drama from age to age. Now, the first question arises here, when did people begin to act? And it is still vague, not clear. According to Aristotle “drama is an imitation of actions” probably first it might be told by primitive tribes who after returning from the hunt would have been enacting the incidents for other tribes. Whatever it might be, it's just an assumption, and there is no evidence. Further, Ifor Evans has said “The beginnings of drama in England are obscure”. However, from available sources, it is clear that Romans had established theatres in England for production of plays. They also laid down many basic principles of drama like; Aristotle laid down the principle of the three dramatic unities – the unity of time, place and action. The Greek playwrights wrote their plays on the episodes of Thebes or Troy. Earlier their plays were the mean to worship their mythical gods. They performed the drama to celebrate the festivals. These early plays were performed by a group of men and boys called a chorus. The chorus used to work as a group. But even with the introduction of individual actors, the chorus still remained in the background, acting on stage and the character's thoughts. Infact, there were very few people on stage in general, which meant that everyone had to play multiple parts.

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The smiling comedy mask and the frowning tragedy mask were used to enhance the songs and actions on stage. The famous dramatists of this period were Euripides, Sophocles and Aeschylus. But when Romans departed, their theatres departed with them. Because in Middle Ages, the church had different views of the mythological gods and saw theatre as evil. Most theatre was outlawed, and drama was only performed by travelling group of actors.

But by the time, it was church itself that saw the value of the ritualistic nature of drama and brought back the theatre into England. Theatre originated in church with the sole purpose of propagating religious and moral teachings. These religious plays were Miracle, Mystery and Morality plays. In the beginning these shows were acted in church in dumb shows on Christmas and Easter, but due to insufficient space and for increasing spectators these plays came out of from the church into the market places. 'Mystery' plays were basically the stories from the Bible, whereas 'Miracle' plays focused on the lives of saints and miracles performed by them. Later than these, there was 'Morality' plays, which were allegorical. They did not preach the story of Bible; instead they represented personified virtues and vices like seven deadly sins, God and Satan, Angels and Demons, and Death. Here the hero was either Everyman or Mankind and the play generally ended in the triumph of virtue. For example, in the play 'Everyman' when death goes to everyman to take him at that time all the worldly companions included fellowship, beauty, kindred, worldly goods forsake him. And finally only the good deeds alone accompany him on his last ordeal. They together go into the grave and ascend to heaven. So the play taught a lesson about right living and good deeds. They promoted a godly life. After Morality plays there was 'Interludes'. It was not a religious play, rather a short entertainments inserted within a longer play or amidst some other festivals. Its main function was to entertain the audience by humour or even by farce.

With the very beginning of Renaissance there was revival of classical drama. It flourished and became a national movement only during the reign of Queen Elizabeth. In sixteenth century, the Latin models for comedy were Terence and Plautus and their influence can be seen in the first comedy '*Ralph Roister Doister*' by Nicholas Udall's, performed by Westminster boys. Later, it was Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton who wrote the first tragedy '*Gorboduc*'. Main model for tragedy was Seneca which eliminated the religious element of Greek conception and for the conception of fate substituted the more human motive of revenge. It was dangerous model and with the English theme, it was of topical interest in Elizabethan's reign to an audience of lawyers and courtiers. Due to its long, heavy blank verse speeches, and its complete absence of action on the stage, it could appeal only to a learned audience.

Then, Thomas Kyd and Christopher Marlowe provided the solution to theatre. This was the early stage of drama's rise as a popular form of entertainment. There was courtly drama performed by young gentlemen and choir children in halls and noble houses, as well as popular drama performed by common players of interludes in the yards of inns and later at public theatres and playhouses. Kyd and Marlowe gave English drama a new vigour that was lacking. It was Kyd who gave the theatre *The Spanish Tragedy*. He used blank verse and horrors and crimes and the senecan motive of revenge. His characters are distinct, situations theatrically

effective, and his play united design. After him Christopher Marlowe the most outstanding figure amongst the University Scholar, presented a vapour lamp in the hands of Shakespeare. He introduced many changes in the theme, style of drama. It is rightly said "No Marlowe No Shakespeare". For Shakespeare historical plays Marlowe's *Edward II* was a model. It was the first complete historical play. *Dr. Faustus* is the best example of the blending of the morality play and spiritual tragedy. Shakespeare learnt from Marlowe at least two major dramatic techniques – his theory of tragedy and his blank verse. He learnt the concept of the tragic hero and the spiritual conflict through which the hero passes like Dr. Faustus and King Edward II.

Further, while tragedy developed in the hands of Marlowe and Kyd, the most brilliant intelligence to practice comedy before Shakespeare was John Lyly, the leader of University wits and author of the novel *Euphues*. His theme was mythological and there was a touch of courtly life. On the whole these scholars made the ground for Shakespeare. Marlowe found the English drama hard, crude and chaotic like a rock and struck it with his imagination till the waters of human emotion gushed forth. He left it a great force in the history of English literature.

By the end of the sixteenth century the theatre in England was fully established, and the playhouse within the city was Blackfriars, where at first only the child actors performed. Earlier the public theatres were open to sky, and without artificial lighting, so that the plays had to be performed by daylight. But now the enclosed theatre of Blackfriars came. These private theatres were lit by artificial lighting, the curtain dropped between scenes and more elaborated stage devices were encouraged within them.

With these public theatres there came William Shakespeare as actor, playwright and shareholder. Shakespeare improved the weakness of Marlowe and became dramatist of all the time and all the places. He wrote always for contemporary theatre and manipulating the Elizabethan stage with great resources and invention. His earliest historical plays cover a long period of British history from the middle of eleventh century to the middle of the sixteenth century. They are all largely tragic plays end with the imprisonment and murder of the king. They were a product of the patriotic spirit that ruled supreme in the Elizabethan England. In all the historical plays of Shakespeare there was a predominance of action. He presented consistently the conception that only by loyalty could the state survive and this virtue must be supremely the attribute of kingship.

After history there was comedy, which was basically a story of love and marriage. All comedies of Shakespeare are romantic in their tone, spirit and atmosphere and they all are removed from this material world, in the words of Matthew Arnold; 'sick hurry and divided aims'. For the comic world of Shakespeare the main characteristic was the blend of fantasy and realism.

Furthermore, after comedy it was the great period of tragedy with melodramatic themes. For example *The Ghost*, the madness or semi-madness of Hamlet, Lear, Ophelia; the graveyard scene in Hamlet, the witches, and numerous murders in Macbeth, the drunken scenes and riots in Othello, and Gloucester's blindness in King Lear. These scenes are common to all the great tragedies of Shakespeare. Shakespeare's heroes are generally men of high eminence and nobility. They are kings, princes or generals. These accords with Aristotle's view that, "The tragic hero should

be someone of high fame and flourishing prosperity". For with the fate of a king or an emperor is attached to the fate of the millions and therefore his fall implies the fall of a whole nation. This gives a deep impression of universality to a Shakespearean tragedy. The real impact of Shakespearean tragedy lies in the spiritual conflict of the hero. Shakespeare still remains the greatest master of human psychological behavior. According to Dowden; "tragedy as conceived by Shakespeare is concerned with the ruin or restoration of the soul and the life of man. Its subject is the struggle of good and evil in the world. No great deliverer of mankind descends from the Heavens. Here upon the earth, evil is; it does exist. There is also on the earth a sacred passion for deliverance. Good also does exist. Good and evil are in perpetual conflict".

In the last phase of his career Shakespeare moves towards Dramatic Romances. The basic themes of his last plays are reconciliation, restoration and reunion. For example, Prospero in *The Tempest* is the very embodiment of all Christian Virtues – love, generosity, forgiveness, and reconciliation. In Dramatic Romances, Shakespeare writes as if he wore a metaphysician and philosopher. In Dramatic Romances thought predominates imagination in the same way, in the early comedies imagination predominates thought.

Besides Shakespeare his contemporary Ben Jonson was in almost every way a contrast to him. He was the progenitor of The Comedy of Humours. Comedy of Humours was actually satirical comedy based on the classical concept of Humours. He presented the London of his own day. While Shakespeare portrayed the places like, Belmont, and the Forest of Arden, Jonson shown the rogues of Bartholomew fair and Thames side. Shakespeare was the dramatist of romantic comedies whereas Ben Jonson advocates realism and satire in his theory of comedy. He said Comedy ought to be judicial, and deal with real life.

The element of realism, which Jonson mastered, was pursued by a number of writers. In seventeenth century there came post Shakespearean dramatist called Jacobean and Caroline. In this age playwright began to look for patronage not from public but from court and the king. Drama that used to be national and democratic became aristocratic and courtly. The tragicomedy of Beaumont and Fletcher and the horror tragedy with its furious declamation gave birth to the 'Restoration Tragedy' particularly the 'Heroic Tragedy' and comedy in the hands of Ben Jonson, Middleton and Shirley paved the way for 'Comedy of Intrigue' and 'Comedy of Manners' during Restoration period. John Webster the most profound tragic writers of Jacobean age remembered for his two plays, *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*. For both depend on the 'revenge' theme, which was already popular during Elizabethan age and continued in favour throughout these decades.

The theatre were closed by the Puritans in 1642 and reopened with came back of Charles II with the Restoration of 1660. The drama of this age did not represent the whole of the age, for it became only an entertainment of the court and those that aped its fashions. It was in 'The comedy of Manners' that the Restoration found its peculiar excellence. The Comedy of Manners exhibited the artificial manners of the high class society of the Restoration age. They largely displayed the intrigues, witty remarks, dialogues and verbal fencing between gentleman and ladies. During eighteenth, nineteenth and Victorian age drama was at the back seat

because readers did not come out beyond the influence of Poetry, Novel and Prose. In the early eighteenth century, comedy decline into sentimentalism. Sentimental comedy developed as a reaction against the immoral comedy of manner. It leads to emotionalism instead of mysticism, and to charity instead of genuine reform. From such depth the drama was rescued by Goldsmith and Sheridan. They cultivated comedy of humour which was the reaction against sentimental comedy.

The development of the Drama of Ideas, towards the close of Victorian era was closely related to the domain of English drama. The Drama of Ideas dealing with the social problems, sinned against the accepted principles of dramaturgy and venture to deal with unconventional themes and motifs. Instead of traditional types, the characters were recognizable individuals and instead of stilted language the forms of current speech were used in the drama of ideas. The Drama of Ideas or a problem play was the presentation of a contemporary question through realistic technique. The flourishing of Drama of Ideas is closely associated with the disintegration of middle class life and values. The conflict between Victorian orthodoxy and the modern new ideas and the style of life furnished the material for dramatic treatment. In short The Drama of Ideas became a powerful and effective medium of social criticism. The most abiding influence of Henrick Ibsen gave an impetus to the realist movement in English drama. Ibsen brought to the theatre some novel ideas that posed a serious intellectual challenge and his appeal was irresistible because of the superb technical mastery. We must admit that ideas move the world. In *A Doll's House* Ibsen dealt with the theme of women rights, but the play shocked his contemporary because in the end Nora leaves her husband and children. *Ghost* deals with the modern scientific concept of heredity. It is a mordent attack upon society and the standards by which it lives. His follower G.B Shaw a cyclonic genius, brodened the theme many steps further. Shaw was opposed to Art for Art sake. To Shaw drama was an effective tool for socio-economic transformation. His almost all the plays such as *Candida*, *Arms and the Man*, *Ceaser and Cleopatra*, *An Apple Cart* and many others extending more than forty deal with a problem that provokes the readers to laugh and think. G.B Shaw was a laughing philosopher, a comic genius and whose purpose was to change the society to his own ideas. The only difference between G. B Shaw unlike his master switched over to comedy for the simple reason that comedy according to him is the most suitable medium of inspiring the people to change. Shaw was a dramatist with a purpose and the purpose was to change the society to his view point. He was a Febian socialist and above all a humanitarian.

In the early decades of twentieth century drama, dealing with social problems, was prosaic rather than poetic. But with the passage of time, dramatist were fascinated by the glamour and enchanting loveliness of poetic plays, and here it was T.S Eliot who prepared the ground for them by stating that 'the craving for Poetic Drama is permanent in human nature'.

Twentieth century drama has assumed different forms and shapes in the hands of different dramatist. Some plays have been written on the glorification; and exaltation religion and the church, while a good many of them have atheism and denunciation of God and priests as their subjects. Some poetic plays are symbolic and mystical in character and

quite a large number of them have Celtic mythology and Irish life as their subjects. Some plays have inspired by oriental setting and splendor, while others have aesthetic enjoyment and glorification of sex-urge as their main spring. The Irish movement also known as Celtic revival is also the cause of Poetic Drama. Its great leaders are W.B. Yeats, and J.M. Synge. Yeats created symbolic dramas with lyrical spontaneity. For example *The Countess Cathleen*, *The Land of Heart's Desire*. He published '*Four Plays of Dancers*' and in them revives the use of masks and employs the technique of the Japanese. Synge's two best plays in this connection are '*The Playboy of the Western World*' and '*The Shadow of the Glen*'. Yeats and Synge are remarkable for modern Poetic Drama, as Marlowe and Kyd for the Elizabethan stage. The poet who was largely responsible for the re-birth of Verse Drama is T.S. Eliot. His famous poetic plays are '*Murder in the Cathedral*', '*Family Reunion*', '*Cocktail Party*', and '*Confidential Clerk*'. Other names in this connection are W.H. Auden, Christopher Isherwood, Stephen Spender, Sean O'Casey, Christopher Fry.

In modern poetical plays myths, religion, politics, modern life, have been well represented.

By 1942 London theatre productions were approaching normal, but the public venturing out in the black-out preferred revivals to new plays. To the Royal Court Theatre in 1956 came John Osborne's '*Look Back In Anger*', which caught the imagination of a generation. He broke into the theatre with what seemed an authentic picture of a post-war society. Here was a turning point in the modern English theatre. In Jimmy Porter, the angry, almost hysterical, often self-pitying young man who finds society cruel and unjust, and his own world a chaos, many of Osborne's contemporaries seemed to find an image of their own lives. Porter is not merely an orphan of the upheaval of war, he is, or at least sees himself, as a victim of the change in English society. The world from which the play emerged was fresh to the English stage, the dialogue brilliant and contemporary, the action dramatically effective. The mind behind it all was violent, yet poignant and arresting.

In the end of twentieth century, Osborne's contemporary writer Samuel Beckett's presented the problem arises from a generation facing life in the post-atomic age, disillusioned, at once alert and quick, addicted to sordid scenes and periods of despair. His *Waiting for Godot*, by some regarded as a profound illumination of the contemporary dilemma.

So, on the whole it can be said that it was mainly the changing circumstances of the society and changing moods of the public accordingly, which became the major factor in shifting the focus of drama from age to age.

It is difficult to trace out the development of drama in a very comprehensive manner but it shows that the drama prospered, flourished and went forward, with its own pace in different ages reflecting the trends and tendencies of each period in a very real perspective. It is rightly said that the drama wins the hearts and minds of people in a stronger way to enable them to change them and their system in the most effective way.

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