

The Development of British Socialist Drama after 1950s: A Critical Survey

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Abstract

This study aims to highlight the development of British Socialist drama from 1950s onwards. The exigency of appraising it lies in the fact that Socialist British drama was at its lowest after the World War II, added to the death of socialists like G B Shaw and John Galsworthy. This entire scenario created an apparently everlasting vacuum on the British stage. However, all the barrenness suddenly vanishes from the British stage with the arrival of new dramatists who in spite of all odds unearthed and rejuvenated the Socialist drama. What was thought to be the death of British drama because of its inability to cope with the new social realities, at once found new heights with the arrival of new dramatists. Not only did they adapt to the new social realities but also emphasized the urgency of socialist theatre to change the society. This was an important event in the history of Britain because new dramatists removed the inactivity and decadence from drama and challenged irrationality and injustice prevalent not only in Britain but worldwide.

Key Words: Angry Decade, Absurdism Essentialism, Naturalism and new Wave.

English theatre saw a remarkable increase in ‘Socialist drama’ starting before 1950s and progressing rapidly through the century. British Socialist drama regards social criticism as the most important function of all art. A socially committed playwright can use drama as a powerful medium to explore social issues of his times. In the first half of the twentieth century, playwrights like John Galsworthy and GB Shaw engaged with complex social issues in their plays. Shaw’s ideas about theatre and its social role remained very influential even after his death in 1950. Among the eminent playwrights like John Osborne as well as other modern dramatists’ concerns and thematic preoccupation can be traced to him. Shaw advocated direct social function for theatre in his introduction to *Man and Superman*. He believed that theatre ought to try and alter public views and conduct. He saw humans gifted with powers to correct the evil from Society. He comments:

Can you believe that the people whose conceptions of society and conduct, whose power of attention and scope of interest, are measured by the British theatre as it is today, can either handle this colossal task themselves, or understand and support the sort of mind and character that is (at least comparatively) capable of handling it? (Shaw, 1903: 7).

This proposition of Shaw continued to draw upcoming dramatists to achieve the same motive in 1960s and 70s. The death of Shaw in 1950 created a vacuum in the English Socialist theatre. His loss was hard enough to severely impact the theatrical development. At that time no playwright then practically appeared qualified and skilled enough to fill up his academicianship. It appeared to be unworkable until the arrival of new dramatists.

New dramatists faced a number of predicaments before giving new life to Socialist drama. They were impeded by turbulent socio-political situations. Shortly after the World War II, nothing suggested that a revolutionary tendency in playwriting might appear on the British theatrical scene. For the simple reason that: “Many of the existing theatre buildings had been

heavily damaged during the conflict ... The British theatre was not showing any signs of progress” (Cornish and Ketels, 1988: 13). Dan Rabellato in his book *1956 And All that*, summarizes the bleakness of the post-war period. His summation of the theatrical scenario is disheartening. He notes that “by 1956, British theatre was in a terrible state” (1969, 111). His observation is further strengthened by some important dramatic critics. In a similar vein English drama critic Kenneth Tynan, writing in the *London Observer* said, “The bare fact is, that apart from revivals and imports, there is nothing in the London theatre that one dares to discuss with an intelligent man for more than five minutes” (1954). The situation of the post-war Socialist theatre was highly disheartening because it was entirely cut off from the contemporary reality. It was clearly weakened and apparently at its end. This state of the English stage is appropriately evaluated by Richard Findlator, who regrets the lack of imaginative freshness in British theatre. He laments that the theatre, “takes its sociology from Punch, its politics from British Movie tone, its religion from memory” (1969: 11). This awareness of decline was not visible in England only but also clearly expressed in America. Arthur Miller an American playwright, before a Royal Court audience in November 1956 comments on British theatre. He senses it is hermetically sealed the way the society is unresponsive to what is presented on the stage. This situation was beyond control and seemed to produce lasting effects. Dramatic critics like Kenneth Tynan expressed the idea in memorable words: “How is it that political plays are not being turned out in England at the present time? How is it that in fact we have no tradition of political theatre?” (1964: 10).

In this context, when drama was clearly showing signs of decadence, the role of the English Stage Company was of crucial importance in developing the Socialist theatre. It was set up by George Devine, a director, Lord Harewood, a patron of the arts, and Neville Bond, a businessman. They took control over the Royal Court theatre with the urgency to restructure it. They intended to make it a writer’s theatre which had an artistic aims. Due to nothingness and lack of originality in the Socialist theatre, George Devine approached established novelists like Graham Greene and Angus Wilson to persuade them to write for the theatre. The credit goes to Devine who offered a chance of a lifetime to these new writers by advertising and instituted a system of Sunday night ‘try-outs’. He offered a way to the educated working class playwrights to give vent to their disillusionment and deprivation. They vented their anger that they had been harbouring for a long time against the double standards of establishment. John Osborne replied to the advertisement and submitted *Look Back in Anger* (1956) which provided a step forward by initiating the Socialist drama. For Socialist theatre the seeds of change had been placed with Osborne’s play. A dramatic critic like Tim Brassell believes that the introduction of English Stage Company and the arrival of Osborne on stage transformed and rejuvenated the socialist drama. This was an unforgettable moment in history. Commenting on the extraordinary event of the history of British Socialist theatre, Tynan writes: “we begin in the dust-bowl of Shaftesbury Avenue, a wasteland owing its aridity to improvident speculators. Famine seems imminent, when suddenly, to everyone’s amazement, life blossoms in the virgin lands of Sloane Square and the East End” (1964).

With Osborne’s remarkable success several writers arrived at the London stage by means of the Sunday night try-outs, notably Arnold Wesker, Shelagh Delany, Edward Bond and John Arden. Among them John Osborne first projected contemporary life through the neo-realistic mode. In this way he brings the out-of-date realistic drama to a new and innovative direction. By doing this, Osborne pulled off an incomparable merit at a crucial point in the history of British Socialist drama. He achieved what Ibsen and Shaw had attained in the 19th and early 20th century European and British drama. As Tynan says:

The beginning of the British Socialist Theatre of the late 1950s was heralded by John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*. The moment of this play was undoubtedly a momentous one in the history. I agree that *Look Back in Anger* is likely to remain a minority taste. What matters, however, is the size of the minority. I estimate it at roughly 6, 733,000, which is the number of people in this country between the ages of twenty and thirty ... I doubt if I could love anyone who did not wish to see *Look Back in Anger*. It is the best young play of its decade (1975).

Look Back in Anger is thus a dividing line that separates the post-war British theatre into two periods - pre and post 1956. Osborne's hero Jimmy Porter articulated the expectations and apprehensions of post-war generation. He forced English people, especially young men and women, to come together in clusters to the Royal Court. The anger of Osborne challenged the moral and spiritual standards of the British Welfare State. His criticism was directed towards a society which in the name of economic improvement had enlarged moral callousness. Jimmy Porter, the central character in Osborne's play, is a working class young man who feels deprived because of his class. He is disheartened on seeing the "welfare state", a "utopian dream" envisioned by the Labour Party getting disappointingly unproductive (Innes, 1992: 98). This disillusion like the rest of the generation is promoted by the waning glory of England as an imperialistic power. England turned humbler and insignificant in the international political scenario with the loss of colonies, Suez crisis and Hungarian suppression. Jimmy has a severe resentment towards the establishment, the snobbery of the middle class, the corrupt church and the unconcerned society as a whole. These were all the characteristic sentiments of the post-war youth of England.

The significance of Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* lay in its impact on the alignment of culture and politics, rather than in its direct contribution to the development of British Socialist drama and theatre. Mary Luckhurst in her book *A Companion to Modern British and Irish Drama* (2010) quotes approvingly the playwright David Edgar who claims that it contributed in the development of British Socialist drama as well. In his speech at the memorial service for John Osborne in June 1995, David Hare, remarked that "John knocked down the door and a whole generation of playwrights came piling through" (Tynan, 1975). Certainly the play was helped by its connection to the emerging and critically successful English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre and in turn, as Mary Luckhurst says, "not only helped to establish the Court as the cradle for new writing, but also paved the way for the Socialist drama in 1960s and 1970s" (2006: 386). There were other plays produced at about the same time other than by Royal Court Theatre, which showed a greater spirit of innovation, for instance, Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* (1958) and Brendan Behan's *The Hostage* (1958) produced by Joan Littlewood in the Theatre Workshop. They were produced in naturalistic form and challenged contemporary assumptions about race, class and gender in a more adventurous way than Osborne's play had. Osborne's particular contribution has been to bring to the British theatre-goers in mid-fifties, a mood of newness and an attitude of defiance against the establishment. The situation in Britain was one of disenchantment with politics at home, frustration with politics abroad, confusion about the economy and disorientation about the direction of society. Historically the time was ripe for the new drama to arrive. The situation was suitable not only for the emergence of Osborne but of a whole wave of socialist playwrights.

The most prominent feature of this Socialist drama was the freshness of its subject matter. Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* achieved a breakthrough not in terms of form but in terms of content. Raymond Williams, referring to this fact, observes: "When this revolt at last broke

through, it was very like the many that had preceded it. Its great virtue was new content, which came through with an evident excitement and vitality. Conspicuously it was the life and style of a new generation as in Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*" (1973: 31-32). In a similar vein, Shelagh Delaney opened her revolt against the middle class drama in her *A Taste of Honey* (1958). Plight of youth and poverty, restlessness and frustration of the disorganized class were the main commitments of most of the socialist playwrights who succeeded her. They surprised and shocked the audience, which attracted Lord Chamberlain's rage for the liberal presentation of homosexuality, prostitution, violence and death. They often chose popular and vulgar subjects, like slum clearance in Arden's *Live like Pigs* (1961), a collection of fashion clothes and of antiques in Pinter's *Collection* (1961), a new housing project in Wesker's *Their Very Own* and *Golden City* (1966) and others. According to them, life was mysterious and man's dignity lay in facing it boldly.

More than this, they raised questions but withheld solutions. They knew the age lacked an established religious, social or ethical doctrine and so a neat and general answer to any problem was impossible. These Socialist writers were against the establishment, militarism and imperialism. For them content and passion mattered more than strict adherence to the rules of the theatre. They brought a spirit of freedom and vitality into the Socialist drama. They overthrew all preceding conventions and invented new ones of their own. Socialist playwrights craved love, friendship and humanity which they thought could dispel the despair and frustration the age suffered from. They were Leftist in tone, and committed to human situation.

This Socialist drama assumed a confrontational attitude towards the older generation. These dramatists deliberated that Britain was not rebuilding as pledged and there was a state of inactivity in every field. There was still a middle class Britain debating free-thinking values and philosophical concepts or concerned about traditional family and domestic values. John Russell Brown remarks that these new dramatists:

write for the theatre because this is the art form which allows them to show the complexity of those worlds: the permanent and frightening forces that lie behind each explosive crisis and each boring, dehumanizing routine, the limitations, dangers and experiments of personal, subjective view: the impossibility of judging any except in relation to other, the strength of truth and permanence of idealism. They write youthful plays, logical, sensational, theatrical, exploratory, complicated and hence, responsible medium (1982: 14).

Their new freedom enabled them to embark upon the subjects which really concerned them, and which have increasingly concerned the British people as a whole. Christopher Innes writes, "the landmark in contemporary drama have been more like landmines, shattering conventional expectations, a whole new configuration of subjects and themes emerging on the stage each time after the dust of public outrage settled" (1994: 126).

This first break with traditional drama began with the writers setting a line against taking upper, middle class as subject of a drama. This leads to striking development in the emergence of authentic 'working-class fiction'. This was possible by the assuming of stage by writers coming from the industrial northern part of England. Of several powerful writers, Osborne, Bond, Wesker, and Alan Sillitoe are good examples. They produced vigorous fiction about the lives of workers as seen from a working class point of view. This upsurge expressed the discontent and frustration of the newly educated lower class which felt that it was still denied the opportunities and privileges accorded to the educated upper class. These new plays had a working-class hero who rebels against the social privilege of the middle and upper classes. Dramatists of the 1950s came with their low-life drama with new themes

involving the ordinary man's ordinary experience which were thought the themes unfit for the theatre before. They rejected the style and subjects of the educated upper-middle class in London and the universities, and wrote about common people in the provinces who had quite a different point of view. It was a rejection of versions of theatre reality made habitual by the middle class drama. The orthodox middle class drama, observes Raymond Williams in his book *From Ibsen to Brecht*:

starts and ends in appearances. It is concerned on the stage with a real looking room, a real looking people, making real sounding conversations. This is all right as far as it goes, but invariably it is not far. The whole world of inner and normally inarticulate experience, the whole world of social process, which makes history yet is never clearly presented on the surface, are alike exclude. The more real all it looks, the less real it may actually be (1973: 28).

'New Wave Dramatists' broke away from these conventions and appearances and used new kinds of dramatic effect for communicating a different underlying reality.

Post-war dramatists experimented radically and extended the possibilities of what drama was able to represent. In contrast to the dominant theatre which had preceded it, Socialist theatre did indeed introduce new and often shocking subject matter and replaced the earlier rational explorations of ethical, moral and spiritual concerns with often emotionally charged studies of various aspects of sexuality, violence and alienation.

The exploration of new themes also initiated the change of the language used by the characters depicted in the plays of New Socialist Drama. The way the characters spoke matched up with the radical ideas expressed by the authors. A frequent usage of strong language became common. Brown observes that: "Before that time, the actual language spoken by people in real life, especially by people without middle class inhibitions, could not be spoken on the stage. Everyday 'four-letter' swear words were banned" (1982: 13). The change of language used by the characters in these plays is also noticeable "New characters and fresh themes called for fresh idioms, new patterns of stage dialogue, and new theatrical forms" (1982:13). The authors of the New Drama describe working-class life as realistically as possible. Their plays can be therefore considered naturalistic. Simon Trussler in his article "British Neo-Naturalism" suggests that, "The new wave dramatists instinctively chose naturalism mainly because it served their purposes, and allowed them to make social comments, unlike the previously frequently used poeticism" (1968: 33).

When contrasted with the state of the British theatre before the year 1956, the above mentioned features of New Socialist Drama demonstrate the fact that the appearance of this genre caused a dramatic change in the British theatre. It forced critics as well as the audiences to acknowledge the theatrical pieces written by young working class playwrights. These authors were considered revolutionary mainly because they decided to challenge the long established and conventionally forbidden. They used new forms of expressing their opinions and paid attention to the unseen working classes.

Most of the 'New Wave Dramatists' liked to be sensational, to surprise and shock, choosing themes like homosexuality, prostitution and abortion, nymphomania, disfigurement and callow humour. In Edward Bond's play *Saved* (1962), a baby is stoned to death in its perambulator on the open stage to show the dehumanizing effects of society, in John Arden's *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance*, (1959) Musgrave prepares for the killing of twenty five persons, Jimmy Porter, in Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* is highly vociferous against almost all aspects of the establishment, and in Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, (1957) Stanley is bashed and brain washed and made completely dazed. In the plays of Arnold Wesker, Shelagh Delany

and John Maritine such sensationalism is not found. Wesker draws materials for his plays from experienced reality of his life and is almost autobiographical in his plays. His trilogy *Chicken Soup with Barley* (1958), *Roots* (1959) and *I'm Talking about Jerusalem* (1960) is a recreation of his family life and his experience that is rendered dramatically.

By the early sixties things were twisting around in a distinctly separate direction and there was a noticeable swing away from the critics' original assessment of Osborne and other Royal Court dramatists. The critics moved away from their evaluation of the first 'New Wave Dramatists'. John Russell Taylor in *Anger and After* (1969) evaded the question of the extent of political commitment of the new dramatists. Raymond Williams's article "New English Drama" (1963) altogether avoided the writers' politics. With the turn of the decade, the liveliness and enthusiasm of the fifties bubbled out from the British theatre. The reason for this set back can be discerned in failing to provide an appropriate principle of their aims. The general opinion for this difficulty lies in their vagueness in relaying, what someone should be angry about without having anything to be angry at? Clearly dramatists had lost their intended purpose and they were wayward and targeting something that the audience could not comprehend. This misdirection and waywardness is questioned by Harry Ritchie in "The Anger That Never Was". "No one was quite sure what they were angry about — the class system, perhaps, Suez, or the H-bomb — but they were clearly angry about something" (1985). Osborne's assaults are focussed in opposition to that indeterminate and unspecified section of society called the establishment which ostensibly upholds traditional values. But he is not in a position to plainly indicate for whom he is carrying his campaign. Kenneth Allsop rightly questions his unidentified target, "When you ... try to specify who exactly of the population of Great Britain have the standards of decency and honesty which Osborne finds sickeningly lacking in the sections of society he has thrashed so often, difficulties arise" (1958). His rage at the absence of any heroic cause to fight for indicates the confusion of the youth. These youth ultimately neutralized and deactivated the process of using the anger as a fuel for social revolution. Alan Sillitoe, for instance, held that "John Osborne didn't contribute to the British theatre: he set off a land-mine called *Look Back in Anger* and blew most of it up" (qtd in Taylor, 185). This inability to find a lasting success is not confined to Osborne only but it jeopardised the validity and legitimacy of his contemporaries as well. His contemporary like Arden's *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance* (1959) was faulted for its "sense of political stagnation" (Rabellato, 1956: 17). Even Pinter's politically forceful 'comedies of menace' were slowly becoming redefined into comedy of manners. With this scenario in the Socialist theatre, it was recommended to have a stage occupied by playwrights other than these. So it was necessary for the British theatre of the sixties to have, as George Goetschius holds:

a new Jimmy Porter who will give up the sweet stall, abandon some of his sexual obsessions and class-inflicted self-consciousness, and even the nostalgia of 'slim volumes of verse' and say something relevant to Britain in the sixties, a Britain which has moved so far beyond the angry young man and the kitchen sink as to give the impression that these were somehow involved in the Irish question and the Easter rebellion (1966: 34).

This new voice of Socialist drama fortunately is found in Edward Bond, Howard Barker, David Storey and other Second New Wave Dramatists. These were to be the new flag bearers of British Socialist theatre who gave a new lease of life to drama and also carved out a way for future development of Socialist drama. Despite the fact that contemporaries with an obvious leftist fondness were busy in attacking the Rightist government, new dramatists questioned the entire system. This was a voice distinct from the angry generation. As Edward

Bond says: “We haven’t done much when we’ve abused the stupid and the presumptuous people in power” (*Plays: 4*: 106), for mere criticism cannot change the power equation.

Undoubtedly, in the post-war period, British Socialist theatre experienced one of its major excitements in the plays of Osborne, Silhouette and Delaney. But it became rather soft, yielding and reformist, when in comparison with Osborne and Wesker more confrontational and militant opinions were put across about internal and international politics by new socialist playwrights. Prominent socialist dramatist like Arden, Griffith, Bond and Hare addressed themselves to the task of fighting against the intellectuality and emotional hostility towards the leftist politics advocated by Marxism. They made every endeavour on the stage to give predominant importance to socialist culture within bourgeois cultural practices. The plays of Bond, Churchill, Arden, and Griffith provided a theatrical restatement of the cold war politics. They, Bigsby observe, “created a drama charged with social and cultural alarm” (Bigsby, 9). They also addressed “problematic social matters with a directness and insistence that was unprecedented” (qtd in Rabey, 1986: 1). They were making a mark not only by being different from previous decade of dramatists but by giving a new direction to the Socialist theatre in its professed aim to remove injustice. John Elson says about these Second New Wave Dramatists, “British left-wing writers became famous throughout Europe for their hardline opinions, among them Bond, Howard Brenton and Nigel Williams, and the strength of their vocabularies” (1976: 95).

Besides finding the roots of Socialist drama in its transition from first to second generation of ‘New Wave Dramatists’, the appearance of Socialist drama has a special significance in the British socio-political history. The backdrop of the historical processes and the socio-political spheres against which the Socialist drama unfolded has been amply treated by critics and scholars. Martin Banham in his study of New Dramatists gives a concise account of “the kind of society that, by 1956, can be said to have divided into two worlds”. As he puts it:

They began to dismantle the embarrassment of Empire, the granting of independence to India being perhaps the most notable and irrevocable step. ... the Brave New World of theory proved too often to be a compromise and like all compromises gave the worst of both worlds. An older generation, who had seen the war as a battle for a return of old standards, was often savagely divided from the younger generation, who saw it as an opportunity for new. A society that rejected tradition, and found the class system both laughable and abhorrent, built its world alongside another society that found its stability and sanity only in a comfortable perpetuation of these very things. Both sides had their strongholds. The one could nationalise industry, give away colonies, create opportunities for the free education to the highest levels, expanding, en route, universities and colleges that were open on grounds of merit alone. But on the other side could still use its residual wealth and politics and social power to maintain its exclusiveness, and could still insinuate its standards into the morality of society (1969: 15).

The socialist writers, who grew up within this larger context of chaos and social instability in Britain were disillusioned. David Daiches recounts the historical situation impeding the Socialist drama. They were aghast and “felt life as being futile, hollow and confused”. Further, as Daiches observes:

They were the people who had grown up after the Second World War and gained advantage of the Education Act of 1944 and the welfare state of the Labour government elected in 1945. They had gone to a red-brick university - not to Oxford or Cambridge. The state had paid for their education. When they left the university and looked for jobs, these were reserved for those who went through the traditional public school plus

'Oxbridge' education. They had expected 'a genuine meritocracy' with important places available for those who were educated. But the kind service of the welfare state had made them to be misfits in the world already out of order. The aftermath of the Second World War created a new generation which felt life as being futile, hollow and confused (1960: 112-13).

After the war, British Empire was reduced to its minimum its economy was in tatterdemalion plight. To put across the ruin of England, it was termed as the 'sick man of Europe'.

John Stuart in *Twentieth Century British Drama* (2001) relates British drama to its social, cultural and historical context and the way individual playwrights shaped and developed their distinctive dramatic forms. British Socialist Drama has its roots in the war torn sensibility of disillusioned, battered, and spiritually sterile humanity. The catastrophic consequents to the two major wars dismantled reliable structures of religion, morality and family. The basic queries regarding existence and truth remained unanswered and the disillusioned individual rejected traditional moral absolutes. Socialist drama offered expression to the realities of the post war period. The major noticeable feature of these dramatists is that they were all young. Most of them were born around 1930 and had undergone harrowing experience of the political events of their times like the Spanish Civil War (1936), the Second World War (1945) and the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 by Russia. The impact of the Second World War was the most damaging one. Michael Patterson in his book in detail talks about how the war had dealt a crushing blow, leading to fractured beliefs and convictions everywhere. The war bewildered them and made them disillusioned about their existing values and their faith in Christian God. It created a chaotic situation, and left nothing for them to lean upon. It broke all shibboleths, especially the British class system. The young generation experienced general restlessness, disorganization, and frustration.

For a proper appreciation of the response given to this general situation by contemporary dramatists, one may turn to the playwrights of the Theatre of Absurd, who had lost faith in human relationships and in the competence of language to facilitate human communication. Their drama creates its forms out of the boredom and loneliness of life. The setting is bizarre and irrational. The characters are parodic and eccentric. They speak and behave whimsically. The dialogue consists of monologues, repetitions, pauses and silences. The characters do not understand the world around them and their action is unmotivated.

Socialist playwrights with essentialist approach on the other hand do not share this cynical attitude of the absurdists. Essentialist dramatic art, as represented by Brecht, deals with the same disorder that of an absurdist but it does not attempt to give shape to what is shapeless in the universe. Essentialist dramatic form shows the human condition as one which needs a renewal and portrays man's struggle to uphold the societal patterns underlying all experience. Implicit in their dramatic practice is their basic faith in the family ties and social institutions. Martin Esslin, commenting on the portrayal of characters in Beckett and Pinter who are representatives of the Theatre of the Absurd says that these dramatists were "shy of providing their characters with neat motivations" (1962: 20). One of the important ways in which the Theatre of the Absurd diverged from all earlier theatres was its view of human being as irrational and ultimately opaque to itself. In explaining this feature Esslin points to the similarities it has with trends in modern psychology. He says, "however widely these schools of psychology may diverge, they agree about the immense difficulty of a human being's motivations under any single heading" (20). He also points to how, "the unity of the characters, consistency and the behaviour of a human being from cradle to the grave ... has lost much of its basis" (20). The concept of the unity of the character, of consistency in the

human behaviour was directly challenged by this dramatic tradition. Esslin's reference to the unchanging essence of a human being is so central to the essentialist theatre, points to the difference between an essentialist and existentialist view of man.

Characters in essentialist drama, as represented by Brecht, Arden, Bond and others try to understand the social environment surrounding them precisely because they believe that human beings are always everywhere situated in a spatio-temporal frame of reference. They obviously do so, on the assumption that it is possible to comprehend human character. They also attempt to make the audience understand the social reality by interrupting the action or by presenting it in a strange light. The stage setting gives only a glimpse of the surroundings, leaving the spectator free to imagine them on his own. In Raymond Williams's words, Brechtian drama demonstrates the essentialist belief that "man had not only made but could remake himself" (87). It unmask the society of its time on the basis of the belief that man can reform it through contemplation and action. As Walter Benjamin in *Understanding Brecht* says, Brechtian theatre does not "reproduce conditions", it "discloses" them, "uncovers them", in order to make the audience aware, so that "they can collectively transform the existing society" (1973: 100). Rejecting the meaninglessness of the human life and situation portrayed in existential plays, the essentialist dramatic form has the spectator visualise the possibility for man to create the history with a degree of faith in his capability to change it.

British Socialist drama also emerged out of the discontent with the existing modes of writing. Indeed neither the commercially successful popular works of Noel Coward and Terence Rattigan nor the verse plays of T. S. Eliot and Christopher Fry spoke of contemporary reality to an adequate extent. Socialist drama was a revolt against the poetic drama of T.S. Eliot and Christopher Fry as it had failed to communicate the underlying reality. The verse drama started as a reaction to the harsh and reiterative prose utterance of the realistic drama and offered musical dramatic speech. But in spite of T S Eliot's and Christopher Fry's best efforts, it ended in mannered dialogues and failed to touch the inner and normally inarticulate experience of the audience. As long as religious and historical themes were concerned, it could appeal to the audience's taste with its poetic eloquence. But when confronted with the modern themes especially after the Second World War, it fell short of synthesizing dialogue and action with its poetry. As Simon Trussler says, "Eliot's high Toryism was as much out-of-tune politically with the new dramatists as his sugar-coated cadences were stylistically ill-adapted to their themes" (1968: 21). Pointing out the rigidity of poetic drama J. R Taylor says that, "It was difficult for a character to order a servant to bring a pack of cigarette and attend the telephone call simultaneously in poetry" (1962: 27). In the old mode, T. S. Eliot and others continued to write verse-drama, but their religious or mythological themes, when put into modern settings, proved hard for actors to perform convincingly and audiences did not like these plays much, so verse drama died out. This paved the way for new drama. As Trussler points out:

New drama wasn't a label any of the early new-wave British dramatists would have chosen deliberately, but a shape for which they reached instinctively: it happened to meet many of the demands which they were beginning to make on the English theatre. It served as a convenient vehicle for direct social comment, as opposed-very much opposed-to that poeticism in symbolic drawing-rooms which delighted the cultural establishment, and which was being vaunted abroad by the British Council as a renaissance of verse drama (1968: 30).

More than this the theatricality of poetic drama was lost. Socialist drama rejected it and strode upon new themes of common life experience.

In the absence of any vital and original drama after 1950s, London producers were forced to draw heavily on foreign sources, particularly on plays from the United States. When they wanted American plays of serious nature they drew upon the works of dramatists like Lillian Heilman, Clifford Odets, Thornton Wilder, William Saroyan, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams. Reviewing the early fifties, John Russell Taylor notes that “most of the big critical successes— those which were felt to add appreciably to the cultural life of the city- were foreign” (17). Thus, the surfacing of Socialist drama has a special significance in its open exchange with the foreign productions. British Theatre was also dominated by foreign productions especially those of Samuel Beckett, Brecht, Eugene Ionesco, Jean-Paul Sartre etc. Socialist theatre showed its openness to these European theatre influences and appropriated what was suitable to its own purpose. Its techniques and themes influenced the British young dramatists. This exposure to varied experiments in form and technique emboldened these dramatists to exploit their own vision in a broader perspective, with the current and popular themes of their times.

Many influences from abroad, both Continental and American, influenced the contemporary Socialist theatre, and of these the influence of the plays and theories of the German Bertolt Brecht was strongly evident. David Edgar claims that most of the playwrights were affected by Brecht one way or the other. In his recognition of Brecht he said: “Brecht is part of the air we breathe” (1999: 1). John Arden and Edward Bond, in particular have been heavily influenced by Brecht, not only in theatrical technique, but also in his sense of historical change. Arden’s *Sergeant Musgrave’s Dance* (1950) owes much to Brecht’s *Mother Courage* (1933). Even Arnold Wesker in *Chips with Everything* (1962) successfully applies the Brechtian technique of division of action into short independent scenes. In his original production of Bond’s *Lear* (1971) at the Royal Court, William Gaskell followed Brecht’s Berliner Ensemble by creating locale through foreground object rather than background decor, and in the style of the groupings, lighting, costumes and overall visual economy. The influence of Brecht proved to be greater than Beckett: not because of “the slogans — Epic Theatre, Alienation and Commitment — but because the tendency over these last twenty years has been to shift the emphasis from actor to writer and finally to producer; and Brecht has more to offer the producer than Beckett” (Hinchliffe, 1979:1). Not only this, Brecht’s slogan of theatre for social change was held strongly by the socialist playwrights.

The progression of Socialist drama should be seen in the perspective of one of the greatest debates between Brecht and Lukacs with regard to the choice of form and style. New dramatists refused to follow the artistic style of conventional realism. Hence, writers were divided broadly into two strands, reflectionist and the interventionist, who argued the merits of their respective positions drawn from the famous Lukacs-Brecht debate of the 1930.

Lukacs attacked modernism because of its subjectivity. If the writer perceived and responded to reality as an isolated individual, then it was impossible to offer political insights. Instead the realists offer:

an image of reality in which the opposition of appearance and essence, of the individual case and the general rule, of the immediacy of the senses and abstract conceptualization etc. is resolved. The immediate effect of the work of art is to dissolve the oppositional elements into a spontaneous whole so that they can form an inseparable unity for the reader (Patterson, 2003:21).

According to Lukacs, by rejecting the attempt to record the 'appearance' (everyday reality), and insisting instead on depicting a subjective perceived 'essence' (underlying reality), the modernist was divorcing art from the real sphere in which political action could take place. The modernist counter-argument was that there was no longer any objective reality to be produced, and that modernist writers were being more honest in acknowledging the subjectivity of their response. As Fredric Jameson observes: "Realists, by suggesting that representation is possible ... tend to perpetuate a preconceived notion of some external reality to be imitated, and indeed to foster a belief in the existence of some common-sense, everyday, ordinary shared secular reality in the first place" (Jameson, 1974:10). Brecht's perception of reality may have been subjective and he may have shared with other modernists a sense of despair at the sorry state of the world, but his Marxist conviction offered him a non-personal objective and methodical solution.

The claim for realism was that it offered a complete and coherent account of reality, a necessary prerequisite for political action. Modernism on the other hand presented a fragmented vision of reality, one that did not depict a clear chain of causality. Lukacs was particularly critical of montage, which he condemned as the "technique of juxtaposing heterogeneous, unrelated pieces of reality torn from their context" (Lukacs, 1971:43). Brecht countered that it was an ahistorical and reactionary viewpoint to insist on continuing to write within the tradition of nineteenth-century realism, it was essential to embrace new forms and to adopt them to political ends, in fact, to develop a theatre 'for the scientific age'. In a memorable example Brecht states, "If you hit a car with a coachman's whip, it won't get it going" (qtd in Patterson, 2003: 9).

Following this debate, socialist writers like Bond, Arden and others used theatre for highlighting social issues along the Brechtian line, believing that new models of writing are necessary to handle the chaos created by the wars and excessive materialism. On the other hand, Socialist drama in its realist form was dominated by the realistic trajectory in the hands of Wesker, John Maritime and Shelagh Delany. Nevertheless, while it is convenient and illuminating to discuss reflectionist (Realist) and interventionist (Modernist) as polar opposites, in practice socialist playwrights will draw on elements from both modes. The social realist like Arnold Wesker may accord expressionistic aura to quiet realistic situation and the experimentalist like Edward Bond may present action and dialogues that could be taken from everyday life. It would be more appropriate to think of two strains as ends of spectrum rather than as mutually exclusive categories. At one end of the spectrum we have the reflectionist strain of realism, at the other the interventionist strain of modernism. The former appealed to some British socialist playwrights (Arnold Wesker, Shelagh Delany, John Maritime and Caryl Churchill) in 1960s because it allowed them to portray a familiar world where injustice could be recognised. The later appealed to others (Edward Bond, Joe Orton, and Alan Ayckbourn) because it seemed to offer greater possibility of analysing the causes of this injustice.

British Socialist theatre has bloomed and flourished by the contribution of the eminent playwrights like John Osborne, John Arden, Arnold Wesker, Edward Bond, David Edgar and other socialist playwrights. The credit for this successful and revolutionary development of contemporary British Socialist theatre goes to every playwright. Not only do they attempt to deal minutely with the issues of the day but are resolute in defending the rights of those who find their due rights trampled on every day basis. This attempt is followed by a picture of a society, unlike the absurdists, of an optimistic one in which the role of individual in creating such a society is shown to be enormous. It is this confidence and vibrancy of socialist

playwrights which enabled them to continue working in challenging circumstances. The biggest achievement of the socialist playwrights is that they convinced a generation that drama can redeem the chaos and turbulence resulting from acts inconsistent with reason. The playwrights gave the theatre a vitality and freshness which drew critical attention from all sides. Notable among them are Arnold Wesker and Edward Bond, whose talent bears witness to the way they furthered the cause of Socialist drama. With their unparalleled skill and committed socialist stance they are resolute in demonstrating the importance of Socialist theatre. The following chapter will examine Bond as the champion of 'Rational Theatre' and evaluate his position in the tradition of Socialist theatre.

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