

Post-Modernist Drama – Some Trends

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Abstract

Recent criticism accepts modernism as a highly significant form of art (we hear expressions like 'modern painting', 'modern poetry', 'modern drama' etc.) attempting to render the very depths of modern experience in some acceptable form or the other. Like the other forms of art modern drama attempts to portray modern man's experience, doubts, uncertainties. Modern drama as Bradbury and Bigsby put it, is "a major achievement which belongs to our experience, our doubts and uncertainties, our ways of perceiving an achievement stylistically radical and novel, and likely to be regarded as quite as exciting, important and innovative as that of any previous period".

The complexity of modern drama is such that it is very difficult to comprehend it in its fullness. Modern drama is definitely different from the old type of conventional drama. One finds a number of play-wrights, each experimenting in one's own way. As a result the plays that emerged from the hands of these writers reflect the multiplicity of experience that these writers felt in their hearts. As a result, one finds an intriguing variety in modern drama, leading to all sorts of names. The modern drama is called kitchen-sink, neo-realist, drama of non-communication, absurd drama, comedy of menace, dark-comedy, drama of cruelty, comedy of exhaustion. Modern man in general, particularly during and after war seems to have undergone an inexplicable, agonizing, harrowing and traumatic experience. After the Wars it appeared as though the values that people cherished seemed to be disappearing may be because the social condition of people was very bad due to unemployment and other reasons.

Before one thinks of post-modernist trends it's not out of place to think of modernism first. One cannot but think of Peter Faulkner's caution that one should use it with care and precision. In his book on Modernism he says "Modernism is a term now frequently used in discussions of twentieth century literature - indeed, of all forms of twentieth century art. Like all critical terms, it needs to be used with care and precision if it is to help our understanding of the works it is applied to".¹ The term modernism meant a more specific association with experimentation in the arts. It is definitely difficult to define the critical terms such as 'Modernism' and 'Post-modernism' because they defy all definitions and categories. When the term modernist (preferred to the adjective modern) has been applied to the vast variety of works in all the arts it is difficult to arrive at any exactness. To think of a common definition one can say that anything that is connected with the twentieth century, anything that has dissociated itself from the 19th century assumptions, ideologies, and concepts can be termed as modern. Particularly after the traumatic experience of the two wars, the western man felt as though the world was shattered to pieces and every artist - be a painter or a musician or a poet or a dramatist or

a novelist - tried to reconstruct the world. He also tried to give expression to personal isoteric view of life. The modern writer wants to express something which he felt; that he cannot express. There seems to be a number of impediments to him, including the medium through which he wants to express. This result in the modern writer feeling helpless that the more he tries to express the greater he feels that it is a 'raid on the inarticulate'. Referring to this, Peter Faulkner says "that modernist writers fail to see man socially and historically and so make his alienation, which is a social process, into an absolute. They offer -a totally subjective vision, leading to 'the attenuation of reality' in Joyce, Kafka, Musil, Faulkner and Beckett inevitably accompanied by 'dissolution of personality' Kafka's angst is seen as 'the experience 'par excellence' of modernism,".²

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Dramatists like Pinter, Wesker, Osborne, Arden, Tom Stoppard and Edward Bond tried to give expression in their plays, to their own understanding of the times and their own share of despair and distrust, a legacy which every modern man shared after the Wars. The complexity of the experience of modern writer contributed to the complexity of modern drama. Sometimes one wonders what all this modern drama is; whether the modern dramatist has any purpose at all. John Russell Brown feels that "there has been no manifesto from the new dramatists, no proclaimed and commonly agreed program". It's very difficult to expect any proclaimed manifesto from these modern dramatists because they come from varied backgrounds and want to express their varied experiences and hence one cannot expect them to have a commonly agreed programme. Many of these modern dramatists try to project society in which they lived. For example, Osborne

in his *Look Back in Anger*, though subscribes to the conventional structure gives expression to his rage and helplessness at the happenings around him in his society. He is angry and defiant. But he also seems to be recreating the half conscious pressures under which his mind bogged down.

Another aspect which one cannot forget is the stress on language, for example a dramatist like Pinter who is a new phenomenon with his unusual type of dialogue which is used more as a smokescreen rather than a clean glass to look through. He aims perhaps more at obfuscation rather than clarification. The modern dramatist is concerned with manipulating not a language of enlightenment but a language of obfuscation; not a language of social progress but a language of existential survival; not a language of communal faith but a language of divisive, strategy. The words of his plays are intransigent and intransitive they can not be transferred to other levels of meaning, be they philosophical, ideological or allegorical".⁶

The words like modernism and post-modernism can not be avoided particularly when one tries to analyse post-war drama. The influence of European drama on the post-war dramatists and their experimentation with expressionism, surrealism, existentialism and marxism, with a variety of ups and downs, successes and failures, cannot be ignored. As Tim Brassell rightly observes "a variety of successes and failures, the tides of expressionism, surrealism, existentialism and marxism (to name only the main ones) have washed through the European theatre it's now clear that the European authors, with their bolder approach to stagecraft, to character, to theatricality, to the whole treatment of ideas on the stage, did in time, have a radical effect on the developing consciousness of an important number of our more original more formally adventurous British playwrights of the '60s and '70s including Arden, Bond, Pinter and Stoppard"⁷. One discerns two contrasting and opposing views that seemed to have shaped the post-war drama. One is the Brechtian world-view stressing the importance of man's role in society, second, the view of the theatre of the Absurd which felt man as a psychological out-cast from society. When the values that sustained the 19th century appeared to be fading out, it has become increasingly difficult to the playwright to present his ideas other than through formal characterization and other more open theatrical methods. In the case of novel, the medium being fluid and protean adapted itself successfully "to the endless stream of socio-cultural change, from Hardy to Forster to Woolf to Joyce to Beckett to Fowles".⁸ The Absurdist theatre and the Brechtian theatre, one heavily existential and the other highly Catholic try to present man in different perspective each opposing the other and each contrasting the other. The influence of Brecht can be traced on the 'Post-Anger' playwrights such as David Hare, David Edgar, Howard Brenton, who reshaped the drama "into a new, hard edged school of social (often socialist) realism".⁹ The main theme running across this post-war drama is "a sense of the nightmarish abyss that underlies our precarious existence".¹⁰

Though it is very difficult to assess the contemporary drama, still one perceives certain trends. For example the drama of Osborne, Wesker and others in 1950s was political, and it was a theatre of anger and revolt. To put it in the words of Bradbury and Bigsby "in fact much of the protest was reformist rather than revolutionary in spirit, and much the same might be said of the form of the plays, though they did contain a powerful

reaction against the way theatre had become fixed as an anodyne and middleclass institution. But it was in many ways a very traditional drama, realist or naturalist in spirit, that emerged, taking much of its energy from the social range it attended to and the new social experiences it explored".

Soon this theatre of anger and revolt is replaced by a new type of drama called the Absurd drama influenced by the continental theatre of foreign playwrights like Brecht, Artaud, Sartre and others.

It's very difficult to draw a line between modernism and postmodernism. One overlaps into another. Post-modernist drama reflects also a sense of cultural dislocation. The anger expressed in modern drama is not against injustice of the society but at the vacuousness of one's own life. The old dead England could not be replaced by a new one. The issues beneath the carapace of class and behind the caul of imperial pretensions have been exposed. The cultural uncertainty, the depletion of energy, the disruption of moral forces, the disintegration of society, the disjunction between language and action and the decay of the world in general have been focused at in this drama. The post-modernist drama makes certain references to cultural alarm and one finds incoherence both in theme as well as in utterances being projected through the disjunction of language and action. As Patrice Pavis feels "despite the thematic incoherence of its utterances, the post-modern 'work' maintains a certain coherence in its enunciation; and it often retains great simplicity, even naivete, and as its organizing principle a certain harmony that organizes the work 'atleast at its vanishing point,'".¹²

The characters in the plays of Beckett, Pinter and Stoppard make one believe that people have lost their identities or atleast their contours. The human being appears no longer as an individual but he is more a machine. The modern play as such is "an avalanche of discourse which no longer claims to be linked to a visible action in the world, an inheritance which pours out into its heirs without giving them the choice of accepting, rejecting or selecting the best of it" Post-modernism is generally equated with depoliticization of art and it is incoherent.

Tim Brassell, referring to an essay of John Barth says that he, "referred to parody and travesty (albeit somewhat disparagingly) as two of the manifestations of the new approach which he sees as dominating the post-war literary vanguard".¹⁴

The modern writer becomes bold enough to reject existing artistic conventions and in its place tries to create something new by re-trying, subverting, transcending and transforming even the very same artistic conventions which he rejected earlier. This search to revive new versions out of the conventional forms is what distinguishes post-modernism from modernism. Referring to the idea of Barth and approving it Tim Brassell says "for Barth, this search to revive new versions of traditional forms is what separates post-modernism from modernism. The relevance of these comments to Stoppard's work may already be apparent from our consideration of his novel which, though uneven, contains many of Barth's post-modernist characteristics. They are still more relevant to Stoppard's plays, especially *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. And since Barth places Beckett (whose work first appeared during the 1930s) firmly at the tail-end of Modernism, a question that may usually arise -without delving into the

complex realms of contemporary critical theory -- is whether Stoppard's plays might, in their own unique way, represent a step past Beckett into the vanguard of our Post Modern theatre".

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