CONCLUSION
Bennett's artistic achievement.

As Bennett is being read and re-evaluated even five decades after his death, it stands as a fitting testimony beyond doubt that the impact of his works is quite durable and they are going to be there for generations to come. For a decade or two after his death, Bennett's reputation as a creative artist has suffered a severe setback. But this declining tendency did not last long and his popularity began to regain momentum and in sixties and seventies it showed a further trend of rejuvenation. Ernest A. Baker thinks that, as a novelist, Bennett has been underrated. He takes the same stand as that of Henry James about Bennett. Baker says:

Henry James was impressed by the density of Bennett's knowledge of the world that he undertook to depict his 'saturation' with his subject matter, "the firmness and fullness of his embrace of it".1

Henry James was impressed by 'the density of Bennett's knowledge'. If an authority like Henry James commended Bennett it could not be without any solid ground. As had already been observed that the most important characteristic feature of Bennett is his keen observation. This characteristic trait of
minute observation he maintained throughout his career, but it bloomed into a full force in his Five Towns novels. Commending this sharpness of Bennett Baker says:

His keenness of eye was such that he missed nothing. And as a workman enjoying his job and simply performing it honestly he never annoys by his knowingness, never puts on that air of pert—omniscience characteristic of a certain school. 2

The depth of Bennett's knowledge astonishes everyone. The extent and minuteness of his knowledge was enigmatic. His workmanship was sportive. All the same time he did not want to 'annoy' anybody nor did he pretend to be an 'omniscient'. Instead of delving deep into the interiority of his characters he looks around him with utmost curiosity to find something new every time he peeps out. James Hall touches this trait of Bennett pertinently. Says Hall: "He saw personality as reflected in its surroundings, mannerisms, eccentricities, typical actions." 3 Bennett wants to see everything in order. If something has gone wrong around him he wishes to rectify it, not with a frowning censure but with a tender touch of love or laughter.

He worked on his novels as any other craftsman did. He never tried to hide the fact that his prime concern was to obtain a decent livelihood. He performed
his duty with the zeal of an artisan. His curiosity was so intense and insatiable that he wanted to see a complete intimacy with each and every human being.

(ii) Bennett's approach to realism.

In order to project his artistic scheme the technique he adopted was realism. He could not get it as a technique taken for granted but he had to obtain it. The great French masters were the torch-bearers for him in the beginning. Then came the Russian realists with a better technical frame work.

All this was happening at the turn of the century when Bennett was growing to be an artist. The complications created by the various approaches to the techniques of novels were so profound that it was not easy for a young writer like Bennett to imbibe a new method for himself. The confusing condition prevailed in the '90s is evident from the comment of Helmut E. Gerber:

"The last twenty to thirty years of the 19th century witnessed the rise, almost concurrently of half a dozen literary movements as well as many momentous political, economic, and moral shifts of emphasis. These currents interacted upon each other in a way that almost defies our efforts to over-simplify the process by applying an adamantine nomenclature to all the changes we can catch in flight."

From the above quoted passage of Gerber it is easy to imagine the fluctuations prevailing at the turn
of the century and how difficult it was for Bennett to evolve his own methods. In short, when the continental influence combined with his characteristic way of observation Bennett could evolve a realistic method of his own. Still he could not forget that he was writing in the background of the Victorians. That is why Bennett never escaped from the class consciousness of the Victorians though he had his sympathies with the underdogs. But the main concern of Bennett was the life lived by the people of the Five Towns in all its simplicity and charm. Bennett shows life through acute and obtuse angles, so that the beholder can make an impartial judgment on the life lived by the people.

A keen observer will not fail to notice that the central theme of a Bennetian novel is the presentation of a crisis rising from the interpersonal relations of the people around him. John Bachelor's point of view is worth quoting here. Bachelor says:

*If Bennett's novels can be seen falling into a broad pattern in which man struggles with his environment, best novels are those in which the environment wins, in which the will of the hero is broken.*

It is true in almost all the cases that the hero or for that matter, the heroine is broken. With all her dynamism at her disposal, Sophia does not achieve
anything. So is the case with Edwin and the same is the position with Hilda. Anna again doesn’t achieve anything solid. No doubt Bennett’s women are stronger than men; yet they fail to make a mark in the society. It happens because of the environmental impediments created by the combined impact of utilitarianism, industrialism and Darwinism coupled with innumerable social actions and interactions. These things he presents through the telescopic expositions of the day to day life lived by the people around him.

Bennett knew that realism is a way of expressing life with truthfulness. This truthfulness differs according to the temperament and environment of a writer. Bennett’s was a method of writing with a perspective of the society around him. James Hall comes more or less very near to this argument. Hall says: "He saw personality as reflected in its surroundings, mannerisms, eccentricities, typical actions." With this social perspective in mind he was inquest of minute details which was definitely a departure from the great victorians. With the aid of this keen observation Bennett chalked out a new brand of realism which he effectively used in formulating his great Five Towns novels. James Hall hastens to add that, "Bennett’s creative achievement is the registration of the semisophisticated human consciousness."
It is true that Henry James succeeded in bringing out the "sophisticated human consciousness". Bennett's art reaches only up to the "semisophisticated human consciousness". This difference is due to their social upbringing. Although some of the Victorians like Meredith and Hardy were still alive, the 1890s saw the emergence of many young writers with a different intellectual, social and temperamental approach. They were writing as the pace-setters of a new trend in fictional writings. When Joyce, Woolf and Lawrence appeared, they came to be known as modernists. Thus a gap was created between the Victorian tradition and the modern innovation. Here lies the real significance of the Edwardian writers. Their importance and impact have always been underplayed. Some of them, especially Wells, Bennett and Galsworthy bridged the gap between the modernists and the Victorians.

(iii) His shortcomings.

Bennett's reputation as a creative writer remains to be an enigma. There may not be many other names which can be included with that of Arnold Bennett. At best he is a writer par excellence and at worst he is less than a mere mediocre artist. This dichotomy in Bennett is beyond the understanding of many. When he was alive his reputation rose to skyhigh and it was under siege when he died.
in 1931. Many people underrated his methods as
'literary capitalism'. A major part of his writing
career was simply devoted for serials for nothing but
cash. In one of his journal entries Bennett remarks
that no man is writing for his posterity. He has to
assure bread for himself and his dependants. But even
after becoming very rich Bennett used to contribute to
the serials purely on monitory considerations. This
materialistic practicalmindedness was certainly un-
becoming of a creative artist. His works like Mental
Efficiency, How to live on Twenty-four hours a day' and
author's craft have definitely darkened his image which
gave Virginia Woolf an opportunity to write the most
damaging comment on Bennett, 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown'
in 1924. Referring to the above three books John
Bachelor writes, "they support the popular view of the
aggressively philistine, money-grubbing, self-complacent
figure pilloried by Virginia Woolf. On certain, other
technical ground also Bennett had to incur the ire of
many critics. An objective observer, no doubt, he was.
At the same time he did not want to alter anything. He
was only interested to copy them down. James Hall's
opinion is quite pertinent here. Hall says:

"He wanted every object in its place, every
action on schedule, every love affair according
to the table of organisation. An inflex-
ible writer, he could not adapt,"
and doubtless did not want to understand too well, the efflorescence of the inner life which his immediate successors developed. The interior monologue was suppressed in him and he could only suggest its existence.

Though he claims to be an antitransitionalist, he could not free himself completely from the Victorian traditions. He suppresses 'the interior monologue', he could 'only suggest its existence'. These are the aspects which definitely create a partition wall between himself and the other writers of 1920s and '30s.

(iv) His critical reputation.

After Bennett's death his reputation dwindled considerably. But that was only for a temporary phase. Critics like Angus Wilson, Walter Allen, John Lucas, Arnold Kettle, John Bachelor and others who belong to the new generation of critics, in one way or the other, extol Bennett as an artist pure and simple. Orwell rightly says that every novelist has a "message". James Hall adds to this proposition a bit. Hall says:

Bennett's message lies in a mediation between the primitive conceived as the commercial aristocrats, and the aspiration to a more complex set of morals and manners!

Through all his Five Towns novels Bennett was trying to mediate between the old and the new. The generation gap is well brought out and he puts his emphasis on return to childhood, the nostalgia for
class-conscious England, the playful concern with manners and social climbing.\footnote{12} James Hall genuinely accepts Bennett's greatness. He writes "In this context of contemporary reality Bennett still seems old-fashioned, but relevant to the main conflict."\footnote{13}

It is true that Bennett does not allow his characters unlimited powers. But he makes them think as Shakespeare does that 'there is a divinity that shapes our end'. John Bachelor says: "As he locks his characters ever more securely in their chains Bennett permits them this last freedom, a self-reflectiveness, a capacity to see that they are playing roles determined for them by forces beyond their control."\footnote{14}

Even though Sophia manages to reach Paris, far away from her Five Towns, she is not totally free from the inhibitions of her potteries towns. After all her trials and tribulations she returns to Bursley not as defiant, but as fully redeemed.

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