HUMAN realism, of which Arnold Bennett as a novelist is the most master, is of two kinds: one that concerns with the human personalities, and the other pertains to the cultural institutions. As a meticulous observer of life around him, Arnold Bennett pertinently noticed that there is a constant conflict between these two realisms. But such a conflict is always subtle and elusive. However, on noticing the lives, as lived by the people and the achievements they make thereof, the nonthetic implicit forces of those two realisms colliding with each other becomes clear. Both the personal realism and institutional realism project themselves through the acts and performances of the individual members in a particular society. Since the two realisms seek their inevitable expressions through the same characters, as individuals in a given society, it becomes difficult to distinguish their nature of operation by way of making a mere objective observation. A sort of self-evidencing - interiorised - inclusive observation becomes necessary and that is what Arnold Bennett does as a novelist.

(i) The conflicting forces:

The concept of personal realism or the realisation of one's own authentic hopes, desires and dreams always centres round one's own sense of freedom and choice. The institutional realisms are the possible performances of the traditional values ethics and morals seeking for themselves a sort of static performance of faith and obedience
in the values of the said society. By the time Arnold Bennett became a phenomenal writer of his age, the age-old Victorian institutional prerogative started giving way to the individual and personal freedoms and aspirations in the society. Therefore there is a great change in the life-styles as well as the ultimate purposes of lives. This change is most conspicuously visible in the gap between the elder and younger generations. The elder generation very strongly adhered itself in its opposition and ruthless criticism of the younger generation. The younger generation sceptically retaliated the elder generation.

In order to ventilate this sharp and unbridgeable conflict between the elder and the younger generations, Bennett prefers to select the life in the Five Towns instead of presenting his characters in the quick-changing urban localities like London or Manchester where the life patterns gave no specific priorities either towards personal aspirations or towards the institutional superiorities. There is a silent war, rather a sort of undeclared conflict, in the basic structure of life; and this is coming to sharp encounters in the family set up of the Five Towns. Bennett concentrated his novels on the domestic plane of the rich and materialistically well-stationed family surroundings of the new suburban areas of Five Towns, where the modern technocratic amenities of life were making explosive inroads into the area.
and where life in the domestic surroundings was being perpetuated without much consonance or taste for the incoming novelties of life. Among the elder generation there is no interest at all in the new social and cultural developments like laying the railway lines, in The Old Wife's Tale, or the presence of the banking institutions in the Anna of the Five Towns. But for the younger generations, who were being brought up in the strict moral surroundings of the Wesleyan Methodist schools and the Victorian domestic domination of the parents, life turns out to be an inordinate and understandable crisis in the offing. In the so-called ideal domestic circumstances of the Victorian houses, the younger generations were neither required nor were ever allowed to make decisions for themselves. The elder generation always retained the privilege of arranging every thing, including the selection of life-partners for their wards in their strong and potent manumission.

(ii) shift in values and valuations:

But, however, there was emerging a new individualism and a sort of conscious involvement into the process of decision making amongst the younger generations, as a necessary result of the institutional changes. In fact the younger generations allowed themselves to be opened up to the new cultural forces with a sort of open-hearted frankness. Rather it is more true to say that the elder
generation foreclosed themselves to the new cultural and technocratic developments. As a result of which they were coming into a sort of incessant conflict with the assertive freedom of the younger generation. In this war of generations, in so far as the domestic peace and harmony are concerned, both the parties are losers, and the end of these generation conflicts invariably lead them to a chaotic disruption into the otherwise could have been complectently happy life-styles with in the rigid four walls of victorian morality.

Arnold Bennett aims at depicting this conflict in his novels. As a realist he wants to maintain a sort of all embracing objective observation of the changing patterns of life around himself. Unlike the post-Edwardian novelists he doesn't declare an open war of the younger generations with the elder generations. But at the same time he is sublimely conscious of the miserable vicissitudes of the younger generations. The younger generations took the cause of their authentic freedom as the stern purpose of their life. The following passage from *The Old Wives' Tale* is worth quoting in this contest.

Mrs. Baines was unfortunate in her phrasing that morning. She happened to be, in truth, rather an exceptional parent, but that morning she seemed unable to avoid the absurd pretensions which parents of those days assumed quite sincerely and which every good child with weakness accepted.
Sophia was not a good child, and she obstinately denied in her heart the cardinal principle of family life, namely, that the parent has conferred on the offspring a supreme favour by bringing it into the world. She interrupted her mother again, redly. (The Old Wife’s Tale p.34)

(iii) Evil machination of money power

It is obvious that the above conflicting situation between the mother and the daughter is the synthetic result of the rigid Christian family traditions and the feudal aristocratic norms. The original Christian idea of parent being an unquestionable and untransgressable head of the family, to some extent devolved on the Western societies through Roman feudal traditions. Bennett in stating that 'parents of those days assumed' amply suggest that the situation was altogether different by the time he came to write his novels. There is ample evidence to show that Arnold Bennett himself had a suffocative time in the care of his father. When his father finally became potentially rich, Bennett in a sort of ironic manner preferred to refer to his father as 'patter' lifting the word from that notorious phrase Patter Familia (all powerful autocratic head of the family). The manner in which 'the parents of those days' assumed their potential manumission is invariably through money power. Sophia's thieving of money from her aunt shows her determined gesture to put her protest against the money power. But somehow Sophia's own strength in course
of time comes to her through money, power. Dennett seems to suggest that acquiring money is the only way for assuming status in the society. This idea is more pertinently expressed in his *Sons of the Five Towns* where Willie Milne goes to the extent of committing suicide on his father failing to retain money in his hands because of debts. Even the elder Rince commits suicide and prophetically paves the way for the suicide of Willie. With a little bit of money the life-stories of Willie and Ritus would have been different.

Sophia absolutely sacrifices all other freedoms which nature gave her, and which her own interiority prompted her to grab. Instead of grabbing her freedoms, she assumes upon herself that Christian notion of sympathetically earning for the well-being of the rascals like Niepce who constantly nurtured in his mind a sexual passion for Sophia. However it is her gentle debonair that ultimately saved her from any untoward incident. In its final analysis it is very difficult to determine as to how much of real existential freedom Sophia asserted and how much of sacrifice of this freedom she had made on the harsh threshold of the realities of life. But the decision taken under the newly got sense of freedom, like the thoughtless act of children invariably led her to a strife and struggle all though her life. Bennett is just picturizing the Edwardian situation in a very truthful realistic manner in all his novels. In this kind of realism J.R. Stern's opinion is worth quoting.
He states:

... realism 'leaves things as they are. No human activity pursued with any degree of intentness and intelligence does that. Realism thrives on change and excels at registering it - literature and life know no better instrument for the intimating of change in all its meaningful detail than the realistic novel.

The manner in which 'realism thrives' is always asserted in the individual forced to take decisions against himself. Here the forcing agent is the institution. The individual, instead of succumbing to the forces of institution, determines to rebel or retaliate by way of taking absolutely self-provoked decision which very often seem to be destructive, even self-destructive. Sophia left for herself unpresurised by the mother would not have perhaps taken her decision to run away along with Scales. Here the institutional constraints are acting in the name of the authority and prerogative of the mother. (Parents are to be respected because they have taken the trouble of bringing the children into the world) (The Old Wife's Tale Page 34) J.R. Stern hastens to add the same strained thoughts in these lines.

I have called this kind of expectation social and existential precisely because what realism appeals to and establishes in the social truth which insists on the interconnectedness, individual and society²

In the above context Mrs. Baines stands for coercive traditionalism and Sophia represents the instinctive freedom. They both ruthlessly conflict with each other in the novel.
'He has vitality', declared Edwin Muir, but - 'The question whether Mr. Bennet's vitality is the artist's vitality, his courage the artist's courage, and his competence the artist's competence, has been generally overlooked in the satisfaction which his positive qualities have given us' Muir went on to distinguish between the competence of the practical man and the concern of the novelist with 'what his imagination can grasp'.

Edwin Muir spaciously hinted that Arnold Bennett's 'artistic vitality', 'artist's courage' and 'artist's competence' were generally overlooked and his positive qualities were taken to be highly satisfactory. This is otherwise to say that Bennett was regarded for his morally persuasive artifacts that he invariably involves in his novels.

In the light of what Edwin Muir suggests, there should have been a re-evaluation of Arnold Bennett's novels, and such re-evaluation should have focussed upon the 'artist's vitality', 'the artist's courage' and the 'artist's competence'. Such a re-evaluation of Arnold Bennett not fulfilled even in our times. As back as 1983 Angus Wilson rightly pointed out that Arnold Bennett was 'due for revival'. All this cry for 're-evaluation' and 'revival' shows that Arnold Bennett was not properly interpreted by the earlier generation of critics. Moreover, it is a fact that Bennett's all embracing passion for depicting the conflict of personal and institutional realisms around him missed the attention of almost all the critics. Angus Wilson's urgent demand for 'revival'
indicated that Bennett was either misread or not properly interpreted in the context of the growing demands of the newer and newer interpretations of life itself. Wilson further emphatically adds that

Most writers of any standing suffer at the hands of the next generation and a generation still later should repair this wrong. 5

This is proof enough that the contemporaries of Arnold Bennett were smuggishly satisfied with what Muir calls 'his positive qualities'. Bennett’s absolute credentials for grappling with the problem of the conflict of institutional and personal realisms was not taken into any consideration whatsoever. Therefore Angus Wilson hastens to add that "Arnold Bennett’s work is open to such changing judgements". This also implies that the ways of looking at Arnold Bennett are drastically changing from time to time and this is due to the alterations that are taking place in the field of ideas concerning men, nature and the universe from time to time. The most important aspect that deserves a reappraisal and recast is Arnold Bennett’s realism. In the world of changing values and judgements, the concept of 'real', 'reality' and 'realisation' change themselves beyond recognition in course of time. Accepting the facts that Bennett needs an urgent revision, a modest question can always be put whether there is anything permanent and unchanging in what he proposed as 'real' in his novels or not.
(v) **Bennett's realism**

What all Bennett wanted to convey appears to be that the conflict of his art that was brewing between institutional rigidities and personal freedom is a universal formula that determines the very form of life in a given society, which ultimately goes to determine the very form of any work of art that emerges out of that milieu. If the institutional realm is a matter of tradition, the personal realm can be considered as individual talent. This is abundantly suggested by T.S. Eliot in his "Tradition and the Individual Talent". Says Eliot,

> Whoever has approved this idea of order, of the form of the European, of English literature will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.

And again "but just as the past directs and guides the present also alters and modifies the past".

The tradition, according to T.S. Eliot, cannot be inherited as a paternal property but it had be acquired after great labour. Eliot was writing all this about poetry. But the same holds good about the importance of the past in respect of culture also. In the Five Towns culture there is a sort of inalienable attachment to the past. As the mechanical and technocratic innovation gave a serious set back to this unconscious attachment to the past, the people of the cities became rather lost for their traditional culture. It is not exactly so with the Bennett
society of the Five Towns. Despite the fact that Angus Wilson keenly felt the necessity to revive and re-evaluate Arnold Bennett's novels, what all he himself has to say about the changed meaningfulness of Bennett's realism is almost insignificant. The late Victorians accepted the domestic domination of parents and the social dominations of the elders. Therefore the critic often found it occasional to overemphasize the domination of the youngsters by the elders as to have been intended by Arnold Bennett as a universal law of existence. But, however, from the narrative focus with which he magnifies his so-called rebel characters (his rebels are not as rebellious as a twentieth century reader would like to have them) it is possible to make a judgement that Arnold Bennett stood for a rebellion in the society. It is a different matter that his rebels like Sophia and Anne, Edwin Clayhanger and to a lesser degree, Hilda Lassways and almost all other central characters are forced into unavoidable and inordinate crises. But even then they withstood by themselves as authentic personalities asserting their sense of freedom as the only value in a world where all other values are dwindling into nothingness. It is their stoic and heroic realism, which remained undeterred in the presence of the imminent opposition, that needs an urgent recast and revival. It is these characters that maintain in themselves their unique personalities.

Neither Angus Wilson nor any other critic worth mentioning
could take up the problem for critical reappraisal of
Arnold Bennett. After making a declaration that Bennett
observed a pertinent revival, Angus Wilson intelligently
contesting the old critical stance with a move verbaal vari-
tion. says Angus Wilson:

Bennett, of course, saw himself as an innov-
ator, the careful master of French crafts
working them into the fabric of English life,
the rebel against the slipshod carelessness
of the great 19th century novelists.

It is true that Bennett always tried to save
his narrative technique from the 'slipshod carelessness
of the great 19th century novelists'. But it is not
altogether right to say that Bennett merely worked
'French crafts' into the 'fabric of English life'. The
basic individual tenacity of the average British demo-
cratic citizen which comes into a full flowering in his
heroes and heroines goes uncommented and unattended to.
At the same time the extra careful manner in which his
heroes and heroines attended to and cared their personal-
ities finds no mention anywhere. In a broad way, as a
fiction writer, it is true that Bennett was substantially
influenced by the French writers, Flaubert, Maupassant,
Goncourts etc. A heroine like Sophia and all her perfe-
tion as a person could not be reached even by the great
French Fiction masters. The arduous attention that Bennett
pays to the local colour and creed of his character, as
well as the typical landscapes of the suburban England
of the Georgian times, grossly eludes the critical compre-
ensions of Wilson. Bearing in mind the achievements of
Virginia Woolf, Wilson hastens to state that

the interior monologue, sensitivity as the
artistic touchstone are both out of favour. 10

But we know that sensitivity not condescending
to sentiments is an artistic touchstone even today and
Arnold Bennett abounds in it.

With the advent of the modern most depth psy-
chology and studies in the phenomenology of human authen-
tic interiority and personal experience it is necessary
for an artist to become rather a sort of 'interior para-
mour' of the inner reality of his characters. A mere
external observation and 'social setting' are not suffi-
cient. They are relevant when the characters in one form
or the other are standing in opposition to the external
as well as social setting, as we find in the novels of
Somerset Maugham and Graham Green. This kind of indepth
awareness to the exterior forces of nature and society is
originally started by Bennett.

(vi) Impact of Institutional forces

While commenting upon life in Bursley Ernest
A Baker in his History of English Novel certainly touched
on the part played by the institutional forces on the
life-styles of both the heroines of Arnold Bennett in
his The Old Wive's Tale. But Baker does not go deep into
the details of the institutional forces which are silently
but coercively moulding the very inner personalities of
the two heroines. The realistic circumstances of the
Five Towns are finally the formidable forces of the characters of these two heroines. But these circumstances are equally available for all others also more or less as equal common property. It is only Sophia and Constance that could grow into characteristic personalities behaving exactly like themselves, without dwindling in the generality of the common folks, which by and large, is the condition of all others in the novel. Sophia's initial rebellion at the drab monotonous condition of life in Bursley turned her into a runaway kind from her home. But in this, rather generally thought of hasty step, lies the real inner trait of the character of Sophia. It is not only that she rebels, but later on she constantly re-evaluates herself on the delicate scales of right and wrong in an extremely sensible manner from time to time. There is something very strong as an individual in the character of Sophia. This has been sensed by Baker also. Says Baker:

If Sophia had yielded to the glamour of Chirac and gone irretrievably to the bad, she would not have been Sophia. She put Bennett right when he was inclined to go wrong; she was a real, live woman to him, the child of his imagination whose behaviour when she had come of age he watched with parental absorption.

If we make a reasonable inquiry into what exactly the Sophianess of Sophia is; and what in reality is the part played by social and domestic circumstances in moulding her into an endearing character for all times, we
may not be getting a direct answer. A doubt always arises if Constance or Anna of the Five Towns also could have grown into Sophia-like personalities had the social and domestic circumstances bear simultaneous and common. It is a hypothetical question. All the heroes and heroines of Bennett commonly share the Five Towns institutions in his major novels. The same cultural background moulded them differently as separate personalities. If so the source of being different and differently particular is not to be found in the institutional forces. It has to be arrived at by way of making a probe into the inner authentic reality of the concerned character. The same society and the domestic environment that rendered Sophia a rebel, also gave her the most necessitous courage to be as herself and not otherwise. In the course of the threatening circumstances of life that she lived in Paris somehow she grew into an unapproachably uncommon character, with the institutional forces remaining the same. If so the answer has to be found in the intrinsic personality of Sophia. There is some rare nerve strength in her that gave her a real stoic forbearance in being an endearing and enviable character. Such endearing and enviable dimensions are certainly there in the characters like Constance and Anna of the Five Towns. But in the force of personal convictions all of them stand far below Sophia. Sophia's personality to the extent that it is a reality of feminine virtue in
forbearance is certainly not an isolate example. Bennett
must have moulded this character after having come across
innumerable likes in the life around him. In the fict-
tional brass she outshines all. This quality of outshin-
ing everybody is a personal virtue that individuals are
encouraged to inculcate in themselves by any positive
and conscious fiction writer. Bennett is one such con-
scious and authentic fiction writer of the twentieth
century. Arnold Kettle commenting upon The Old Wife's
Tale arrives at a pleasant but a strange conclusion.

... but it is typical of Arnold Bennett
that Sophia Baines, for all her youthful
ardour and high promise, should be unable
to escape the background of Bursley and its
values despite her initial act of rebellion.
Sophia rebels against the drabness - the
narrow philistinism, the joyless puritanism
of the successful draper's shop of the Five
Towns. She falls in love and runs off with
her lover to Paris, to a world that in oppo-
site of the Five Towns in all its appearance
and attraction. But the very nature of
Sophia's elopement has been determined by
the Five Towns!2

Kettle speaks of escaping the background Bursley and
its values', without realising the implication that a
mere 'initial act of rebellion' in itself is not suffi-
cient for such an escape. 'The drabness' 'the narrow
philistinism and the joyless puritanism' are the ex-
ternal condition of the society from which she preferred
to run away from Bursley was made by Sophia on being
cornered and made wayless by her mother and aunt Maddack.
The decision was momentary and it was executed with the
alacrity of a strong and determined person of conviction. Kettle forgets the simple truth that Sophia was right from the beginning intended by the author to be exclusively herself in being a woman who takes her decisions instantly and sticks to them for having taken the trouble of arriving at one’s own decision. The force of one’s own decision is such a magnificent nature particularly in the process of original conviction, the extraordinary original manner in which Sophia arrives at her decisions and executes them almost with the same intensity and alacrity is to be found in that operation of the tooth of Mr. Samuel Povey. Towards the end of the operation it was a surprise each for herself as to where and how she performed the operation.

It turned out to be surprisingly a different tooth than the one intended to the dentist’s operation. Almost with the same thoughtless instinctive alacrity she spots Gerald Scales as her lover. He too turned out to be rather an unfortunate choice. Whether it is a tooth or a lover, Sophia, when once she takes a decision, she executes it, come whatever it may, even if it is worth to be suffering loneliness for a lifetime. This kind of strong personalities with abundant personal convictions are created by Arnold Bennett, particularly in his Five Towns novels. Even for Bennett it might have been an unanswered question whether social and institutional forces alone can give us such personalities
or there is something mysteriously undeivable in the human personality itself which ultimately contributes for the fact being themselves and none like others. Of all the 19th century novelists (Bennett is a 20th century novelist performing himself in the 19th century milieu) Bennett alone contributed for the creation of such endearing personalities like Sophia as his fictional characters. There is nothing general about them they are unique and remain permanently unique as fictional characters as it is not given to the craft of imitation that rare inimitable quality of creation, which, by and large, is the basic wonder of the creator of the creators. It is for the greatness of Bennett that he had realised that there are innumerable personalities in our societies who willingly prefer to live exclusively like themselves, without dwindling into one like many of the masses. They are there in the society, only Bennett recognises them and gives them a conspicuous recognition in his art of projecting them in his fiction.

...
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