Chapter - I

INTRODUCTION

Modernism may be seen as a literary movement, spanning the period from the last quarter of the nineteenth century in France and from 1890 in Great Britain and Germany to the start of the Second World War. As an artistic and cultural movement,

Modernism may be said to have begun in the last decades of the 19th century in parts of Europe. In the early decades of the 20th century, it spread to the USA. In fact, literary modernism cannot be studied in one continent alone since writers and painters were influenced by and corresponded with their fellow artists in other places.¹

It may also be viewed as a collective term for the remarkable variety of contending groups, movements, and schools in literature, art and music throughout Europe over the same period. The term ‘modernism’ is a complex one accommodating expressions like Symbolism, Post-Impressionism, Decadence, Expressionism and so on. The period was a time of confrontation with the public

Typified by the issuing of manifestos, the proliferation of ‘little magazines,’ and the rapid dissemination of avant-garde works and ideas across national borders of linguistic barriers.²

Modernism is not a term to which a single meaning can be ascribed. It may be applied both to the content and to the form of a work, or to either in isolation. It reflects a sense of cultural crisis which was both exciting and disquieting, in that it opened up a whole new vista of human possibilities at the same time as putting into question any previously accepted means of grounding and evaluating new ideas.
is marked by experimentation, particularly manipulation of form, and by the realization that knowledge is not absolute. In other words, ambitiously it has broken some of the traditional bases of Western art and Western culture particularly with the contributions made by James Joyce in fiction, Thomas Stearns Eliot in poetry, and Samuel Beckett in theatre as well as the Norwegian and Swedish dramatists Henrik Johan Ibsen and Johan August Strindberg. Moreover, the roots of Modernism are European rather than British, and indeed the determination to take European culture as a model was one of the hallmarks of the Modernist movement.

In the realm of novel, one may boldly say that James Joyce's *Ulysses* may be taken as a typical example of the modernist novel. A notoriously complex novel, it employs the stream-of-consciousness technique as a remarkable means of character portrayal, combining with the mimicry of ordinary speech and the parody of earlier literary styles. Using experimental techniques to convey the essential nature of realistic situations, Joyce merged the literary traditions of Realism, Naturalism, and Symbolism. He scrutinized every detail, transforming the trivial into the significant and symbolic, and made intricate connections between his characters and literary and historical figures.

Modernist poetry is evident from Georgian poets just prior to the First World War. Even the Soldier poets are considered to be the most important figures in modernist poetry. In fact, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* with its sweeping through time and space and indirection and ambiguity has captured the largest audience of the twentieth century. Its despairing mood, gallows humour, and seemingly hopeful ending appealed to many readers after the First World War. So one can possibly
accept that T.S. Eliot is the most representative poet of the modern poetry. But in
British drama one sees a few perceptible trends and experiments.

The twentieth century heralded the birth of the new drama, and gave it a
refreshing vitality which had almost reached the nadir of its fame as a powerful
literary force. In the age of modernism it has reached a standard stage which has
never been surpassed except, perhaps, by the Elizabethan Age. The swiftness of this
transformation is astounding. As the time passed new trends were introduced in
drama and every effort was made by dramatists to make drama life-like, realistic,
and appealing to the common man. As a result, drama gradually began to appeal to
the audience. There was no opposition to the production of drama by the public, for
the air of severity that marred Victorian theatre was dissolved; and a more refreshing
atmosphere suitable for the production of social plays and social comedies came to
take its place. The modern dramatist took his task seriously and made drama as an
instrument of social propaganda and reform. Recounting the emergence of drama as
a powerful force in our times J.W. Marriot writes:

The greatest factor of all is undoubtedly the change in the dramatist
himself. The modern dramatist takes the drama seriously. His
purpose is the interpretation of life, and play-writing has become an
art as well as a craft.³

Many a dramatists belonging to different schools have come forward with a
rich harvest of dramas and many trends have been introduced in modern drama. In
order to appreciate, it is useful to examine the main trends of British drama during
the twentieth century.
Realism and Naturalism are the most significant qualities in modern drama. Naturalism is a description of style and realism of content. Naturalism reflects accurately the surface of life, whereas realism is concerned with the truth of experience which it conveys. Thus the two are compatible but not inseparable. The alternative to naturalism becomes expressionism, and the alternatives to realism are fantasy or melodrama. Realism is an artistic creed according to which the purpose of art is to depict life with objective honesty – to show things as they really are.

Henrik Johan Ibsen, Norwegian dramatist, discussed the problems of life in a realistic way and offered solutions to those problems. Taking cue from Ibsen a number of other dramatists like Robertson, Jones, Pinero, Shaw, and Galsworthy also wrote plays dealing with real life. They do not take us to distant lands of Illyria or to the Forest of Arden, but keep us well rooted to the world of real life. These dramatists deal with problems of all kinds, justice, law, administration and strife between capital and labour. As a result, the dramas of these writers have become far more intellectual than ever before and give vent to so many thoughts. Thus, with the treatment of actual life the drama became more and more a problem play or drama of ideas. For instance, in a play like A Doll's House, the playgoers could imagine that they saw people like themselves or their neighbours, suffering from problems which might be their own, moving in a stage setting which looked like a room in a real house, speaking words which sounded like the talk of ordinary people. In Shaw's words, Ibsen’s dramas describe ‘stories of lives, discussion of conduct, unveiling of motives, conflict of characters in talk, discovery of pitfalls – in short, illumination of life.’ The influence of Ibsen was contagious all over Europe. Moreover he became a master of dramatic construction. He gave up soliloquies,
asides, and other old conventions, and in his presentation of scene or dialogue attained a directness and simplicity without theatrical artificiality.

George Bernard Shaw was the greatest figure in introducing realism, naturalism, discussion and propaganda in his plays. He was often considered to be the most significant British dramatist since Shakespeare. Considerably influenced by Henrik Ibsen, he revolutionized British drama by his propaganda and discussion plays. His plays are highly intellectual in character and the breeding ground for many revolutionary ideas. The boredom of discussion is alleviated by his wit and sparkling dialogues. But reaction to realism and naturalism in drama was evinced with the popularization of poetic plays by a host of dramatists who have signalized their careers by producing poetic dramas.

The poetic drama was inaugurated with great fervour by the poets like T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats who defended poetic plays and waged a war against realistic prose drama of the modern age. This new surge of hopeful revival is based on the increasing realization of the futility of science and the growing understanding in the efficacy of faith as a formative influence in human life. This desire for faith has created certain repercussions in literary and dramatic criticism and the most important of these is the refusal to recognise any ‘finality in science’ and any ‘overriding purpose in history.’ No wonder some of the poets of the contemporary theatre have gone on to write ‘religious’ plays dealing with the relationship between God and Man, and more especially with that relationship as shown in the Bible and Christian history. It is believed that a return to poetic drama is the only way to deintellectualize the theatre and give it back the full emotional appeal which naturalistic form of drama can never impart. It is also said that the poets always
wanted to write plays and were even haunted by the feeling that the dramas would be better if they were poetic. According to Bamber Gascoigne,

> The argument is that dramatic characters must be larger than life and in the same way dramatic language must be something higher than the members which Moliere's bourgeois 'Gentihomme' talked without knowing it. Some have carried this attitude so far as to maintain that there can be no real drama except poetic drama.\(^4\)

Twentieth century poetic drama has assumed different forms and shapes in the hands of different dramatists. Poetic dramas have been written on a variety of themes and subjects. Some plays have been written on the glorification and exaltation of religion and the church, while a good many of them have atheism and denunciation of God and priests as their subjects. Some poetic plays are symbolic and mystical in character and quite a large number of them have Celtic mythology and Irish life as their subjects. Some plays have oriental grandeur and are inspired by oriental setting and splendor, while others have aesthetic enjoyment and glorification of sex-urge as their main spring.

Among the practitioners of poetic drama in the twentieth century may be included Stephen Phillips, the chief exponent of poetic drama in English, John Masefield, John Drinkwater, J.M. Synge, Stephen Spender, and Christopher Fry. These playwrights never hesitated to exhibit deep emotional feelings of characters thereby exhibiting an intensified view of life. To clothe, his vision of the intensity of life to intensify emotions, the dramatist has to employ verse as the medium of expression.
Though there are many practitioners, T.S. Eliot is often considered to be the great exponent of this art form and in his opinion, the craving for poetic drama is permanent in human nature. He wrote a number of essays formulating his concept of poetic drama, and giving an impetus to the production of poetic plays. His *The Possibility of Poetic Drama, The Need for Poetic Drama, Aims of Poetic Drama, and Poetry and Drama* are pioneering works in criticism advocating the theory and practice of drama. He firmly and emphatically stated that the poetry is the natural and complete medium of drama; that the prose play is a kind of abstraction capable of giving you only a part of what the theatre can give and the verse play is capable of something much more intense and exciting. In his *Poetry and Drama* he emphasized the ability of poetic drama to capture the elusive in life, comparing it to the vision out of the corner of the eye. His first triumph in the realm of drama is to revive poetic drama. His *Murder in the Cathedral* is one such play that deals with the theme of martyrdom of St. Thomas Beckett who returns to Canterbury after a seven-year absence. He receives visits from four Tempters, the last of whom tempts him to spiritual pride ‘to do the right deed for the wrong reason.’ The tempters are in fact only the projections of Thomas’ mind and the conflict is more on the level of ritual than on that of strictly dramatic action. The eminent success achieved by Eliot in *Murder in the Cathedral* led him to write another poetic drama entitled *The Family Reunion*.

Christopher Fry too has shown that modern verse drama need not be confined to the presentation of tragic or religious themes. In his *The Lady’s Not for Burning* poetic drama achieves another milestone. The plot of the play is set against a background of superstition, alchemical early science and hysterical witch-hunting. Written in 1949, Christopher Fry’s play, recalls the language and structure of
Renaissance theatre, but superimposes this with a very modern, wit, and humour. The play brings together the cynical Thomas Mendip, sick of life and seeking out the gallows, and Jennet Jourdemayne, a young and beautiful girl, accused of witchcraft. Thomas’s insistence that he be hanged, meets with deaf ears, while Jennet’s protestations of innocence serve only to incriminate her further. Independently both characters turn to Mayor Hebble for understanding and assistance, but are met with only evasion and willing incomprehension. The light-hearted, almost farcical characters of Mayor Hebble’s household provide an antidote to the gravity of the protagonists’ situations. The Mayor’s nephews, Humphrey and Nicholas, seek only to satisfy their whims; and their mother frets over the smallest domestic details, but sets these troubles on a par with those of Thomas and Jennet.

Comedy essentially characterises the play, despite more serious moments when it dips towards a more tragic level. The romantic interest of the central couple, Thomas and Jennet, and of Alizon and Richard, their subplot counterparts, draws the play to its happy ending however. It also intensifies the action, and the whole experience of theatre.

Christopher Fry advocated verse as an appropriate medium of philosophy because it directly makes an appeal to our intuition. Bamber Gascoigne rightly observes thus:

Fry was one time thought to be ushering in a new age of poetic drama. Instead of concealing the poetry he made it very raison d’etre of his art. His comedies play with poetry in the virtuoso one in which Oscar Wilde’s played with epigram.
With the Second World War ended an era in the history of Great Britain. The Labour Government that was voted to power in 1945 slowly but steadily dismantled the British Empire, and the Conservative Government that succeeded it in 1951 could not discontinue, let alone reverse the process. Shrunken to Little England the nation had to make a painful adjustment to a more modest role in world affairs. The country witnessed continued shortages with healthcare, housing, and social insurance. This disenchanted many young men and women of the country. One would perceive class distinctions and middle class morality and also a loss of faith in society.

In Literature, the new generation produced the title of a work by the Irish writer Leslie Paul, *Angry Young Man*. In fact the term ‘Angry Young Man’

is a journalistic catchphrase loosely applied to a number of foolish playwrights and novelists from the mid 1950s, including K.Amis, J.Osborne, Sillitoe, and Wilson whose political views were radical or anarchic and who described various forms of social alienation.

The works of these writers represented a literature of protest, often articulated through provincial characters with a working class background. These characters were generally disturbed, anguished, angry, desperate and at times funny, pouring out invectives against the society, its codes and institutions in seething and vitriolic rhetoric. Jimmy Porter,

A tall, thin young man about twenty-five, wearing a very worn tweed jacket and flannels.... He is a disconcerting mixture of sincerity and cheerful malice of tenderness and freebooting cruelty; restless,
importunate, full of pride, a combination which alienates the sensitive and insensitive alike.8

The scene of action of the play Look Back in Anger is the English Midlands town, in the one-room flat of Jimmy and Alison Porter. The entire play centres on the marital conflicts between Jimmy Porter and Alison. Jimmy Porter is a jazz-playing ex-student from a ‘white tiled’ university, working on a market sweet stall. Alison is a Colonel Redfern’s daughter and she is seen ironing the clothes of Jimmy Porter. Jimmy while reading the Sunday newspapers abuses her and the ‘Edwardian brigade’ which her parents represent. In Act II, the chasm between the two becomes wider as Alison’s friend Helena attempts to rescue her from disastrous marriage by sending a wire to Alison’s father about the kind of life she is living in the room of Jimmy Porter. Alison departs with her father and Helena falls into Jimmy’s hands. Act III opens with Helena at the ironing board. Alison returns, having lost the baby she was expecting, and she and Jimmy find a manner of reconciliation through humiliation and games-playing fantasy. In its use of social milieu, its iconoclastic social attitudes, and its exploration of sadomasochistic relationships, the play was highly influential. As Raymond Williams rightly points out, the play easily exhibits, “The bitter, almost inarticulate rage of the age.”9

Another New Wave appeared in the realm of theatre in the late 1950s. Laurence Kitchen observes:

The artistic vitality of the new wave came from an upsurge of attitudes, diction, and characters formerly unknown to the British stage; but it seems that the release of energy among the supposedly inhibited English could only take place in the absence of genteel
restraint. At all events most of the new writers had an education well short of university standards. The result is a freshness of imaginative response side by side with conceptual poverty, as if they were artistically mature and intellectually virgin.\textsuperscript{10}

The term applied to the plays of writers such as Arnold Wesker, Shelagh Delaney was 'Kitchen Sink Drama.' These playwrights portray working class or middle class life with an emphasis on domestic realism. These plays were written in part as a reaction against the drawing room comedies and middle class dramas of Coward and Rattigan. Tynan primarily championed this new group of writers.

The 'Kitchen Sink Drama' depicts the real and often sordid quality of family life. The plays are socially and politically motivated, seeking to focus attention on the destruction of moral values caused by consumerism and the breakdown of community. The Kitchen Sink Drama is related to the kitchen-sink movement in art, a loose-knit group of British painters, active in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Wesker's play \textit{Chicken Soup with Barley} is a typical example of kitchen sink drama. The backdrop for the action of the play is the stirring Spanish Civil War waged by Gen. Franco for overthrowing the domestic representative set up in Spain which polarized the forces of fascist counter revolution against domestic rule. Franco's attempt was likely to lead to a leftist regime. As an immediate representation of fascist upheaval in England to the Black Shirts under Oswald Mosley mushroomed as a fascist show up which was strongly registered by the Unionist Working Class of East London. In this play the Kahn family of Jewish stock is seen involved in an anti-fascist demonstration in Cable Street.
The play represents more than an escape or retreat to statuesque from the ideological illusion. It depicts graphically how the members shed their views and their visions. They are either frustrated, disillusioned, incapacitated or turn retrograde. They did not end with a big bang but with a low whimper. Sarah, the brave old lady, denounces everyone. Others lapse into the parochial old world of selfish revenge with their initial vision sadly ebbing away. The play reveals the initial error carrying into a major human tragedy which Sarah suffers and bears with rare courage and dignity. The central motif of the plays is stated by Ada. “What audacity tells you, you can harbour a billion people in a theory? What great, big stupendous egotistical audacity, tell me.”

Sarah is a perennial source of inspiration not only for Harry Kahn, her husband, Ada and Ronnie, their children but also for the left minded unionist worker Cissie, Ada’s husband Dave Simmonds and the family friends Montig Blatt and his Bessie. Charmed by the ideology of socialism they come together for a common cause to fight for a better deal for the exploited working class. The massive and noise demonstration, the vocal and violent protest against the reason stall all the fascist wave with a band playing the revolutionary song and the slogan ‘Madrid today come London tomorrow’ keep the backdrop ever reverberating.

In Act II, as the Kahns have now moved to a better flock of flats in Hackney, they have been able to make both ends meet. All but Sarah feel the sense of bitterness and fury of the young post war generation. This process of inevitable disillusionment and disintegration continues even in Act III, ultimately leaving Sarah alone fast to her socialist vision.
The Kitchen Sink drama was soon replaced by ‘The Theatre of the Absurd.’ It has its roots in such literary movements as ‘surrealism’ and ‘expressionism’ and owes a great debt to the works of Franz Kafka. The term ‘the Theatre of the Absurd’ is used to characterise the works of a number of European dramatists of the 1950s and early 1960s. It gave a dramatic expression to philosophical notion of the Absurd, a notion that had received widespread diffusion following the publication of Albert Camus’ essay The Myth of Sisyphus in 1942. To define the world as absurd is to recognise its fundamental, mysterious and indecipherable nature, and the recognition is frequently associated with the feelings of loss, purposelessness and the bewilderment. To such feelings the theatre of the Absurd gives ample expression often leaving observer baffled in the face of disjointed or repetitious dialogues, incomprehensive behaviour which deny all the notion of logical or realistic development. According to Margaret Drabble,

The theatre of the Absurd drew significantly on popular traditions of entertainment, mime, acrobatics, and circus clowning and by seeking to redefine the legitimate source of serious theatre played an important role in extending the range of post war drama.\textsuperscript{12}

It also concerns itself with “Expanded dramatic action and speech to a more vital and more extending human range.”\textsuperscript{13}

Samuel Barclay Beckett is often considered as the foremost eminent and influential writer of ‘the Theatre of the Absurd.’ His play Waiting for Godot first published in French as En Attendant Godot, 1952, was first staged in English at the Arts Theatre London in 1955. This work established Beckett’s reputation as a major exponent of the theatre of the absurd, which uses unconventional forms of character
development, dialogue, and setting to portray humanity’s reactions to realities such as time, self, and death in a senseless and purposeless world.

The play very ably portrays two tramps – Vladimir (Didi) and Estragon (Gogo) – who are trapped in an endless waiting for the arrival of a mysterious personage named Godot while disputing the appointed place and the hour of his coming. Didi sums up the life:

Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave-digger puts on the forceps. We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries. But habit is a great deadener.

Later they argue, consider leaving each other, and contemplate suicide, but do nothing. They amuse themselves with various bouts of repartee and word play. The anxiety of emptiness is felt by both the tramps. Vladimir says, “All my life, I have tried to put it from me, to be reasonable you have not yet tried everything. And I resumed the struggle.” After a while the tramps are diverted by the arrival of whip cracking Pozzo, a rich man driving the prized and burdened Lucky, his ill-used servant on the end of a rope. Towards the end of each of the Acts the boy arrives heralding Godot’s imminent appearance but he doesn’t come. Each act ends with the interchange between the tramps, ‘well, shall we go?’ ‘Yes, let’s go’ and the stage direction ‘they do not move.’ There are strong Biblical references throughout the play. But Beckett’s powerful and symbolic portrayal of the human condition as one of ignorance, delusion, paralyses and intermittent flashes of human sympathy, hope and wit have been subjected to many varying interpretations.

To this tradition of ‘the Theatre of the Absurd’ belong writers such as Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Arthur Adamov, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter, Tom...
Stoppard and others. The lesser figures of this school of drama are Robert Pignet, N. F. Simpson, Edward Albee, and Gunter Grass. Martin Esslin’s book of this title, first appeared in 1961, sought to clarify how these authors, when grouped together, had tendered

A new language, new ideas, new approaches, and a new, vitalized philosophy to transcend the modes of thought and feeling of the public.¹⁶

These writers believed that the only way to represent the absurdity of the modern condition is to write in an absurd manner. The dramas of these writers are not purposeful and specific as they solve no problems and they remain like abstract paintings which are supposed not to convey a definite meaning.

Conventions governing everything from plot to dialogue are routinely flouted, as is the notion that a work of literature unified and coherent. The resulting scenes, actions, and dialogue are usually disconnected, repetitive, and intentionally nonsensical.¹⁷
Notes


5. Gascoigne, *Twentieth Century Drama* 67.


