

Origin, Development, Decline and Revival of English Drama

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ABSTRACT

Drama is basically a representation of life on the stage and the more realistic the portrayal, the more is the identification with the reader or viewer. Drama is always reflecting exact images of society whether good or bad. Thereby it has the capacity to change the mind set of society towards many prevalent social evils. Drama is a literary form for the expression of human sentiments in which actors play their parts assigned to them and utter the written dialogues. It has both the visual and the oral exercises. As drama is considered as one of the highest form in the hierarchy of the artistic expression, it not only acts as a source of aesthetic pleasure by entertaining but also operates as a powerful tool of instruction and illumination. The paper will delve deep into the origin of drama and its development, its decline and revival in the context of British, American and Indian English literature. The paper will also discuss the turning point and stage transformation by the contemporary playwrights. Playwrights have also changed the conviction of theatre and raised the voice of common people with the help of their plays. Playwrights gave a new dimension to the drama and received international fame.

Key Words : British Drama, Playwrights, Literature, Theatre

“Theatre is a form of knowledge; it should and can also be a means of transforming society. Theatre can help us build our future, rather than just waiting for it.”

—Augusto Boal

Theatre has always been an important device of communication not only in Ancient time but today as well. It unfolds scene by scene and act by act, the multicolour saga of human life in all its complexity and shades, giving total elegant experience. To witness a drama is an immediate way of experiencing what it means to be human. It is the oldest, the most authentic, and the most appealing form of literature. Theatres have become the images of society with its true colours. Plays always reflect intensely the social, psychological and the cultural issues. Plays have always discuss and touch every aspect of life and people's modes of thinking, feeling and behaving. It has also been acknowledged as an instrument of human entertainment and enlightenment for ages. Plays have always been the major source of expressing the human behaviour and feelings either good or bad, like love, envy, courage, aggression, violence, power, and fear with strong characterization.

In the plays the dramatist imitates the activities through action and speech. Marjorie Boulton said, a play “is not a piece of literature for reading. A true play is three-dimensional; it is literature that walks and talks before our eyes” (1). The text of a play is changed into a live performance being enacted by actors and watched by spectators. So often the text of a play should be changed into dialogues written in a form that is audible or visual on stage by actors and audible, or visual, on stage by actors and audiences alike. It is the assimilation of various things like dramatic art, direction, stage setting, music, action, etc. perhaps that’s why Compton Rickett defined drama “as an articulate story presented in action ”(89). The dramatist has to write their work in a composite nature, that is to say the plays are capable of entertaining a large number of people belonging to different age-groups and having divergent temperaments.

In a drama, the dramatist has to present the whole thing within a very few hours. For that purpose, the dramatist has to exercise great economy in handling the characterization and delineation of events. Drama involves a range of things such as imagination, aestheticism, dialogue, music, characterization, plot, metaphoric construction and above all, a depth of knowledge about the psyche of men and the manners of society. There are two broad divisions of a drama- tragedy and comedy. While the former deals with the dark and serious things and often ending with the death of the hero or the heroine or of both of them, the latter is full of light and ending with a solution of either love or marriage. In both the tragedy and the comedy, the structure of the drama is the same. Traditional dramas like those of Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare in English and Bhasa and Bhavbhuti in Sanskrit have generally five stages- Exposition, Complication, Climax, Denouement and Solution.

During the ancient times, Drama of a kind is present in the rituals of primitive tribes. While musical instruments provide a compulsive rhythm, and members of the tribe join in a communal dance, there is often also a dramatic figure who is the center of attention. “In mask and costume, strikingly fierce or mysterious, an unseen actor impersonates a spirit which either threatens or secures the fortunes of the tribe. While such an encounter is undoubtedly dramatic, it does not involve theatre in the conventional sense” (Goscoigne 1). Ancient Greek theatre was very dramatic, consisting of a Greek chorus, costumes, theatrical masks, and other cultural elements all of which were staged in an open air setting. Ancient world plays presented, mythology, Greek gods and goddesses such as Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, Demeter, Athena, Apollo, Artemis, Ares, Hephaestus, Aphrodite, Hermes, Hestia and Dionysus. Greek theatre presented the image of the legendary Greek empire. In 250 BCE, Rome was introduced to Greek drama and Greek comedy and reintroduced the original plays which was separating the stories into episodes, removed choruses and replaced them with orchestra and singing.

In the British tradition, the origin of the drama can be sought in the Miracles and Mystery plays which were at first staged by the clergy and in the church. The Miracle plays deal with the stories of saints which made them a saint such as the play Saint George and the Dragon. The Mystery plays were stories taken from the mysteries of God and Bible. Only members of the churches, the Pope and only the king used to see such plays and no common people were allowed to see it. These plays were performed on the day of the liturgy. Then the drama moved out of the church. This type of drama was artistically poor, no doubt. But it expressed the dramatic urge of the people, which grew finer in the course of time, and was observed and sublimated in the works of the great Elizabethans. Around the middle of the fifteenth century, we see a tendency of delivering morality through the plays. Now the characters underwent a great change; they were no longer the Biblical characters, but they are personified virtues or vices. This type of drama is called Morality

plays such as *The Castle of Perseverance* (1425), *Wisdom* (1460-63), *Mankind* (1470) and *Everymen* (1495).

After that, the time came when Oxford and Cambridge University firstly started courses on Dramaturgy. So that trained dramatics came out from these universities. That was the beginning of artistic drama in which drama was performed to be shown to the common people in the private theatres. So that private theatres were opened Like *The Swan*, *The Globe* and *The Rose* Theatre. It was the time before Shakespeare and the beginning of artistic drama. There were seven English dramatists such as Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Nashe, Thomas Lodge, Thomas Kyd, Robert Greene, George Peele, and the last John Lyly who were educated at the universities. All these dramatists were called University Wits by George Saintsbury. They could also be called Ox-bridge scholars. These seven University Wits paved the way for Shakespeare.

Elizabethan drama developed during the Renaissance period. Elizabethan Age's first playhouse opened at this time and played regularly throughout the country. At this time playwrights started writing in a more organized manner and sought to combine tragedy and comedy to provide overall entertainment. The period between 1500-1660, known as the English Renaissance, behold an abundance of the drama and all the arts. "The most noticeable plays of this period were Nicholas Udall's *Ralph Roister Doister* (1552), *Gammer Gurton's Needle* (1566), Sackville and Norton's *Gorboduc* (1561), Thomas Kyd's (1558-94) Revenge Tragedy *The Spanish Tragedy* (1592) that influenced Shakespeare who himself was an actor and performed in various plays such as *Othello* (1604), *King Lear* (1605), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1594) *Twelfth Night* (1602) and *Henry IV*". Christopher Marlowe and Ben Jonson were other prominent playwrights of his period who were engaged in writing courtly masques. There occurred a great change in English drama when dramatics started to introduce a surprising climax and shortened the action of the longer episodes of the drama and also added a thrilling and exciting subject instead of adding complex characters and tragic emotions. John Fletcher's (1579-1625) *The Maid's Tragedy* (1619) and Francis Beaumont's (1584-1616) *A King and No King* (1619) to mention a few.

Theatres were closed down by the order of the Long Parliament on 1642, and did not reopen until Charles II returned to England in 1660. During the interval dramatic performances were made surreptitiously in half-dismantled playhouses. The plays acted were chiefly *Drolls* short plays of a comic character. Sometimes episodes would be taken from longer plays, as the *Bottom* scenes from *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*, and sometimes even a full play would be acted. Now and then a body of Puritan soldiers would erupt into the playhouse and rout the actors and audience. The plays usually attracted large audiences, which testify to the popularity of dramatic performances among the masses even during the Puritan regime.

Other forms of plays established during restoration age were heroic drama, pathetic drama, and Restoration comedy. "John Dryden's *All for Love* (1677), Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserved* (1682) are famous heroic tragedies of the Restoration Age". Restoration comedies attracted audiences more as compared to tragedies because of its sexual explicitness, few among "these comedies are George Etherege's *The Man of Mode* (1676), and William Congreve's *The Way of the World* (1700)". The first women playwright, Aphra Behn came into limelight in this very period and produced many comedies including *The Rover*.

In the 18th century, Drama was widely distributed and written for middle class people. New writers dropped the outdated themes of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. During the Restoration many innovations were developed but soon gave way to sentimental comedy and domestic tragedy such as *London Merchant* (1731) by Philip Jacques de Louthernourg (1740-1812). Burlesque

and musical entertainment flourished during this period. "It was in the hands of Oliver Goldsmith that dramatists revived the wit and high sprit of comedies". During the Romantic Age, mostly poetry was written but the famous poets of that time also wrote plays for instance *Remorse* (1797) and *Zapoyla* (1815) were written by Coleridge, Byron wrote *Manfred* (1816) and *Cain* (1821) while the plays of Shelley were very famous like *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), *The Cenci* (1819) and *Hellas* (1822). Keats also tried his hand at drama while Walter Scott wrote about Scotland.

The reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901) revived a form of comedy which was known as the comedy of manners by the literary giants like A. W. Pinero, Oscar Wilde George Bernard Shaw, and John Millington Synge. The Novels of the nineteenth century were marked for their realism but playwrights like Ivan Turgenev started to experiment in his dramas in the later years of this century. Henrik Ibsen revived the realism in drama which later on was developed by Anton Chekhov. His dramas were more socialistic and dealt with contemporary issues which were prevailing at that time.

The modern dramatists such as Bertolt Brecht, Henrik Ibsen were inspired by the tradition of imitators; their plays were both modernist as well as realistic. The works of Ibsen's culminated a tradition of liberal tragedies whereas Brecht's work was aligned with historical comedy. "There were other modern playwrights who was the social critics of the age such as Antonin Artaud, August Strindberg, Anton Chekhov, Eugene O'Neill, Luigi Pirandello, Ernst Toller, Arthur Miller, Harold Pinter, Dario Fo, Heiner Müller, and Caryl Churchill". The famous dramas written by these playwrights were *Hay Fever* (1925) and *Private Lives* (1930). It was in the 20th century when W. H Auden, Christopher Isherwood, Bertolt Brecht and T. S. Eliot who attempted to revive the poetic drama of the 16th century. "

A new kind of drama known as absurd drama was introduced in 1950 by Irish dramatist Samuel Beckett whose work *Waiting for Godot* (1955) was a landmark in the history of the theatre of absurd. *The Birthday Party* (1958) written by Harold Pinter was written under the influence of Samuel Beckett. There we find a kind of menace and claustrophobia. The most prolific playwright Andrew Lloyd Webber (*Cats, Jesus Christ Superstar, Evita, and The Phantom of the Opera*) of 20th century is famous thorough out the world and his works were adopted into films. Caryl Churchill, Tanika Gupta, Nina Raine, Lucy Prebble, Roy Williams Terry Johnson are few prolific contemporary playwrights who interweave racial issues, and reject the stereotypes, explode the expression of femininity and address female sexuality, showcase realism with idealism. Drama had far reaching effect all over the world and English speaking people were highly influenced by it as is visible in India too that had a rich ancient tradition of drama.

Origin of Indian drama made its presence felt from the later Vedic period. According to the great Hindu sage, Bharat Muni, when the world passed from the golden age to the silver age and people started getting addicted to several sorts of sensual pleasure then, Lord Indra requested to God Brahma: "Please give us something which would not only teach us but be pleasing both to eyes and ears."(339-340) Lord Brahma, then gave the virtuous idea of the Natya Veda. He collected the essence from the four Vedas- plot from the Rigveda, music from the Samveda, acting from Yajurveda, and Rasas from the Atharvaveda and finally made the fifth Veda called Natya Veda. Natyasastra is a text that has tried to portray the mind of the actors for the first time in the history of Indian drama. We also get the description and discussion of drama and dramatic art in the ancient classics such as *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*. In *Ramayana*, Valmiki, the first poet mentions the word 'Nat' or 'Narataka' which means actor or player. The *Mahabharata* defines drama as a blending of many things such as story, poetry and action.

The theatre world was introduced in India as Sanskrit theatre, long time back in 2nd century. Sanskrit theatre categorized Abhinaya or acting into two forms named Lokdharmi and Natyadharmi, the former referring to the realistic drama and the latter to conventional or literal form. Kalidasa is revered as the greatest dramatist of those times who produced *Malvikaganimitram*, *Vikramorvasiyam* and *Abhijnanasakuntala*. Other amazing works by great dramatists of that time were Bhasa's *Swapan-Vasavaduttam*, Sudrak's *Mudra Rakashasa* and Bhavabhuti's *Uttar Ramcharita*, and *Mahaviracharita*. These plays portrayed lives of ancient sages and Gods. The range of Sanskrit drama is so vast that one can see everything such as historical plays, romantic plays, humorous and satirical plays. It is to be noted that Indian culture, history and legends are so old, unique and varied that it provided a great help to the old writers and even today most of the writers in various languages of India got India's rich tradition an inconsumable source of story, plot and music. Later some chapters from *The Mahabharata*, *The Ramayana*, and *The Bhagavat Gita* were acted on the common stage. Such types of dramas are widespread at the time of the festival of Dussehra in India.

Later the art emerged again, but this time in the form of Village Theatre. Practiced in villages of various states, it began in 15th century and developed in many regional languages till the 19th century, after which began the modern version of theatre during the British reign. During the British era, the theatre in India was used as a mode of revolution against the British. It was highly condemned and objected by the government. That time an act 'Dramatic Performances Act 1876' was imposed by the British Government to police seditious Indian Theatre. Yet it got a new shape, blended in contemporary drama. After independence, the further addition of ingredients like realism gave a different shape to drama; it is called The Modern Theatre. Earlier the theatre was just meant to entertain the royal and the authoritative. But the modern theatre that already started taking shape in 1850s started charging for tickets as it was not under control of the powerful anymore. Gradually, it was commercialized completely rather than just being a mode of free entertainment for those in power. It became a permanent profession for the performers who earned their bread through this only. In the early 19th century, amateur plays were produced by the British residents in India. Theatre companies from England used to visit India to entertain British people in India by the plays of famous English playwrights of the day. English plays of Shakespeare were produced by college students and they were adapted and translated into many other Indian languages leaving a great impact on Indian drama. *The Persecuted* (1831), the first Indian drama in English was published by Krishna Mohan Banerjee in Bengal. Banerjee's *The Persecuted* got a fresh impetus at the hands of Sri Aurobindo.

The Bombay Amateur Theatre was built in Bombay in 1776. Marathi theatre has always been regarded as one of the most cultural and richest theatre traditions in the country. It grew up in between 1950 to 1960 with dramatic forms such as musical drama and folk classical dance. In the 1970s, humorous social plays, farces plays, historical plays, serious plays and experimental plays were staged in Maharashtra. Vishnudas Bhave is called the father of Marathi Theatre. Sita Swayamvar in Sangli (1843) was the first Marathi play staged by Vishnudas Bhave. Hindu Rangmanch was established in 1831 at Calcutta by Prasanna Kumar Thakur. He staged Wilson's English translation of Bhavbhuti's Sanskrit drama Uttar Ramcharitam. Although Banerjee's play is considered to be the first Indian English play, but Michael Madhusudan Dutt is attributed with having translated his three Bengali plays. Krishna Mohan Banerjee's *The Persecuted* (1831) was "less a play and more in the form of a dramatized debate of the conflict between orthodox Hindu customs and new ideas introduced by western education" (Gokhle 337). Another noticeable effort

came from Ram Kinoo Dutt's *Manipur Tragedy* (1893) and C. S. Nazir wrote *The First Parsi Barronet* that became the great examples of early Indian English dramas.

The establishment of Madras Dramatic society in 1875 gave some opportunities to amateur Europeans to stage a number of plays in English. In 1882 the Oriental Drama Club was established, and in 1895 The Sarasa Vinodini Sabha, an unprofessional dramatic society was established by Krishnamacharya. For Indian English Drama, The Madras theatrical scene seems to have been quite active and many more dramatists came to the limelight such as Tagore, Aurobindo, T. P. Kailasamand and Harindranath Chattopadhyay. These dramatists wrote on various themes such as social, historical, and mythological. Prithvi Theatre was established in 1944 by Prithviraj Kapoor, the pathfinder of Indian cinema and theatre as well. Prithviraj Kapoor always desired to construct a permanent theatre but was prevented by his death in 1972, later Shashi Kapoor (son) and Jennifer (Daughter-in-law) carried on. In 1984, after Jennifer Kapoor, her son, Kunal Kapoor managed the theatre.

The National School of Drama was founded in 1959 at Delhi. Some of the dramatic organizations such as, the Parsi Natak Mandali, the Indian National Theatre, the Amateur Dramatic Association, and Ebrahim Alkazi's Theatre Unit were established in different parts of the country. Parsi theatre had a significant impact on the journey of drama. Dramatic institutes for training were founded in big cities rapidly. In 1954, the departments of drama were founded in the universities and colleges. In 1954, Sangeet Natak Akademi started The National Drama Festival in Delhi. During 1943-44 Indian People's Theatre Association gave some life to the theatre in many regions of the country by giving it strength and direction. There were some organizations such as 'Akshara Little Theatre' in Delhi and 'Bangalore Little Theatre' to promote the drama in English. But all these advancements led to the growth of Regional theatre in their local language. When some plays were staged no great enthusiasm was shown by the audience towards the English plays. Many of the English Indian plays had to remain satisfied with one or two performances in big cities. After independence in 1947, the drama and theatre industry took a turn and saw a big boom. At the time, when there was not much of television and cinema, drama was one most important mode of entertainment for people, who could relate to it very well and enjoyed it. The popular playwright during this phase was Mrityunjay Prabhakar, who worked with many theatre groups and became the founder of the theatre groups Abhiyan and Society of Education, Harmony, Art, Culture and Media Reproduction (SEHAR). Among with him many other literary luminaries started writing and presenting plays.

There are many dramatists nationally and internationally who have been recognized in the field of drama. In this series, there have been many playwrights writing in Hindi, the regional languages and English too. Among these playwrights, Vijay Tendulkar is a playwright, providing a new insight and form into Indian theater. His plays are an imitation of human action that often present a picture of what people think, say and do in society. The impact of naturalism is clearly seen in all his play. After examining the various aspects of the playwright, it is possible to say that the credit goes to Tendulkar for carrying forward the tradition of Indian theater through an essential and dynamic change. By studying different dramatic traditions from a historical perspective, it seems that Tendulkar's plays highlight the new way of being postcolonial, feministic, humanistic, psychological, sociological and naturalistic in the twenty-first century.

Sri Aurobindo as a playwright stands a class apart in Indian Drama in English. Sri Aurobindo is known for his five immortal dramas. His dramas though tinged with the color of religious sentiments and historical legends, are dramatic and poetic. In the philosophical presentation, Sri Aurobindo seems to be richly impressed and influenced by our great tradition of Vedas and Upanishads.

Rabindranath Tagore, a great personality in the field of philosophy, politics and literature, has left an indelible imprint on the path of literature particularly in the field of drama. His famous plays translated into English are *Sanyasi* (1884), *Malini* (1895), *The King and Queen* (1889), etc. He attempted to “unify Indian and European traditions creating plays which have been described as a mixture of Bengali folk drama and Western medieval mystery plays”. (Shukla 4) Harindranth Chattopadhyaya’s plays deal with social, devotional and historical themes. He brought working-class characters on the stage; *Five Plays* (1929) reveals social consciousness and flair for realism. His plays have a social playlist such as *The Window*, *The Parrot*, and *The Evening Lamp*. He wrote hagiological plays also, such as *Siddhartha: Man of Peace*, *Saku Bai*, and *Eknath*. He attempted to modernize Indian drama in English. The Progressive Writer’s Movement deeply influenced him. A.S.P. Ayyar is also a very famous playwright of that time. His famous dramatic works are *In the Clutch of the Devil* and *The Trial of Science for the Murder of Humanity*. T.P. Kailasam plays are *A Monologue*, and *Keechaka*. He had good stage sense and his plays appeared to be capable of great success on the stage.

Bharti Sarabhai was the most prominent woman playwright in the Indian English drama. Her plays were inspired by Gandhian philosophy. Her well known works were *The Well of the People* and *Two Women*. Asif Currimbhoy known for His plays made an impact on the audience’s mind with the issues such as- Indian takeover of Goa, Mahatma Gandhi’s life, Naxalite Movement, concern for the exodus of refugees from Bangladesh in India, liberation of Bangladesh, and Dalai Lama’s Flight to India He has been hailed as a ‘dramatist of the public event’. His memorable plays are *The Doldrums*, *The Tourist Mecca*, *The Captives*, and *Om*. Gurcharan Das is well known for his successful historical play *Larins Sahib* (1970) which “succeeds admirably in evoking the 19th century colonial Indian background.” (Naik 262) His other two plays are — *Mira* (1971) *JakhooVilla*. Nissim Ezekiel was an Indian Jewish poet, actor, and playwright. His first published book of plays is *Three Plays* (1969) includes *Nalini*, *Marriage Poem* and *The Sleep Walkers*. His other two plays are *Don’t Call It Suicide*, and *Song of Deprivation*. He is not bothered about the plot construction, but the characters hold his complete attention. Badal Sircar was another prolific Bengali writer. He used the contemporary conditions and social issues to present the life -in -death situation in modern society. Badal Sircar started his career with the play *Evam Indrajit* (1962). His well-known plays are *The Other Side of History* and *There is No End*. Girish Karnad a leading playwright, secured a permanent place in drama written in English. Karnad’s plays in English are *Yayati*, *Tughlaq*, *Tale- Danda*, *The Dream of Tipu Sultan*, and *Flowers*. Almost all the plays of Karnad have a mythical and historical background. Mahesh Dattani, a celebrated name in the modern plays, cannot be forgotten. He has written number of unique plays related to various ills and maladies of society. His *Final Solutions*, *Tara*, *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, are related to major ailments of the society.

Conclusion:

Thus, Drama is considered as the finest medium of expression because of its tendency to turn an actual reality into an exquisite aesthetic experience. As a dominant literary composition and efficient tool of communication it unfurls the moral, religious, ethical, cultural, social and political thoughts and beliefs in a society. Dealing with the inner conscience and the human psyche of the man, it portrays man’s hopes, vision, ideas, aspirations, pleasures, violence and distress with a critical insights. It is not so often meant for reading as we generally see in the case of fiction, story or poem. From the whole discussion, history of drama from the origin to current position have been

discussed. It is observed that drama has undergone many changes. From Greek to contemporary modern period, from subject matter, themes to character portrayals. Drama has been started using for the common man instead of courtiers, kings or aristocracy. The real aim of the drama is to entertain to educate and to arouse the feelings amongst people. Since medieval time till present age drama is performed on the stage to achieve the same. Theatre has become for the people, of the people and by the people.

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