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Realism in British Theatre: Early Beginnings to Kitchen Sink Realism

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Realism in British theatre is not simply a movement which began in the nineteenth century. Rather, it is an underlying attempt to fulfil the mimetic quest of representing the zeitgeist through stage setting, character, plot and language in such a way that feels most real to its audience. This paper seeks to present a brief outline of the development of British theatre in order to understand the socio-political and literary developments that led to the rise of Realism. After a brief account of Greek and Roman theatrical origins and Elizabethan drama's contributions to the later theatrical scene, the paper situates the development of modern Realist theatre within the industrial revolution, the rise of a consumer middle class and the influences of continental philosophers like Marx, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, briefly tracing the influences of French and Russian theatre. The paper argues that, while the nineteenth century English theatre depicts successful portrayal of realism through its structures and form, it was with the emergence of Kitchen Sink Drama that the theatre employed both realist structures as well as contents to voice proletarian frustration, gender roles, and political structures. Consequently, the paper also draws a comparison with other parallel movements like Beckettian and Brechtian theatre, under which the realm of reality explored in drama shifted from the physical to the psychological. Realism in British theatre, therefore, emerges as a dynamic and contested terrain that continually questions the subjectivity and power dynamics that surround the reality narrative.

Keywords: Realism, British drama, Kitchen Sink Realism, Theatre of the Absurd

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Britanya Tiyatrosunda Gerçekçilik: İlk Örneklerden Kitchen Sink Realism'e

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Britanya tiyatrosundaki gerçekçilik, yalnızca on dokuzuncu yüzyılda başlamış bir akım değildir. Aksine, sahne düzeni, karakter, olay örgüsü ve dil aracılığıyla dönemin ruhunu seyirciye mümkün olan en gerçekçi biçimde yansıtmayı amaçlayan köklü bir temsil arayışıdır. Bu çalışma, Gerçekçiliğin yükselişine zemin hazırlayan sosyo-politik ve edebi gelişmeleri anlayabilmek amacıyla Britanya tiyatrosunun gelişimine dair kısa bir çerçeve sunmayı hedeflemektedir. Antik Yunan ve Roma tiyatrosunun kökenlerine ve Elizabeth dönemi dramasının sonraki tiyatro anlayışına katkılarına kısaca değinildikten sonra, modern gerçekçi tiyatronun gelişimi; Sanayi Devrimi, tüketici orta sınıfın yükselişi ve Marx, Schopenhauer ile Nietzsche gibi kıta Avrupası filozoflarının etkileri bağlamında ele alınmakta, ayrıca Fransız ve Rus tiyatrolarının etkileri de kısaca incelenmektedir. Çalışma, on dokuzuncu yüzyıl İngiliz tiyatrosunun yapı ve biçim açısından başarılı bir gerçekçilik anlayışı ortaya koyduğunu; ancak tiyatronun proletarya kaynaklı hayal kırıklıklarını, toplumsal cinsiyet rollerini ve politik yapıları hem içerik hem de biçim düzeyinde gerçekçi şekilde ifade etmesinin esas olarak Kitchen Sink Drama'nın ortaya çıkışıyla mümkün olduğunu savunmaktadır. Buna ek olarak çalışma, Beckettçi ve Brechtyen tiyatro gibi paralel hareketlerle de karşılaştırma yaparak, dramada araştırılan gerçeklik alanının fiziksel olandan psikolojik olana kaydığını göstermektedir. Sonuç olarak Britanya tiyatrosunda gerçekçilik, gerçeklik anlatısını çevreleyen öznellikleri ve iktidar ilişkilerini sürekli sorgulayan dinamik ve tartışmalı bir alan olarak ortaya çıkmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Gerçekçilik, İngiliz draması, Kitchen Sink Realism, Absürd Tiyatro

A man said to the universe:

"Sir I exist!"

"However,"

replied the universe,

"The fact has not created in me

A sense of obligation." (Crane 56)

This short poem leads one to raise the questions which have been bothering writers, political scientists and even philosophers alike- *what* is existence? *What* is reality? *Where* is reality? Or more importantly, *whose* is reality? This paper will enable the reader to think about these questions, and even ask new, better ones.

It is difficult to define realism in terms of a specific movement in theatre, or even as a component of theatrical production. Raymond Williams writes in *The Long Revolution*, "Realism is not an object, to be identified, pinned down, and appropriated. It is, rather, a way of describing certain methods and attitudes, and the descriptions, quite naturally, have varied in the ordinary exchange and development of experience" (274). This implies that realist art in general is more concerned with the mimetic quest to bring in art a semblance of reality as experienced by the artist.

Williams then goes on to give the literal meaning of realism as the rendering of "an observed detail in art with precision and vividness" (274). In this sense, this movement becomes a mirror of reality, and the artist becomes a representative of its people. But which reality are we talking about here? What is our vantage point? Which culture and values do we focus upon and which do we leave, when we wish to show the real England in British theatre? This kind of subjectivity is what, then, makes realism a question of identity also. George Orwell, for example, in his essay 'England Your England', states that the real England is found in "the queues outside the labor exchanges" (12) and "the old maids hiking to holy communion through

the mists of the autumn morning" (12). This is the vantage point we are talking about, "the ordinary, contemporary, everyday reality as opposed to traditionally heroic, romantic, or legendary" (Williams 274) one. This further defines the methods and attitudes which tend to be employed to depict such a reality, whether the subjects are the aristocrats or the underclass, whether the setting is of a country estate or a one-room flat.

While discussing the constituents and evidences of realist fiction, scholars often argue within two broad areas of characteristics. On one hand, the first group asserts that realism is portrayed through the structure and form of the work (Barthes 141 & Watt 11)— the presence of inconsequential descriptions and dialogue in common speech patterns. On the other hand, the second group of critics argue that the realism of a fiction is inherent in the content it portrays— the things, people and events represented attempt to resemble the everyday reality of the masses (Shumway 184). I seek to argue that, while the nineteenth century theatre successfully employs realist structure, the content it focuses upon still largely caters to the bourgeois class, even if to reveal the vulnerability of its obsolete value systems. It is only with the advent of Kitchen Sink drama that English theatre embodies both realist structures as well as contents— the proletariat's arrival in lower-middle-class setting opens up the possibility of dealing with tabooed themes of prostitution, violence and unsettling anger at systematic failures, which dismantles any semblance of a clear resolution. Like reality, therefore, the plays sought to show the agency, or the lack of agency, of the common man in shaping her/his own life. In order to better understand how British theatre reached this juncture, it would be helpful to first get an overview of the history of theatre to trace its transition from supernatural to realist trends.

The earliest seeds of English drama can be traced within ancient pagan rituals and Greek religious traditions. In Athens, these were performed in the festivals honoring the pantheon of gods, the chief among them being Dionysus. By the fifth century BC, these festivals emerged as a platform for dramatic contest between Greek classical plays by the master playwrights

Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. Due to the nature of open theatre in which these were performed, the actors in these plays used huge masks and stilts for visibility for a ten-thousand-strong audience. The Roman conquest of Athens in the battle of Corinth in 146 BC contributed to the birth of Roman drama, developed by figures like Livius Andronicus Plautus. However, the purpose of the plays was not to mirror everyday realities, but to provide an escape from regular life through fantastical plots and larger-than-life characters. The content as well as the plot were extraordinary and were more tragic than realist. Eventually the growing influence of the Church led to the decline of classical drama, while the Catholic Church began staging scenes from the New Testament for the benefit of the masses who were fast losing their command of Latin. Other than liturgical drama, the vernacular plays also included the increasingly secular morality plays, for example the 15th century play *Everyman.* The idea of using universal character names to hint at underlying human tendencies is later revived by Yeats through plays like *Purgatory*, showing how dramatists frequently attempt at using theatre to glimpse into the larger human existence. Serving a didactic end, the content was centered around shunning a life of excess and promoting frugality in living. Here, one can trace a transition from an aristocratic heroic protagonist towards a more relatable central character whose moral dilemmas were concurrent with the 'temptations' of the Seven Deadly Sins, which were more than relatable for its Christian audience.

With the arrival of Christopher Marlowe on the theatrical scene in the Elizabethan age, the English drama reached a fairly well-developed form. The chorus was still an integral part of the play, but its role was reduced to giving commentary on and voicing the audience's concerns for the characters. The play staged grotesque scenes, and the comic elements were preserved in the interlude to puncture the tension of the tragic plays. His play *Doctor Faustus* is a prime example of the Marlowian tragedy, where the idea of conventional morality is abandoned, and instead Faustus is damned due to his own fatal flaw, which is, his hubris. The presence of

chorus, comic reliefs and supernatural elements emphasised upon the artificiality of the theatrical experience.

Yet, perhaps one of the most defining moments for English Theatre was the advent of William Shakespeare. Allardyce Nicoll writes about Shakespeare that, "...he stands out as a central figure in the swift dramatic movement which between about 1587 and 1592 laid a sure and firm basis for the great dramatic development which enriched the last years of Elizabethan age" (86). The patronage granted to arts by the crown and the rise of a theatre-going public contributed to the development of plays as lengthy, extravagant and grand affairs, with works like *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth* revolving around the themes of power, dilemma, tragedy and romance. His plays often involved aristocratic characters, majestic settings and complex plots, which reflected the realities of only the elite section of his society. Yet, use of soliloquies in his plays reflected broader cognitive dissonances of the human condition– the blood stain on Lady Macbeth's hands is often interpreted as the manifestation of guilt, and Hamlet's question, 'to be or not to be' seems to resonate with the existential dilemma in T.S. Eliot's poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock". His play, therefore, can be viewed as proto-modern insights into human psychology wherein the themes and ideas are universal even when the settings are often class-specific.

While the Elizabethan drama was marked by romances and adventure, the Jacobean drama was shaped by the rising socio-political unrest, which culminated in events like the Gunpowder Plot of 1605. In the Restoration age, the plays were suited to the taste of the cavaliers– wealthy aristocrats who returned to England from neighboring countries after enjoying pleasures of life. Other theatrical types, like the 'comedy of manners' and the pantomime, attained similar popularity. These were the plays which were specifically designed as celebrations of life to divert the audience from their decade-long exilic existence under the previous Interregnum period. The later drama of the nineteenth century, characterised by the

Victorian vanity of excesses and represented through melodramas, farces and extravaganzas, was also a result of the influence of French well-made plays. Made popular by French playwright Eugene Scribe, these plays used overtly complex plots and artificial dialogues. They revolved around romantic affairs in *Le Mariage d'argent* (1827) and mistaken identity in *Adrienne Lecouvreur* (1849), which were resolved by the plays' end. The presence of vanity in dramas across European countries around this time is also reflective of the prosperity of European civilization which seemed to be riding upon the waves of acquired colonial wealth during this period. Hence, the drama of this period related to the lifestyle, situations and settings of the elite class who emerged as both the patron and the audience for the plays.

However, with the rise of industrialization and rapid urbanization, there came the rise of an independent consumer middle class in the English metropolis, which could no longer relate with the precedent aristocratic ideals and lost values. For the first time in theatrical history, common people could afford the time and money to demand a theatre which mirrored their own existence, and not cater to the demands of the elite. The middle class, whose lives were only marginally better than a hand-to-mouth existence, sensed a chasm between the realities which they experienced and which the stag depicted. Theatre was brought to its knees with a receding audience. It was then that playwrights like Thomas William Robertson and Arthur Wing Pinero humbled the dramatic form 'to its knees' in an ironic sense, down from the proverbial ivory tower and amongst the common man. Plays like *The Weaker Sex* (1888) by Edouard Bourdet now emerged with realistic dialogue and bourgeois subjects, providing a bridge between melodrama and realism though harmless jesting. It was here that the first seeds of Realist drama were sown on English soil.

The rise of realism in British theatre in the mid-nineteenth century was also shaped by several continental influences. During this period Karl Marx and Joseph Stalin gave birth to the philosophy of Marxism, the antithesis of growing capitalism. Friedric Engels' report *The*

Conditions of the Working Class in England (1845) dissected the dilapidated circumstances of its working masses. Engels states in his work,

> "I got an opportunity of doing justice to an oppressed and calumniated class of men who with all their faults and under all the disadvantages of their situation, yet command the respect of every one but an English money-monger…" (29).

This rising skepticism and a disillusionment with bourgeois values was naturally reflected in the literature of its times– the proletariat struggling for survival in the metropolis replaced the aristocratic subject contemplating metaphysical problems. This paradigm shift was also backed by the existential philosophies of this era. Friedrich Nietzsche's madman in *Gay Science* (1882) proclaims, "God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him!" (120) This tragic epiphany of disillusionment echoed the despair and disillusionment of the age. Concurrently, Schopenhauer's work *The Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason* (1813) dismembered any reminiscences of the belief that the world is essentially rational. Yet humanity was forced into a futile existence, 'disrobed' of any Romantic escapism, and brought to face "the unpleasant, the poor, and the sordid" (Williams, 275). Theatre across Europe reverberated with these ideas, which is termed as "that unnecessarily faithful portrayal of offensive incidents" (Williams 275).

Additionally, the theatrical developments in other countries also influenced British drama in this period to a large extent. Russian writers and playwrights like Leo Tolstoy, Anton Chekhov and Fyodor Dostoevsky ushered in an era of minimalism in prose as well as on the stage. The idea of 'Chekhov's gun' exhorted that all elements in a narrative must justify their existence by contributing to it, and not merely 'exist' as embellishments in the scene. Consequently, the *mise-en-scène* on stage shifted from larger-than-life stage settings and extravagant dresses from the previous age towards realistic stage setup, with only essential elements in sight. Every prop and dialogue was carefully selected to contribute towards the

overall ‘cohesiveness’ of the act. As an example, Ibsen’s play *A Doll’s House* (1879) opens with a porter delivering an ornamental Christmas tree to Nora. This tree does not simply signify the festive setting of the play nor merely add to its aesthetics. Instead, the tree’s condition resonates with Nora’s psychological state of mind throughout the play. Nora demands that Christmas tree be visible to her children only after it is properly dressed with ornaments, parallel to how she herself keeps her inner feelings hidden and ‘puts up an act’ of being a ‘good’ mother and wife. By the beginning of Act II, Nora’s secret of forging her father’s signatures is revealed to the audience, showing her hitherto hidden ‘ulterior’ side. Her ‘false act’ drops. Consequently, the Christmas tree too is shown stripped of ornaments; only spent candles accompany its disheveled branches. In this regard, all elements of the play served as a narration of events which mimicked ‘real’ life.

Additionally, significant alterations in acting style were brought into the scene through the extensive works of Russian actor and director Konstantin Stanislavsky. His theory of acting was influenced by naturalism, with emphasis placed not upon performing a role but rather living it. As the director of Moscow Art Theater, he created an entirely new system of acting called the Stanislavski system, described in works like *An Actor Prepares* and *Building a Character*. Under him the stage transformed from a fanciful world into a real one, a natural one. The Drama Centre in London was one of the chief exponents of this system, which gave the likes of naturalistic actors like Colin Firth.

The Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906), who emerged during this time as a pioneer of modern prose plays, is often hailed by scholars as the chief exponent of Modern Realist drama. His play, *A Doll's House* (1879) depicts the story of a bourgeois household, where Nora, the wife, is reduced to being a ‘doll’ in her house– pretty and dumb, the prototypical ‘angel in the house’, in order to maintain the semblance of a sane family. But reality dawns upon her when her husband Helmer berates her for forging a bond and bringing

possible disgrace to his name, only to later retract his words and 'forgive' her when the danger of his disgrace is safely over. The fragility and superficiality of their marriage is revealed to Nora, who then decides to leave Helmer, and go on a quest to discover herself. She tells Helmer, "Our home has been nothing but a playroom. I have been your doll-wife, just as at home I was papa's doll-child..." (114-115).

Stepping out of the mold of 'the angel in the house', her act of slamming the door shut behind her metaphorically 'rattles the Victorian family frame'. This seems to be symbolic of the first wave of feminism during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries– an assertion of female individualism, with the demand of education and political rights for women. Thus theatre now proved to be a stage for interrogation of burning social challenges.

Further, Swedish dramatist August Strindberg strengthened the Realist movement in English Theatre through plays like *The Father* (1887) and *Miss Julie* (1888). In the latter play, any element which was not found true to 'everyday life' was dropped. The conventional pantomime and peasant dance which marked the interludes were replaced with more formal intermissions, acts and scenes. The theatrical setting was that of a Swedish country estate, specifically the manor house's kitchen, with the plot revolving around Miss Julie, an aristocratic young woman, and her affair with her father's valet Jean. The play portrayed "characters in crisis, at odds with their world" (103). However, Strindberg's later plays, including *A Dream Play*, break out of this neo-realist portrayal and enter the realm of the dreamscape, where "time and space do not exist", and "a single consciousness holds sway over them all– that of the dreamer" (103).

Ultimately, the arrival of George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) on the theatrical scene led to a permanent shift of focus from the private to the social and political. As Peter Childs notes in *Modernism: The New Critical Idiom*, "Shaw's socialist opinions permeated his works, which comically and irreverently juxtapose conventional and paradoxical stances" (104). Shaw used

irony and satire to challenge and unhinge social conventions of class, gender and morality. His play, *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1893), which centred around the theme of organised prostitution, was considered so shocking that it was initially banned by the Chamberlain, the official British censor board. However, for Shaw, the play was an attempt to bring to the foreground such social realities which were for a long time swept under the carpet, stating that it is better to live in a brothel than to live in grinding poverty. Yet, the play is replete with ironic instances and humor. As Oscar Wilde states in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, you must make people laugh if you want to tell them the truth, otherwise you will get killed.

Another contribution of Shaw to the realist theatre was what Roland Barthes termed as the 'Reality Effect' (147). Barthes argues that in real life, not every person, object or situation contributes towards meaning-making in the present. Similarly, the elements of a true realist fiction, should be strong enough to outdo any necessity of function; its descriptions should be self-sufficient without any necessity of contributing to its narrative. Barthes proposes that this leads to a 'Reality Effect', wherein the text moves in a leisurely, erratic and 'lifelike' manner. In tandem with Barthes' ideas, Shaw's plays contain elaborate introductions and detailed descriptions of stage settings, which only seem to add to the 'irrelevance' of information in the plays. For example, in the introduction to *Pygmalion* (1912), the playwright mentions that the mathematician Alexander J. Ellis covered his head with a skull cap, and narrates an anecdote when the playwright tried to commission an article with a leading monthly review. However, these descriptions do not contribute to the play's progress in any way, and instead present digressions. In this sense, realism superseded purpose in Shaw's plays, paving way for a verisimilitude through Barthes' Reality Effect.

But, as the theatrical tradition transitioned from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, the Realist theatre faced a backlash due to its abhorrence with imaginary and fantastical dimensions of life. Yeats, a pioneer of modern poetic drama, amalgamated elements from Irish

folklore and mythical tradition with the Japanese Noh theatre (a dance drama featuring divine spirits disguised as humans), to create plays which included divine, mythical and magical realist elements. His play *Purgatory* (1938) is a modern revival of verse drama, whose lead characters named Old Man and Boy are curiously reminiscent of morality plays. Hence it is seen that the new playwrights frequently look upon the works of the older ones, to draw fresh inspiration from them. Like Yeats's gyres, theatre too displays a spiraling existence where one form escalates into another, and while the overarching themes remain relatively same, the socio-political context and zeitgeist alter significantly. T.S. Eliot, building upon Yeats' form, reestablished the poetic drama as he too grappled with ideas of traditionalism and modernism. Although Eliot wreaked havoc on the poetic front through his dysfunctional language and 'barren grey landscapes', several of his plays reflect his religious upbringing and render Biblical themes in a modernist setting. His most critically acclaimed verse drama *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) is a modern miracle play on the martyrdom of St. Thomas Becket. The play revives the Greek theatrical element of the chorus (comprising the poor womenfolk of Canterbury), and Thomas's resisting of four worldly temptations (pleasure, power, recognition and glory) are curiously reminiscent of morality plays. But the verse play was only one of the several forms of theatre developing around this time. Influenced by the nineteenth century French well-made plays, Oscar Wilde developed the 'comedy of manners' along similar lines, made popular by plays like *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). Edward Albert writes about Wilde's plays that, "These are comedies of manner in the Sheridan tradition, aristocratic in tone and outlook, and with all the conscious artistic grace and refinement of his other work" (473). Indeed, the play seems to mirror the realities of the vanguard coterie of English elitist circles, which included Aubrey Beardsley and Ada Leverson, who could lead a Bohemian revolt against heteronormativity and conservative standards.

Yet for the majority of the English population, the twentieth century found British society grappling with extreme internal chaos and conflict. While the elites were replete with a sense of nostalgia and the fear of loss of tradition, values and culture, they were also wary of the developments in the metropolis. The Great Economic Depression of the 1930s led to increased crime rates, and international travel led to frequent Cholera outbreaks. In such acidic times, Britain found itself in the midst of the second world war from 1939 to 1945. Attempting to sail through these waters, even George Orwell seemed to attempt to create common footing in British society through his article 'England your England'. Winston Churchill's 1940 speech *Their Finest Hour* became an exhortation to the masses to set aside their own social differences and rise in national unity and patriotism against 'tyrannical and fascist' Germany, which seemed to translate the British collective unconscious desire for eugenics into action through the Holocaust. As the reward of fighting together as one, the British people were promised an egalitarian society and better living standards. Post the world wars, the state did engage in creation of a welfare state (Fraser 265) through the National Health Service, the Education Act and state institutions like the British Broadcasting Corporation, National Theater and CEMA (Center for Encouragement of Music and Arts). But it was largely felt that the state used these as tools for controlling art and literature instead of promoting it. The welfare state seemed to merely bandage the wounds of the proletariats instead of eradicating class differences. Harold Macmillan iterated that it was the best of times for Britons, yet it sounded ironic in the face of abject class differences, and for the working class, nothing seemed to change.

With the clash of Elitist nostalgia and plebeian angst, the underlying disappointment with the existing state of England and its 'unfulfilled promise' of a utopia for the working class led to the rise of a New Wave of dramatic production to rise up to a new kind of reality. Several new dramatic forms emerged, from Kitchen-Sink Realism to the 'theatre of the absurd' to Brechtian theatre. The former theatrical type depicted a new kind of protagonist, an angry young

man who leaves behind the comfort of civility and lashes out at every symbol of elitism. This anger was directed also towards the pretense of 'life is good' through promises made in Churchill's speeches, when contrasted with the life in dingy streets overrun with petty crime and theft. In English theatre this genre developed through the plays of John Osborne, Shelagh Delaney and Arnold Wesker.

Hence, a transition is evident here. While the Elizabethan drama centered around elite and aristocratic characters and settings, the realist drama focused upon bourgeoisie lives and values. For the first time in English theatre, then, the Kitchen Sink drama sought to represent the reality of the majority, the proletariats. This representation was realist in terms of the structures and forms of narration employed, as well as the content and settings in focus. This assertion will become evident upon an analysis of the plays of this period, both written by and for the 'angry young men'. In this regard, Shumway lists the criteria for identifying realism in a piece of fiction (184), which include depiction of contemporary social life, visual and sensory details, socially plausible characters, routine events and lesser represented aspects of human life. In this final characteristic, the Kitchen Sink Drama stands out exclusively— the very nomenclature of this genre reveals the facet of domestic life which was never before the central setting in a play. Similar to the slogan from second wave feminism, then, 'the personal becomes the political' in this theatre which seeks to showcase the reality of the domestic sphere, long considered a 'safe haven' but which had increasingly become the center of violence.

While discussing 'Angry Young Men', one finds that women playwrights excellently dramatized anger on stage. Shelagh Delany's play *A Taste of Honey* (1958) apparently marks the transition of British theatre from traditional British values to contemporary themes through its depiction of illegitimate pregnancy and homosexuality. The return of Jo's alcoholic mother Helen in her life threatens the little respite she has come to find in life, leading Helen to become a symbol of the English society which refused to partake with traditional heteronormative

values. Though the play does not depict the archetype of an angry young man, its frustrations with decadent values and indifference to human suffering are as contemporary as Osborne's plays. Hence the content of the play is concurrent with Shumway's criterion of depiction of contemporary social life.

While Delaney is recognised through a relatively low number of highly successful plays, Arnold Wesker left behind a legacy of over forty dramatical pieces. His three prominent plays, *Chicken Soup with Barley* (1958), *Roots* (1959) and *I'm Talking About Jerusalem* (1960), were together published under the Wesker Trilogy, which is considered by scholars to be a seminal contribution to the development and the spread of the Angry Young Men sobriquet. Coyle (2023) observes, "Wesker's 1958 play, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, the first in his *Wesker* trilogy, explored the lives of the Kahn family to directly confront the question of communism as a sustainable political ideal, and its ability to alleviate the crises of everyday living" (2). The play transitions from a functional Kahn family with a faith in the Communist manifesto in the first Act, towards the fracture of community living in the second Act, where each flat is a world of its own, and no one knows who their neighbours are– the ultimate expression of the loss of socialist values. Sarah's observation proves to be a revelation, "If you don't care you'll die" (76). This statement also reflects the essential camaraderie that proves to be the life force of the working class, while at the same time showcasing contemporarily relevant theme of the friction between survival and idealism.

Another Angry Young dramatist, Harold Pinter is considered by scholars to be one of the best post-World War playwrights. His plays exemplify the comedy of menace, characterised by small talk, reluctance of communication and even silence, which only act as garbs for underlying streaks of violence and repressed anger. His play *The Birthday Party* (1958) provides a powerful commentary upon the situation of the second wave immigrants in Britain in the fifties, many of whom arrived in search of better employment opportunities but instead were

forced to a life of mundane lower middle-class existence. When McCann and Goldberg come to visit Stanley, an unfulfilled pianist, the two men confront him on the pretext of giving him a birthday party, but their verbal attacks on him churn out decades of loss of culture. Goldberg accuses him, "You stink of sin" (50), and adds later, "No society would touch you. Not even a building society" (51). For them, Stanley, having betrayed his land and his breed, can only be saved by dragging him back to their land – which exists in the idyllic past and not the futile present. This also resembles the immigrant's fear of not finding a life of success and fulfillment but being trapped in one of anonymity and commonplace existence.

At the same time, the play makes a clever shift from realistic repetitive conversations and non sequiturs on the most mundane of subjects towards dysfunctional dialogue to reveal the fractured borders of a 'normal' existence. It takes an exchange of six dialogues by Petey and Meg to establish that they acknowledge each other's presence, and another five dialogues to prove that the cornflakes Petey is eating are 'nice'. Their 'small talk' runs for around 5 pages in the text. However, by the end of the play, another character Stanley becomes wordless. The only utterances he can make are 'Ug-gughh...uh-gughhh' (58). Thus, the play moves beyond a comprehensible portrayal of any realist semblance of 'normal' life, to show its disintegration when faced with the overarching undertones of socio-political violence.

Many scholars observe that Osborne single-handedly managed to concretize Kitchen Sink Realism as a prominent school of drama under New Wave theatre through his play *Look Back in Anger*, and opened the door wide enough for other playwrights to follow. Analysing the play for a deeper insight into the angry young man movement, one observes that the set resembles a typical middle class English household– a modest attic room with a dressing table, chairs, newspapers, and an ironing table. Here, the ironing table has replaced the kitchen sink as the symbol of domesticity which Alison, an upper class woman, is entrapped into as a result of her marriage to Jimmy. Coincidentally, referring back to the play *Miss Julie* mentioned earlier,

the aristocratic woman Julie too commits suicide in the kitchen of the hotel, aided by her fiance Jean. Hence the kitchen as the center of domesticity also seems to become the center of violence.

Having a desire to fight against the powerful, the classed bourgeois, Jimmy can only vent out anger on people weaker than himself. Hence there emerges an intersectionality of class and gender, as Jimmy directs his violence, both active and passive, towards his own wife Alison who for him is no more than a symbol of superficial elite refinery. This misogynistic trait runs throughout most of the Kitchen Sink dramas, and building upon Freud's psychosexual theory, this violence towards women seems to point towards a fear of castration of the middle class heterosexual white man. Thus the tensions between social classes in the English society were expressed not only on the material front through a resentment of upper class prosperity, but also through most personal and intimate relationships, such as that of husband and wife. This tendency of relationships in literature mirroring the larger socio-political tension is also mirrored in other works, like Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913).

The first theatrical performance of the play took place in Royal Court, London in 1956. The play was not an instant success, though (Billington), with its claustrophobic setting within a single middle class drawing room. It was only through subsequent favourable reviews that its popularity gained momentum and reached a cult status under the Angry Young movement. The play did secure for Osborne several awards, including the Evening Standard Theatre Award for the Most Promising British Playwright in 1956. Scholars contest that Osborne's play caused a major disruption in the British theatrical lineage, a shock from which it could never quite recover (Billington 2015). Tony Richardson's 1959 film adaption of the play attempted to achieve a similar breakthrough in cinematic realism, which it did. However, subsequent attempts at the play's revival (such as the 1989 film adaptation directed by Judy Dench) failed to capture the new audience. Thus, scholars argue that the New Wave theatre voiced the

distinctive unrest and dissatisfaction of the lower middle-class youth during the 1950s, with its relevance waning during the contemporary times (Adams 75).

Almost parallel to the Kitchen Sink Realism, the New Wave in British theatre also witnessed the 'theatre of the absurd'. Fueled by the philosophies of Camus and Schopenhauer, playwrights like Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco managed to present the existentialist angst on stage through sparse setting, dysfunctional language and potent silences. Yet, upon comparing the absurdist play with the Kitchen Sink Drama, one can find startling resemblance in the underlying themes. Both share a disillusionment with traditional values and social structures. But while Osborne's angry young protagonist stages an active revolt against it before dropping its weapons, Beckett's tramps refuse to lift the weapons at all. Both reach the same state, as the audience witnesses an endless, meaningless struggle ultimately amounting to nothing.

Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* was staged for the first time on January 5, 1953, in the Theatre Babylone, Paris. Its audience, which was used to seeing action on the stage, could not comprehend this new type of play where the only action is waiting. In its 1956 performance at Coconut Grove playhouse in Miami, almost half of the audience walked out the first night (Berlin 423). Nevertheless, the play eventually gained fame as critic after critic tried to decipher its meaning– the symbolism behind Godot, the meaning of waiting, and the implications of its sparse settings. Beckett wondered why the people had to complicate a thing so simple (Berlin 1999) – here was reality stripped down of any false pretense, deception or attempt at concealing life, which was found to be essentially devoid of any overarching explanation. As the play attempted to scan the theatrical conglomeration from a sufficiently lofty vantage point, it threw at its audience the cathartic realization that they have been blathering about nothing in particular for half a century now (Beckett 66).

The theatre of the absurd eventually outlived the Kitchen Sink Realism, and brought

forth a new type of reality– one which is not expressed through the actions but through the silences. Reality on the stage ceased to be physical and became psychological, and forced the audience into acknowledging the hollowness of their own existence. But, one can concur with what Terry Eagleton states in *The English Novel,*

> "Like many partial viewpoints, this one is then offered to us as a universal truth. It is rather as if someone were to sigh 'Life is meaningless,' to which one might riposte, 'Well, yours might be'. The truth, surely, is that the world always comes to us significantly shaped by human projects" (311).

In conclusion, realism in British theatre does not refer to simply a type of dramatization, but an underlying faith in the power of theatre of reflecting its contemporary realities, whether they be found in vanity of excesses in the nineteenth century or the grey psychological landscape of the twentieth century. In post-war Britain, it sought to employ raw, authentic voices and everyday settings in order to give a robust expression to the frustrations, disillusionment, and social stagnation of its age. Yet, the nineteenth century theatre was realist more in terms of is form and structure, rather than its content and settings. It was through the commitment of the New Wave playwrights to depict the banally violent lives of the underclassed which brought a decisive break from the farcical conventions of earlier drama, giving rise to a new kind of 'social truth' on stage. Targeting plebian social reality, characters, settings and themes through both structure and content, it shares the Angry Young Men's underlying concern with alienation, futility, frustration and the search for meaning in a changing world. Ultimately, it is observed that British theatre in the mid-twentieth century was less about style than about verisimilitude: although theatre, being an artificial domain can never truly 'be real' in the absolute sense, yet it attempts to employ different means to create a 'lifelike' presence on stage. Ultimately this quest for mimesis shifted from a depiction of physical to a psychological reality, as realist fiction proved insufficient to show the dysfunctionality of normalcy. This journey, hence traces a quest

to confront life as it is, and to delve upon some of its most fundamental questions- *What* is reality? *Where* is reality? And, more importantly, *whose* is reality?

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