

**CHAPTER - I**

Since Aeschylus the tragic or serious drama has shown a tendency to swing more and more from the presentation of action to the presentation of character, and from the outward of character to the innermost citadel, to the regions where character withdraws more completely within itself. In 1666 Dryden put it that in plays, "every alteration or crossing of a design, every new-sprung passion, and turn of it, is a part of the action, and much the noblest, except we conceive nothing to be action till the players come to blow."<sup>1</sup> Thus there was growing a consciousness of a new kind of action in drama which H.F. Brunetier calls "the exertion of human will",<sup>2</sup> and to create which Ibsen put most of the mechanical action of a play outside it and depended mainly on the after-stir of the thoughts and passions that were left behind when the external action was over. Accordingly, playwrights should not have the external action, the rant and bombast in their view while composing plays, but the vigour and vehemence of passion, the theatre of soul.

Whether theatre or no theatre, drama was being contemplated, as evidenced from these arguments, as most dramatic when it laid bare the great passionate crises of man's inner-world existence, the climacteric situations of his soul.

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1. Montague, C.H. Dramatic Writing, London, 1910, p. 136.  
2. Quoted in Matthew, Waller. The Development of the Drama, New York, 1922, p. 20.

Discerning critics saw some probable line of future change in the concept of drama in what Maurice Maeterlinck wrote in his Traité des Mysteres :

"I have come to think that an old man, seated in his armchair, simply writing beside the lamp, listening, without knowing it, to all the eternal laws that reign about him, interpreting, without understanding it, what there is in the silence of the doors and windows and in the small voice of the light, undergoing the presence of his soul and of his destiny, leaning a little his head, without suspecting that all the powers of this world are intervening and watching in his room like attentive servants, not knowing that the sun itself sustains the little table on which he rests his elbows and that there is not a planet in heaven not a power of the soul which is indifferent to the dropping of an eyelid or the disclosure of a thought --- I have come to think that this motionless old man was living in reality a deeper, more human and more general life than the lover who struggles his mistress, the captain who wins a victory or the 'husband who avenges his honour'.<sup>1</sup>

Thus from 'action' to 'introspection', i.e. struggle of human will, from the physical to the psychological, from

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1. Quoted in Nicoll, Allardyce, World Drama, London, 1949, pp. 281-22.

the outer to the inner, was drama's trend of development. The playwrights grew aware of what Stoddard referred to,<sup>1</sup> that is, the 'literary merit' in the theatre. The drama stood at the crossroads : 'Theatre' and 'Literary'. But the elements grew combant instead of combining themselves into complementary forces. In this connection Gilbert Murray's remark may be recalled : "where you have drama, you have killed poetry, and where you have poetry you have killed drama."<sup>2</sup> Any attempt at their reconciliation gave as short an effect as dovetailing the two opposing forces or bringing the two belligerent bullocks to carry the cart despite the utmost efforts of the carter. The two forces instead of infusing a fresh lease of life into drama stood juxtaposed.

Pulled from two opposite directions by the repelling forces drama broke. Throughout Europe during the first score years of the nineteenth century the acted plays were frankly unliterary and the literary plays were considered unactable. The void in the region of drama was being filled in by adaptations from German plays.<sup>3</sup>

In the directionless mediocrity with no clear out

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1. Matthew, Brander. Principles of Play Making, 1922, New York, p. 49.
  2. Ibid., p. 55.
  3. Ibid Matthew, Brander. The Development of the Drama, New York, 1922, p. 207.

principle for dramatic compositions the poets in both the Romantic and the Victorian eras, from Wordsworth to Tennyson, composed plays more often in apparent anger but with a secret desire to see their plays boarded than in open repudiation of the decadent stage. Whether called 'closet dramas', 'study-plays', 'lyrical dramas' or 'poetic dramas' they exhibit one common feature when a survey is made of them : inordinate length of speeches impregnated with exuberant lyricism which were among the causes of their being relegated to the closet. Still they served a vital need of the period. Critics like T.S. Eliot, Mrs Ellis-Ferner, hailed the emergence of these poetic plays. These plays reveal the inner knowledge of the thoughts of the characters "without sacrificing the ultimate impression of dramatic directness".<sup>1</sup> "Fullness of experience is communicated without loss of cogency of thought."<sup>2</sup> Nicoll outlines the character of these plays as having the intensively subjective tendency and being the product of the cleavage between the poets and the theatre or divorce between literature and the playhouse and remoteness from the spirit of their own age owing to the slavish imitation of the Shakespearian style.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Ellis-Ferner, Mrs. The Frontiers of Drama, 2nd ed., London, 1946, p. 86.

2. Ibid.

3. John Nicoll, Allardyce. World Drama, London, 1939, (1949), p. 143.

In English literature, the term 'Closet drama' is generally applied to the 'Literary' or Poetic plays composed by the poets of the Romantic Revival and the Victorian period. In a brief but pointed note on the desecration of the closet drama, the Oxford Companion to the Theatre refers to the theory that the closet dramas written to be read remain outside the main stream of Theatre, though this theory is refuted by the success of the plays of Alfred de Musset on the stage many years after they were written to be read, and the enormous influence of European drama of the tragedy of Seneca, which were probably not acted, but read aloud. It is suggested that a change in theatrical fashion may bring it into prominence.<sup>1</sup> There are, however, critics who have either been vague in their conception of the closet play, or have defined it as a play deliberately intended to be read and not acted.<sup>2</sup>

But the actual achievement does not, in many cases, reflect that intention. Rather, it will be truer to say that two opposing purposes, one conscious and the other unconscious,

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1. Wide Oxford Companion to the Theatre, Ed. by Phyllis Hartnoll, 2nd Ed., London, 1957, pp. 741-742.

2. Thomas Hardy says that it is 'a form in which there chances to be no brief definition save one already in use for which it superficially but not entirely resembles'. Hardy, Thomas, The English, London, Reprinted 1970, p.7. William Archer calls the closet play a "curious non-descript," "like the amphibious animal described by the sailor", it cannot live on land and dies on water. Archer, William, Play Making, London, 1912, p. 21.

are discoverable in most of the plays of this type. The conscious purpose was, doubtless, their production in the theatre, but unconsciously the poet in the dramatist pulled himself in the other direction, attempting to make his plays more readable thanactable, and thus giving their true and best rewards not in the theatre but in the closet.

One should not allow one's critical enthusiasm to obscure the defects, or to overshadow the obvious merits of the closet drama. An important fact to be considered in this regard is the state of the contemporary theatres, which repelled the sensitive poets, and often led to the rejection, not always deserved, of their plays. Willy-nilly, the poets were forced to cultivate the closet play,<sup>1</sup> which served as a stronghold in which they felt secure and sometimes as an ivory-tower that made them forget the uninviting theatre world below.

The complex art of drama embodies a harmony between the literary and the popular, and it can, therefore, grow only in an age like that of Pericles in ancient Athens or of Shakespeare in England, in which the classes and masses have many common

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1. As reaction to the fashion for "all plays intended for the stage to be written throughout in prose ... in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by the growing commercialism of the theatre which effectively ousted the poet from the stage ... many poets conceived their dramatic works as pure poetry often not intended for the production". *English Dramatic Criticism in the Nineteenth Century*, Ed. by Phyllis Hartnott, 3rd ed., London, 1967, p. 747.

tastes and are willing to share common amusements. But in this respect the age of Shakespeare and the age of Wordsworth or the age of Tennyson and Swinburne were almost antipodal. Moreover, largely detached from the vulgar masses, the 'Romantic' spirit was too subtle, too subjective, too idealistic and too lyrical to find a complete, or even a satisfactory expression through the theatre, the more so because the type of drama which the English Romantics cultivated was largely imitative,<sup>1</sup> and conflicted with the depressing conditions and demands in the monopoly theatres.<sup>2</sup> The undramatic age thus acted from within as much as from without and vitiated the poets' practical approach to drama by making it partial or one-sided.<sup>3</sup> They often

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1. All the major poets of the nineteenth century, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, Byron, Browning, Arnold, Tennyson or even Hopkins attempted, as we have endeavoured to show, in chapter V of the thesis at poetic drama usually either in the manner of Shakespeare or in imitation of classical Greek.
  2. This is cited as one of the causes of dramatic failure in the nineteenth century. Vide, Watson, E.B., A Study of the Nineteenth Century London Stage, 1888, Cambridge, p. 124.
  3. "Both conditions, youth and decrepitude were united; the ancient dream of poetical romance was well-nigh in its decay, while the drama of realism was still in its infancy", Watson, E.B., A Study of the Nineteenth Century London Stage, Cambridge, 1888, p. 121, Cambridge University Press. "Our theatres are fit for nothing; they are too large for acting, too small for bull fight". Thomas Chatterton, Esq., M.P., 1822. Macready, the noted actor, said before the committee of parliament in 1822: "The profession of the actor appears at present to be the very worst that in intellectual man can select." Watson, E.B., A Study of the Nineteenth Century London Stage, Cambridge, 1888, p. 121.



laid lepsided emphasis on poetry, character, psychology, philosophy, historical and social problems, having cultivated them largely to the exclusion of other essential elements. In other words, it may be said that it was difficult for them to harmonise their substance with the dramatic.<sup>1</sup> In their plays, therefore, literature and drama do not become organically one but often suffer juxtaposition. The ambitious post-dramatists of the nineteenth century had, as we shall see, thus to grapple with an age which was perhaps the most undramatic in English literary history.

The closet drama is not so strange a case in dramaturgy as it is thought to be. It is written primarily to be read, or disregarding of the needs of existing theatres. It is literature that talks and walks and only when it does so it is effective. The closet play should not be taken as the unsuccessful stage-play or the undramatic play. A drama is essentially a piece of literature and as such is ever enjoyable in the closet, whether it is successful on the stage or not.

Aristotle and the ancient critics regarded drama as a branch of poetry and poetry to them included all creative forms

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1. The true dramatic essence, according to an eminent critic of drama, "is some mysterious injection of energy into dialogue which creates value in words quite beyond their apparent significance". - Drew, Elizabeth. Discovering Drama, London, 1937, p. 112.

of writing. Also, when the ancient Indian critics termed drama as "Draya Kāvya", (literally, the term Draya Kāvya means 'visible poetry') — they viewed the dramatic art as a form of the poetic art. When Aristotle declared that the power of tragedy is felt even apart from representation and actors, it reveals its power by mere reading, he was pointing to the 'dramatic' which can move us both in reading a play as well as seeing it acted,<sup>1</sup> although often scholars and critics have tried to tie the dramatic down to the appeal to the eye of things meant by the terms like action, conflict, suspense, crisis, passion or the use of the unexpected.

But there are also some critics who do not necessarily limit the dramatic to the four walls of the playhouse, for it is that there remains much in life that although essentially dramatic, is excluded from enactment on a stage. This essentially dramatic quality can make its appearance in any branch of literature. Thus we speak not only of a 'dramatic' novel but of a dramatic poem also. With such ideas, the advocates of the closet drama assert that the closet drama "is a quite legitimate product of literary art, since the playhouse has no monopoly of the dramatic form."<sup>2</sup> But the comparatively modern craze for the

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1. Vide Aristotle's Poetics, part V.

2. Quoted in Matthews, Brander. The Study of Drama, Boston etc., 1910, p. 251.

theatre and theatre craft to the exclusion of literary quality, often threatens to lead to the isolation of the settable plays from literature and to put the playwright in the same class as the stage-economic, the painter, the electrician and the costume designer who were at the bidding of the theatre manager or director. It should be remembered that drama is creative writing and as such has the power of being appreciated independent of the theatre. That is why Elizabeth Drew has observed that the history of drama is "the history of how every fine dramatist has subdued the terms of the theatre to the terms of the drama."<sup>1</sup> To save the theatre, the theatre must be destroyed.<sup>2</sup> Dryden said that as a playwright his ambition was only to be read. William Archer advises the dramatist not to regard the act of his play as indispensable, but only as an added illumination.<sup>3</sup> Decrying emphasis on gestures in acting, W.B. Yeats also wanted actors to keep still enough to give poetical writing its full effects; they might forget gestures and have their minds free to think of speech for a while.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Drew, Elizabeth. Discovering Drama, London, 1937, p. 15.
  2. This paradoxical epigram is from the pen of Eleanor Duge quoted in Gordon Craig's On the Art of the Theatre, London, Reprinted 1924, p. 75.
  3. Archer, William. Play Making, London, 1913, pp. XI-XII.
  4. Vide Yeats, W.B. Essays, 1934, p. 207 and Plays and Controversies, London, 1923, p. 47.

With Yeats were a number of contemporary and later poets, including Eliot and Auden who in a way or another were associated in this movement — this quest for a poetic theatre. "Like Wagner they reject as meaningless and deathly the standard images and stereotyped dramaturgy of the commercial theatre. Like him they seek a renewal of the dramatic or in the more direct notes action and swiftness associated in our time with poetry in the widest sense."<sup>1</sup>

The basic problem of drama is how to harmonise the inward with the outward, the ephemeral with the eternal, the theatrical with the literary. It is, we may say, to make the peacock, with all the lovely burden of its tails, attain the flight of the eagle. Writing down to the level of the audience a great dramatist also writes across it, and so stage-representation is only the beginning of the greatness of his plays, which reveals like the skins of an onion, a large number of deeper levels. That is why in great poetic plays, independent of laws of drama, characters may become non-entity and the action may take place in the Theatre of the soul.<sup>2</sup> "If the play is really to interest us, it must present a struggle; its chief character must desire something, striving for it with all the

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1. Fergusson, Francis. *The Idea of Theatre*, New York, 1933, p. 194.
  2. Vico Ellis-Fernor, Una, The Frontiers of Drama, 2nd ed., London, 1946, p. 194.

forces of his being".<sup>1</sup> The oft-quoted reference to 'action' in Aristotle's discourse on tragedy may be interpreted as struggle and not mere movement — struggle in which the hero knows what he wants and wants it with all his might. It is in this respect that Mattigan is different from Shaw, or Pinero from Shakespeare. It is here that the harness must yield to the horse, the tail to the kite, and the stage to the closet. The basic object of a dramatist is, of course, to sustain the interest of the audience or readers. It must never flag, the donkey must be stretching out his neck to the carrot all the time. This does not mean that a play has to be full of actual swiftly-moving events. That is a very crude way of holding audience's attention in the theatre. Drew quotes Granville Barker as saying, "Shakespeare soon made a 'capital discovery' that physical action in itself and by itself is the least effective thing upon the stage".<sup>2</sup>

The traditional concepts of the theatre are fast losing their significance to-day. In the early part of this century Thomas Hardy thought that by "dispensing with the Theatre altogether a freedom of treatment is attainable".<sup>3</sup>

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1. Matthews, Brander. The Development of the Drama, 1922, p.20.
  2. Drew, Elisabeth. Discovering Drama, London, 1937, p. 25.
  3. Yiddish Hardy, Thomas. The Theatre, London, Reprinted, 1978, p. 7.

Through radio-play and the television-play even acted dramas have reached closet, and the coming into existence of these new media is a reminder of the patent, though much forgotten, fact that good drama not only impresses a hydra-headed crowd in an auditorium, but also touches the deepest chords in the heart of a sensitive person in his closet. The 'reading' of drama is a perfectly natural activity. A play is 'read' before it is acted and if it has merit it is worth preserving and continues to be read with pleasure ever after. A great drama is appreciated both in the theatre and in the closet.

The appreciation of a drama during reading it implies its theatrical visualization. As Nicoll says, "The Theatre, if not physically present, must be visualised, and that all endeavour has to be made in the reading of the play to imagine its production in a play house with scenery and histrionic interpretation of the parts",<sup>1</sup> A modern critic, G.S. Fraser, says that while reading generally a great plays, we are "caught up in an intense illusion of reality and that this illusion is more intense in the mere reading of a great play ... than in the reading of a great novel".<sup>2</sup> Again, when we read a

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1. Nicoll, Allardyce. The Theory of Drama, London, p. 60.  
2. Fraser, G.S. The Modern Writer and His World, Indian edition, 1961, p. 41.

novel, we are in a sense passive. We have not to co-operative with the novelist but merely to watch and follow. But we co-operate with the dramatist even in reading a play ourselves in solitude. We become the characters. We recite their speeches to ourselves; we feel our muscles tense with their emotions.

A play aspiring for greatness and immortality has to be literary as well as stageable. It is, therefore, necessary for a good drama to be good closet drama as well. In such a drama the emotional level is raised and the arena of consciousness extended as in Ibsen's A Doll's House, The Wild Duck or Hedda Gabler.<sup>1</sup>

Nicoll recognises the poetic or literary plays distinctly separable from the theatre plays. In his British Drama he names one Chapter 'The Literary Drama' and says that in such a drama "attempts are indulged in not from within the Theatre, but from without".<sup>2</sup> According to him the flourishing of closet dramas denotes "a period when the poetic play becomes firmly separated from the Theatre play, when publishers deliberately issue dramas for the 'Closet' as they would issue novels and poems".<sup>3</sup> While we

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1. Vida Fernal, Una, Ellis. The Frontiers of Drama, 2nd ed. London, 1946, p. 9.

2. Nicoll, Allardyce. British Drama, 4th ed. London, 1965 (Reprinted), p. 307.

In the 5th rev. ed. of the work (1968), the title 'Literary Drama' has been replaced by 'Poetic Plays'.

3. Nicoll, Allardyce, A History of English Drama, 1600-1900, Vol. 4, Cambridge, 1968, p. xiv.

may not fully agree with Nicoli that the literary play is so separable from the theatre play, we recognize the possibility that in their enthusiastic rivalry with the stage literary plays may over-shoot the mark and fall on the other side; in their enthusiasm for 'Literature' they may forget the needs of the theatre. But the problem of poetic plays was also complicated by the fact that some distinctive 'types' of Romantic drama evolved concurrently. Indeed, the purely 'closet' dramas of Charles Wells and Heddoes, the 'Byronic' dramas of Byron and the 'Pseudo-Elizabethan' dramas of Shelley and Keats present a baffling picture of directionless mediocrity and artistic ineptitude. Yet it is clear that from the time of Wordsworth's The Borderers the poetic dramatists were growing increasingly dissatisfied with adaptations of the Georgian drama and the Gothic drama in particular which was more widely felt to be a corruption of the earlier horror-mongering English novels. Seen in this light, the tentative, hesitant, and confusing directions pursued by serious English drama during the Romantic period may be regarded as attempts to combine the best elements of Elizabethan poetry and psychological insights with the Gothic and sentimental ingredients. Similar attempts continued in the Victorian period, the only noticeable difference being the replacement of the Gothic ingredients by the genuinely Greek elements.

It is relevant to mention here that the terms 'study play',





'literary drama', 'lyrical drama', 'poetic drama' are loosely used as synonymous or variants of 'closet drama'. But the terms 'study play', 'literary drama' and 'closet drama' bear one kinship; the terms 'lyrical drama' and 'poetic drama' another. A distinction must be made between the closet drama and the poetic drama. The closet drama is simply the drama of the closet, and may include any kind or ~~genre~~ of drama, whereas the poetic drama is the drama in which poetry is the medium and as such determines and shapes more or less the character of the drama. As we know, the term 'poetic drama' is of modern origin. The use of poetry for plays was constant in early times all over Europe, and continued for tragedy long after comedy had suffered the incursion of prose. The term which at one time would have been unnecessary, has been adopted to denote the plays in which poetry or versified speech has been used as their medium. It is applied also to plays written in a deliberately 'poetic' manner, even if not in verse-form. In our study, however, the term refers to the plays in verse-form.

The nineteenth century poets wrote poetic drama which, owing to unnatural circumstances, became dramas of the closet. As will be seen in details later in our discussions, the English stage of the nineteenth century turned away from the great early tradition and became more and more a vehicle of mere entertainment, less and less a medium for the investment of exalted ideals with trappings of actuality, and in consequence it divorced itself from

literature. The poets of the day, finding themselves unwelcome in the playhouse, ceased to heed its requirements and wrote their plays mostly with an eye to the satisfaction of readers.

It may be reiterated that it ought not to be thought that because a play has been written for or relegated to the closet, it is unactable or is undramatic. With the conspicuous examples of the plays of Seneca and those of Alfred de Musset,<sup>1</sup> it must be agreed that there is no hard and fast line between the drama of the stage and the drama of the closet, that it is possible to pass by nearly insensible gradations from the most obviouslyactable plays to those that appear most remote from the practical requirements of the playhouse. So far as the nineteenth century English poetic dramas are concerned, it is debatable as to how far these were unfitted for the stage and how far the English stage unfitted itself for the production of these plays.

It has been rightly said, "When drama reaches out to become as richly articulate as it can possibly be, and poetry reaches out to become as richly human as it can possibly be, the result is true poetic drama. It is not an application of one art to another, it is a fusion of two worlds of artistic experience which become another entity."<sup>2</sup> Again, "... in poetic drama a

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1. The failure of his first play la Nuit vénitienne (1830) turned Musset from the stage, and he wrote his later plays to be read.

2. Drew, Elizabeth. Discovering Drama, London, 1937, p. 214.

failure in poetry entails a failure in drama, for the drama is contained in poetry."<sup>1</sup> Further, "lyricism is dramatic conflict."<sup>2</sup> In these views we get a clue to judge the essential merit of the nineteenth century English poetic plays of the closet including those of Swinburne.

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1. Chiari, Joseph, The Poetic Drama of Paul Claudel, London, 1954, p. 15.  
2. Ibid., p. 175.