



ELECTRONIC MEDIA (RADIO AND TELEVISION) AS AN ALTERNATIVE FOR STAGE DRAMA

Dr. SUREKHA AHLAWAT

Associate Professor, Department of English,

MMH College Ghaziabad

Email: drsurekaahlawat@gmail.com

doi: [10.33329/elt.9.6.30](https://doi.org/10.33329/elt.9.6.30)



ABSTRACT

Present paper is based on my study about the possibility of media drama as a substitute for stage drama. The height of British drama was represented by William Shakespeare in the Elizabethan age. Post Shakespearean drama in the Restoration era led to the decline of stage drama. This decline continued throughout the Romantic period, Victorian Age till the first half of the twentieth century. England in twentieth century felt an onslaught of drama. This decline continued till the advent of the new wave dramatists like Wesker, Pinter, Arden, and Shelagh Delany. Thus, the development of drama in England established two major points: One that English drama remained rooted in the naturalistic tradition and that the basic dramaturgical strategies remained wedded to the traditional dramatic conventions and devices. Secondly, English drama in spite of its hesitation to absorb European experimental techniques of the Absurdist's, the Experimentalists, the Surrealists and Epic drama did come under their influence in an eclectic manner. Their departure from physical stage to electronic media is no more debatable, as they prefer to go to theatre. But the attraction of the dramatists from MacNeice onwards, towards electronic media poses a possibility of media drama as an alternative to the stage.

KEYWORDS: Electronic media, new wave dramatists, B.B.C., theatre, Elizabethan.

INTRODUCTION

The success or failure of drama primarily depends upon three factors, the audience, the dramatist, and the theater regarding theme, character, and technique. If we chronologically review the development of modern drama especially after the 1930s, we find that dramatists, audiences, and the production all have drifted towards the electronic media. The reasons for attraction towards electronic media could be various and varied: stage theater is an expensive affair and has certain limitations of instantaneous changes in place and time which are after all not possible to achieve. The presentation of a secondary world or supernatural characters, magical transformations, embodied natural forces, presentation of death, presentation of psychological conflict and subconscious mind the presentation of sexual infidelity, feminine maneuvering, is very difficult to present convincing on stage but it can be more effectively presented in the electronic media especially in radio and television medium.

International Journal of ELT, Linguistics and Comparative Literature*(Old Title-Journal of ELT & Poetry)*<http://journalofelt.kypublications.com>**Vol.9.Issue.6. 2021(Nov-Dec)****ISSN:2455-0302**

Secondly, due to the dominating role of the production manager in theater, the dramatist depends much on his mercy for the successful presentation of his play. If a play does not click with the audience it means the dramatist has failed to deliver the goods, whereas quite often it is the production manager who is responsible.

The problem of training actors is yet another factor because the strain of training actors solely depends on the director. If the trained actor refuses to go to distant Places for acting or he dies while the Play is in production, it becomes very difficult for the dramatist to replace the trained actor. Moreover, star actors have been the dominant force in theater production.

Thirdly, the audience too in this age and time has become used to staying in their homes. The reasons for this could be several and varied environmental pollution, safety measures, increasing terrorism all around, traffic jams, and man's desire to find privacy in a highly competitive, materialistic, and mechanized society. People do not want to go out. The new audience, particularly, the working class, prefer media drama instead of stage drama.

To a large section of people, drama is not something presented only on the stage but for them, drama is heard coming out of a loudspeaker or seen flickering across a rectangular screen. British audiences in particular do not like hopeless and despairing views of life and younger .media playwrights cater to public taste. For example, a lot of dark grey comedies on British TV, the commercial companies, and BBC are producing single plays and series like *Forestay Saga* which have appealed to the tastes of vast audiences. Moreover, media plays are more flexible, mobile, and appeal to wide powers of imaginative suggestion and economy .of dramatic presentation.

During World War II, radio attracted a large section of talented people with diverse experience and knowledge; it became a great cultural force and a national theater and the focus of attention of thinking people of the day. Radio medium employed ex-servicemen, dramatists, and musicians of diverse talents and allowed them to exercise their talent and potential. The attraction of poets including Terence Tilter, Howard Newby, Joe Burroughs, R.D. Smith, Rene Cutforth, Louis MacNeice, Cleverdon, etc. occupied a prominent position in the B.B.C. University lecturers including W.R. Rodgers and Eric Ewens too were attracted to media drama.

Ian Rodger comments on the arrival of poets in electronic media-

“It was very lucky that so many carpenters, with their diverse interests and extravagant talents, were drawn into the business of composing radio programs in Britain in the immediate post-war period. Their observation with the technique of production, with the exact balance of music against words, with the devices of inters cutting scenes and of fading voices and effects, which was a vital preliminary to the later explosion of dramatic talent which utilized radio and created the second Elizabethan age in the history of British drama”.¹

The other factors causing people to turn towards media drama are historical. From the historical standpoint the first production of Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* in 1956, the Education act of 1945. The emergence of electronic media-radio, T.V., and film and their availability as outlets for the Production and diffusion of drama, caused the onset of the "New Wave" drama. Britain's linkage with the mass media and advertising turned electronic media into cultural wastelands of the U.S.A. with the outbreak of World War II in 1939 due to the non-mobility of population, radio drama occupied 'the highest peak of popularity. E Albert observes that



The revival of cinema constituted a new threat to the theatre-its precise effect on the order form is difficult to determine. Certainly, it has become the entertainment of the masses, though how far they would have patronized the theatre had the cinema never existed can never be determined.²

Considering the wider implication of media drama, Albert further says -

"Radio drama did much to interest a wider public in drama and thus helped the professional stage, and at the same time it offered the dramatists new opportunities".³

Tyron Guthrie who worked as a B.B.C. drama producer in Belfast .from 1924-1926, recognized the potential of radio dramatic writing and wrote some radio plays to exploit the possibilities of the radio medium. In the preface to his volume containing his three radio Scripts, Guthrie Writes —

"The microphone play lacks the glamour and physical magnetism of the stage, but lacks also the too, solid flesh. Because its pictures are sole of the mind, they are less substantial but more real than the cardboard grottos, the Calico rosebuds, and dusty grandeur of the stage.... more real because the impression is partly created by the listener himself. From the author's clues, the listener collects his materials and embodies them in a picture of his creation. It is, therefore, an expression of his own experience whether physical or psychological- and therefore more real to him "⁴

Indicating refinements towards technical innovations in drama in all modes, G.B. Shaw made a valuable heterodox statement—

Drama is a method of rearranging the higgledy-piggledy happenings of actual life in such a way as to make them intelligible and thinkable. Its forms, processes and instruments, include the stage, the screen, the camera, the microphone, the actor; He adds that cinema is new only in the sense that "a new instrument added to the Orchestra or a new verse form is new".

RADIO AS A MEDIUM OF DRAMATIC PRESENTATION

In the age of electronic media T.V. and Radio drama still has strong appeal for millions of listeners. In radio medium economy of production is possible. A stage director cannot bring a real forest on stage, a real ocean, a real gelignite explosion, an airplane taking off on a runway. But a movie director can place actors in a real forest and photograph them in that locale. The stage director can provide them through slides, projections, or films.

Martin Esslin, who has directed drama for B.B.C. radio as well

"as for the stage, and who has written stage plays, film scripts, T.V. plays, and radio plays-echoes G. B. Shaw, "While mechanically reproduced drama differs from stage drama "in some of its techniques", it is also fundamentally drama and obeys the same basic principles of the psychology of perception and understanding from which all the techniques of dramatic communication device ⁶

It is relevant to establish the equal importance of all mediums theatre is a writer's medium but the film is a director's medium. In theatre individual prestige, power, personal inclinations also determine which figure dominates.

Likewise, in a film the senior partner in either medium, theatre or film depends upon the prestige, power, and artistic inclination of the individual, Whether he is writer, producer, director, star actor. For example, Tennessee Williams changed the third act of *Cat on A Hot Tin Roof* at the request of its Broadway director, Elia Kazan. Star actors have been the dominant force in theatrical production whether on stage on a good screen even prestigious authors may be elbowed from the foreground by dominant producers or directors.



Due to the following major three-fold functions in the electronic media radio had been popular:

- a) Radio provided a continuous stream of popular and classical novels, soap-opera-type light comedies, and thrillers.
- b) Radio had been a medium for the wider diffusion of stage drama. Apart from popular West End or Broadway success, it combined the production of the classics.
- c) The B.B.C. radio drama department applied itself to developing the new art form of radio, making the use of the medium's unique ability to dramatize the workings of the mind and to present an internal monologue, dream, and fantasy with greater immediacy and impact than the stage or screen could ever hope to achieve. British radio drama vigorously uses all the refinements of modern technology including stereophonic music and the development of monaural production which allowed to record actors in isolation and same ultra-modern studio types of equipment. It provided immense output ever large-1500 productions a year were produced in London in regional centers including Bristol, Birmingham, Cardiff, Manchester, Glasgow, and Belfast which included thirty full-time directors and more script reading sections of approximately ten readers of directors.

During the last forty years, almost every major dramatist has contributed to the substantial body of media plays like Beckett, Pinter, Arden, Mortimer, Stoppard, Peter, Nicholas, Osborne, Hopkins, David Mercer, A. E. Whitehead, and so on.

Due to the technical advances and particularly with the development of techniques like stereophony and binaural, radio drama has encouraged certain dramatic forms which cannot be transferred effectively on stage or even on the screen and can only work on radio. Sackville-West in his preface to *The Rescue* draws attention towards the dramatic factors which are involved in radio performance and do not figure in the category of straight drama —

“Radio is, in fact, susceptible to carrying over screen because of the extreme flexibility of the medium and its wide powers of imaginative suggestion. Even the straight 'talk' has an element. Of drama in it, conferred by the listener's focus on the personality —Of the unseen speaker, and by the shapes of the talk itself, which has to be designed to grip and hold attention from first to last”⁷

The method of dramatized art of storytelling which gives the impression that the speaker is simply speaking his thoughts aloud in a casual and offhand manner, which Sackville-West suggested and Cutforth employed in war reports, Ian Rodger writes about the art of storytelling in radio medium

“The radio-style of giving the impression that the narrator is only thinking aloud naturally lends itself to the presentation of other voices illustrating the theme. But it was a form which was to lend to the creation of a form of radio play which is peculiarly suited to the medium and which generally defies transference to the stage. It was not dramatically difficult to convey to the listener that the central character was thinking aloud and recalling the voices of others associated with past events in the manner employed by the radio reporter. This form may sometimes present a kind of autobiography or an oral form of the novel but it has the attraction of economics which cannot be achieved on the printed page as when, for example, the characters by their voices and accents convey within and previous history”⁸

Later on, the art of storytelling was adopted in monologue plays for radio. In Germany, this method was regarded as the only dramatic form peculiar to radio, in Britain, it was the basis of Hanley's *Gobbet* Gielgud and Martin Esslin encouraged this form. However, no dramatic writing is free from limitations and perfect in itself. Martin Esslin establishes a striking analogy between radio and silent cinema —“Both dramatic media which lack one vital element of drama; the silent film words, sounds, and music; radio the whole gamut of visual information.

International Journal of ELT, Linguistics and Comparative Literature*(Old Title-Journal of ELT & Poetry)*<http://journalofelt.kypublications.com>**Vol.9.Issue.6. 2021(Nov-Dec)****ISSN:2455-0302**

The silent drama died when sound was introduced; should not radio drama have died when television added the visual component to broadcasting? Yet radio drama continues to flourish.”⁹

Martin Esslin further continues, “Where does the analogy between silent cinema and 'blind' broadcasting break down? The eye certainly is as powerful an organ as the ear. Yet it is through the ear that words are primarily communicated; and words communicate concepts, thoughts, information on a more abstract level than the image of the world the eye takes in (of course words can also be visually communicated by reading, but at a further remove. Reading a play is not the same as witnessing it----there is no immediacy, the experience is without involvement, the action; as Aristotle has it, the narrative form ----and hence all that is read---- takes place in the epic past; the drama in an eternal present.),the silent drama therefore could communicate only situations and landscapes, for motivation and information of an abstract nature it had to rely on the written word---- captions. Radio, on the other hand, can evoke the visual element by suggestion alone. The dialogue can carry the scenery and the costume within it and the human voice can powerfully suggest a human appearance. This paradoxically is because man is, above all a creature of the eye and that our minds automatically translate most information we receive into visual terms: the smell of olive oil will evoke a picture of the streets of Seville; the touch of Velvet alone, the rich textures and colors of the garment; and similarly the sound of a voice will conjure up the picture of a face; the mere mention of a place name its image. No wonder, then, that Marshall McLuhan classifies radio as a visual medium, while regarding television, with its reliance on close-ups and the action of the Scanning eye, as a tactile medium. Seeing the lip movements of the characters in the silent cinema could not stimulate the audience to great feats of imaginative effort in reconstructing what the dialogue they were missing might have sounded like; in radio drama, the slightest verbal, musical, or sound hint does powerfully activate the visual imagination And as imagined pictures may be more beautiful and powerful than actual ones, the absence of the visual component in this form of drama may well be a considerable asset on the stage; battle scenes, for example, will always be less than wholly satisfactory: twenty, or even fifty, or even a hundred men, cannot evoke armies of many thousands. In radio, the mere sound of a vast crowd easily suggests these multitudes. And which producer in casting Helen of Troy, or Venus herself, can ever be certain that he will find an actress who will be regarded by each member of the audience as the final and perfect embodiment of female beauty? In radio, each listener will automatically see his ideal before his mind's eye and thus be satisfied.”¹⁰

Esslin regards radio as a perfectly adequate medium for the performance of dramatic works. He establishes distinction in radio and points out its dual nature.

1. It is a mechanized technique for the transmission of pre-existing material like printing.
2. Radio is the cheapest and fastest medium of all mass media.

However, radio drama is a writer's medium as it relies on words, dialogue and has a larger scope than television. Radio drama had been a vulnerable training ground for young dramatists. The long and impressive list of writers emerging from radio into theater, television, or film includes - John Arden, Giles Cooper, Bill Naughton Alan Owen, Robert Bolt, Wills Hall, Henry Tom Stoppard, Dylan Thomas, and Harold Pinter.

Radio acts as the landscape of the mind. Both in novel and drama reaction against naturalism led to an increasing subjectivity and internalization of subject matter. Proust, Joyce, and Kafka took the novel from the description of the surface of life into the inner landscape of the same; for they had discovered that it is impossible to fix an objective outline on external reality, as reality cannot but be seen through the eyes, moods and desires, dreams and imaginings, of a single specific individual. Strindberg used the dream technique in drama in *The Dream Play* *Ghost Sonata* his dreams on the stage. The surrealists Artaud and playwrights namely - Beckett, Ionesco, Adamov, Genet, Mrozek, Gombrowicz, and Havel - used concretized images of their dreams and



nightmares. Thus, radio is an ideal medium of the most highly subjective poetic drama which deals, to quote the title of an experimental radio play by Frederick Brandnum, with private dreams and public nightmares.

Radio drama has incredible potential for firing people's imagination and sending their minds spiraling. It can create atmosphere and characters better than any other medium, simply, because it demands that the audience participates with its imagination and creative energies. In this regard in Theater Quarterly relevant ideas appear –

“Radio is the medium for the imagination; it requires that the audience does a lot of work; it needs the space, to use Peter Brook's phrase, to be filled in. It 'suggests' television which draws everything in particular and uncritical detail. But after ages of gold and silver, what do we have now the age of bronze, with its mixture of base metals? Is radio failing to realize its gigantic potential?”¹¹

Producers are becoming more and more aware of technological advancements which are being made in the extension of studio techniques. Technical revolution being waged - or conducted in radio is concealing the lamentable fact that no one is going out to sell radio. Since art is a minority interest, radio at its best does exist in some art fields. Radio can imaginatively take part, in the life of people. Radio is very demanding of the listener's attention.

TELEVISION AS AN ELECTRONIC MEDIA

T.V. the electronic theater is the mass medium par excellence. Never in the whole of human history have the products hi-tech. T.V. diffuses - news, views, entertainments, information, drama, human personality been ingested in such enormous quantities by such large masses of human beings concerning the size of the audience for a single event or artistic presentation in pre mass media epochs one hundred thousand spectators for a football match. Thus T.V. presents collective consciousness, crisis, war, floods, murders, mysteries, mysterious disappearances, cranks of the past, etc. are developed further in the T.V. medium.

State of hyper-awareness such as - spelled out, of the realities of .their situations: (life, birth, copulation, and death) social necessities (love, co-operation, tenderness) fears and joys, metaphysics, etc. are developed further in T.V. "one Of the questionable virtue of T.V. is that it breaks the boundaries between reality and fantasy, work and leisure, the rulers and the ruled"¹²

Martin Esslin speaks of the long-term effects of T.V. on people. Does its, intrinsic nature predetermine and perhaps even safeguard guidance response? He further observes-

It enables the continuous stream of thought and emotion which constitutes a human being's conscious mental processes as the most private sphere of his individuality; we might express the effect of this mass communications medium by saying twentieth-century mass switches his mind from private to public consciousness. Millions of viewers are hooked into the same stream of consciousness at a given moment.¹³

Another staggering aspect of T.V. is that the material of T.V. such as music hall show or football game, cricket match, etc. is available continuously in an uninterrupted flow, on taps like piped water or electricity. The communication medium can bring about the whole to every human being. The use of T.V. is an enviable whetstone for every social movement and private interest with an ax to grind.

The origin of T.V. was recruited from many other media; from the straight theater, variety theater, cinema, journalism radio (drama, news, documentary, light entertainment). In the initial stage of development of drama, filmed stage plays and emphasis of it was dialogue. Early T.V. writers were associated with theater. Most of the directors were ex-theater people.



In T.V. medium a flight of the imagination is difficult to achieve and the free play of blind radio's dream and the fantasy world is denied in it. T.V. is more oral, verbal, and naturalistic than, visual pictorial and imaginative in its effectiveness for drama. It has been well said that the author is the sine qua non in television production, as is the director in the visual medium of the film. Peter Black has declared that T.V. is a pyramid of which the base is the writer. Like stage and radio T.V. is also the writer's medium T.V. has two assets 1- It shares with radio its qualities of intimacy and immediacy. 2- Its actors speak not to the millions but the family, group, and the solitary viewer.

T.V. drama leans hard on characterization in the naturalistic vein characterization of the individual, but not of people. It cannot manage a crowd. The natural T.V. character is at the center of the play. There are three ways of judging the success of T.V. medium by having a cursory glance in three ways.

- 1- By seeing how far existing stage plays have been adopted for T.V.
- 2- By recognizing where the new medium has satisfied the mass public taste for drama.
- 3- By attempting an early assessment of the work of those writing directly for American and British companies.

The audience's response is an important factor for good Performances in T.V. This photographic medium tends to inhibit qualities of imaginative grandeur.

In radio and T.V. earlier existing stage plays were adapted and in adapting the plays first of all discoveries were made about the nature of the medium. A large amount of T.V. plays still derives from established plays adapted for the medium. T.V. and live theater differ in dramatic space. Theater gives a real sense of space while T.V. gives an illusory sense of space. Real dramatic space is missing in T.V. .

The visual emphasis of T.V. drama is neither theatrical nor cinematic. On T.V. duologue at its center can be a natural scene. Thus, there is an effective reduction of the life-size figure of the actor in long short and T.V. drama must be sardine drama. More than three characters on T.V. become visual embracement rather than a visual asset. T.V. space is photographic and T.V. time is chronological Time.

Marshall McLuhan described T.V. as a cool medium and radio as a hot medium because radio generates tension to a greater degree.

Television drama tends towards a form of a chamber play, close-ups of the characters' faces appear on the screen at the distance and on the scale of people to whom the spectator might himself be talking in an intimate context.

Television's most characteristic feature is the continuity of scenes as a never-ending stream of heterogeneous material, news, sport, documentary, game shows, and drama.

This close juxtaposition of the "real" the fictional or the Semi-fictional confronts the playwright with danger as well as challenge; the danger that his fiction will look staged or unreal next to the reality of news documentary material, the challenge that his material can be made if not, even more, real, than "reality". Therefore, British Television drama principally tends towards documentary and semi-documentary approaches. The traditional forms of drama - presented live on a stage in front of an audience- has become a tiny fraction of all the drama written, produced audience, and ingested in our time, the chief practitioners of drama in Britain are equally at home with radio, television, the cinema not the stage. Cross-fertilizing effect of radio and television writing has influenced stage drama as much as the traditions of stage drama have influenced the mechanically reproduced dramatic forms. The increased use of narration, the tendency towards fluid construction, the increased conciseness of stage drama - all are presented on the radio, T.V., and the cinema.



Media drama's suggestiveness with minimum scenic resources and its immediacy in eliciting the response of an audience is one of the reasons for its popularity. Yet another reason for media popularity and the emergence of the new wave of drama after 1956 perhaps is that dramatic writing on electronic media made it easier to earn one's living by writing radio and T.V. plays rather than novels. The electronic media, powerfully established and institutionalized in Britain and motivated by a "public service" concept provide a recognized progression for the careers of Playwrights. They can first acquire professional experience in radio, and Progress from there to television, which often becomes a springboard to theater and cinema.

CONCLUSION

George Brandt considers the following advantages of media drama —

"In media drama performers are not physically present at all; they exist strictly speaking, only in the audience's mind. The performance consists of sound waves coming out of one or more speakers, or the illusion of movement and three-dimensional in film or T.V. screen. Time and space are manipulated - cut up, re-arranged, and presented selectively chronological sequence and geographical continuity can be possible. Utter freedom and T.V. can present approximation of real-time and space and thus has a good deal in common with the theater. Radio and film, however, enjoy the greatest space-time freedom, freedom recognized long ago in theory, though not always made in practice".¹⁴

In theater, the audience remains at a fixed position so far as the action is concerned, whereas in media drama the spectators have constantly shifting points of view (or hearing). The spectator's substitute, eyes and ears camera lens, and microscope - are constantly on the protocol, tracking swinging, zooming, retreating and leaping from place to place', without a real experience of three-dimensionality, media drama conjures up an enormous sense of space.

In media drama large chunk of actuality can be incorporated as a camera and microphone can be taken outside the studio.

Radio, the 'blind man's theatre', translates all action into sound. It thereby gives the highest importance to the voice of the actor and dialogue. The dialogue-centeredness of radio drama brings it close to literature, to the theater. 'At its peak, radio drama had become a significant art form in right, attracting poets like Louis MacNeice in Britain, Archibald Macheigh in the United States, but since the early fifties, television has been eating into radio audiences. Listeners prefer to be viewers. Nevertheless, radio drama is not out of mode, even today, in the way silent movies were as soon as the optical soundtrack was introduced. It still commands millions of listeners around the world.

The theater is a place not only for artists but also for craftsmen and technicians. In media drama, the technological bias is much greater. There is the constant danger that the original concept of a film or T.V. the program will get lost in the machinery. Hence a high degree of generalship is needed to direct media drama.

Film and T. V. differ greatly in their financial and administrative structures. The film is inevitably expensive though it may be seen by millions of viewers as a matter of instant consumption with a brief impact.

Media drama is so compelling an aspect of modern life that, surprisingly, several young people want to enter this field of activity. The British Broadcasting Corporation runs several widely advertised internal training schemes. A small handful of University graduates are selected each year as General Trainees - destined for high power positions within the corporation.

International Journal of ELT, Linguistics and Comparative Literature*(Old Title-Journal of ELT & Poetry)*<http://journalofelt.kypublications.com>**Vol.9.Issue.6. 2021(Nov-Dec)****ISSN:2455-0302**

To conclude one may say that Pinter and MacNeice have been the torch bearers in the field of radio and television play production, and have opened before us new vistas of technique and presentation. Now the dramatists of today and tomorrow should take up this task ahead with new technological advancements.

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