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## **C H A P T E R - I**

### **JOHN WYNDHAM : LIFE AND CAREER**

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## CHAPTER - I

JOHN WYNDHAM : LIFE AND CAREER

John Wyndham was born on 10 July 1903 at Knowle in Warwickshire England. He was christened John Wyndham Parkes Lucas Beynon Harris by his parents and relatives. His father was a barrister, he did not get an opportunity to live with his father for a long time as his parents separated in his teens. Until 1911 he lived in Edgbaston, Birmingham and then he stayed at many different places at England along with his mother. From 1918 till 1927 he was at Bedales where he got a wide experience of the English preparatory schools. He failed in his entrance examination for the Law school as he spent too much time at the science museum of Oxford.

Wyndham pursued different careers like farming, law, commercial art and advertising before he settled down as a successful writer. It was partly through his admiration for H.G.Wells and Jules verne that he was attracted to this genre of science fiction. He first started writing short stories, which he intended to sell in 1925. It was in the year 1929 in a hotel lobby, that his actual career as a writer was launched. Here while he was just idling his time away, he picked up a copy of an American magazine called Amazing stories. Actually science fiction then enjoyed only a creeping respectability. Soon after

that a series of science fiction short stories appeared under the name of John Beynon in Amazing stories and another publication called Wonder stories. From the year 1930 till 1939 he wrote stories of different kinds under different names but only for the American publication. He also wrote detective novels.

By 1935 John Beynon had published his first novel The Secret People which was serialised in Cannada in The star weekly. By 1937, he was being hailed as the best of all living British science fiction writers. His literary career blossomed after 1937 and he continued till the end of his life i.e. 11 March 1969.

Before the second world war he was an active writer as John Beyron and as John Beyron Harris. And during the second world war he spent his time in the civil service until 1943 and then he became part of the Royal Signal Corps. His production during the war was not much. But he became very well-known for his post-war science fiction, which brought him excellent reputation. Then he used the name John Wyndham, the pen name he had used before. His post-war novels are The Day of the Triffids (1951) and Chrysalids (1955).

The Day of the Triffids is a fantastic but frightening story where we see that the world is dominated by Triffids, the dangerous, poisonous plant which is over seven feet tall. And a

few ~~hundreds~~ of the earth's population was blinded by it.

The chrysalids is a thrilling and a very realistic account of the world beset by genetic mutation. This work is said to be better than many of his other novels. The story is good, it has a well conceived community, the characters are simple.

The Kraken Wakes the title is taken from a poem by Tennyson. And this book deals with the awakening and size to power of forces from beneath the surface of the sea. The almost imperceptible beginning and cruelly terrifying consequences of this new threat to the world are seen through the eyes of the radio scriptwriter and his wife. This is one of Wyndham's best work of science fiction which can be compared to the other famous novels of H.G.Wells.

The Seeds of time is made up of ten stories that are acknowledged by their author as 'experiments in adapting the science fiction motif to various styles of short story'. The fascinating variety here explains his success.

The Midwich Cuckoos is a book from which the film 'The village of the Damned' was made. It deals with children.

The Outward urge with Lucas Parkes. Here Wyndham excitingly plots the conquest of space with technical collaboration.

In Chochy a boy called Mathew starts convessing with a boy called Chochy a child of his imagination, with his abnormal behaviour and he causes a lot of tension to all around him. It

is said that all persons and institutions in this story are entirely mythical except for Jack de Mamio and the B.B.C.

Trouble with Wicken is a story of a Cambridge scientist who is in agony to conceal his discovery of a limited supply of an antidote to old age. Then comes his Consider her ways and others.

Most of Wyndham's novels were filmed,

They are distinguished by the contrast between a comfortable English background and the sudden invasion of catastrophe, usually of a fantastic or metaphysical rather than a technologically suggestive nature.<sup>1</sup>

Wyndham's reputation increased after his novels were filmed because the people then started seeing the motion pictures of his stories and realised the effectiveness of his work. They were terrifyingly believable as science fiction.

His famous works The Day of the Triffids and The kraken Wakes have been translated into several other languages. And all his works have been published by Penguin.

The concept of space travel was ignored by all the writers except the science fiction writers. And Wyndham being one of them write about space travel in his novels. In The last lunarians looking at its lunar diggings he anticipated today moon walk activities.

Derelict of Space, Spheres of Hell are his other works.  
Child of power is something like his other work.  
The Midwich Cuckoos And the most startling of all his creation  
 are the insectile machine which we see in his  
Wanderers in Time, where he takes us into future.

Though his work was purely fantastic an another dimension was added to it and that was the sociological comment which can be seen in his work Exiles on Asperus which deals with an expedition by Earthmen to an alien planet, the earthmen had crashlanded there generations before and were kept there as slaves. The new arrivals freed them, but the earthmen were so used to being treated as slaves, that they revolted against being freed.

Wyndham concerns himself with human behaviour and therefore with moral and ethical codes which can be seen in his work The Day of the Trifids.

His stories focus on the reactions of ordinary people to terrible circumstances which plunge them into a struggle for survival.<sup>2</sup>

His works provide a bridge between traditional British scientific romance and the science fiction which has replaced it. Wyndham uses the term logical fantasy to describe his own works.

Christopher Priest says:

Wyndham is the master of the middle class catastrophe; his characters are bougeoisie, and his books lament the collapse of law and order, the failure of communications, the looting of shopping precincts and the absence of daily newspaper.<sup>3</sup>

Wyndham was influenced by Wells and his ideas, as we see that most of Well's best literary devices are present in Wyndham's books.

9 | He contributed a lot to the British science fiction and of the science fiction writers in Britain he was the first to turn away from the American idiom. He had read the pulps and was involved with the other science fiction writers in London ... but he followed his own rules. Though his books were comedies of English Manners, examples which portray the peculiar British type of novel, he was successful both in Britain and in the States.

Wyndham's novels have a original model within science fiction which are known by a lot of names, but best described as 'the British disaster novel'.

John Wyndham really does write... with a sort of hyline simplicity, perfect timing, miraculous avoidance of cliché and a gentle, sophisticated, slightly astrigent humour. He

is one of the few authors whose compulsive readability is a compliment to the intelligent.<sup>4</sup>

John Wyndham belonged to the period between the two world war. It was a period when the growth of mass production method in industry made the sociologist worried, as they saw that their lifetime work was destructive of interest for the object produced which would result in the death of the craftsman. But by the middle of the century there was nothing called the individual skill and craftsman's pride. But then there developed a vast indifference and to some extent a positive antagonism to form and style in writing.

The approved novels and the plays of the 1950s either ignored or offset purpose flouted literary craftsmanship. Art gave place to the 'anti Art' and under the anti art banner chaotic production needed no apology or defence: chaos had indeed come again, bringing its high priests and devotees.<sup>5</sup>

Hardy, Kipling, Shaw, Wells, Arnold Bennett, Galsworthy were the leading writers during the 1950s who were widely read and respected by the critics. But the average intelligent readers read and enjoyed them thoroughly.



In the twentieth century the authors and scholars will find there

... a mass of evidence of the irascibility, the lack of philosophic calm, and (often) the discourteous quarrelsomeness pertaining to the literary profession...<sup>6</sup>

But this can be said as a partial picture of the belief of that period that good manners represent soberness i.e. the febleness of a character was judged by the good manners. And there good manners were considered as inferior to barbaric rough mindedness, like the anti-heroes of the 1950s as Dixon in Kingsley Amis' Lucky Jim, Porter in John Osborne's Look back in Anger. Magnus reminded Orinthia a quarter century ago in Shaw's The Apple Cart that.

"Without good manners humans society is intolerable and impossible".<sup>7</sup>

It was in the late 1940's and the early 1950s where the insurgent young were described as rebels without a cause.

Satire was the most important and powerful social and political corrective and it also requires intelligence and understanding of what was satirised.

In the 1950s and afterwards, most of that which was offered as satire did not become popular. The satire which was offered on television and several other places of entertainment

periodicals did not reach the peak of success with many who loved mockery.

9 Of all the writers of 1950s H.G. Wells is one who needs to be paid special attention as he plays a dominant role as both a science fiction writer and a non-science fiction writer.

Wells began with a very minor social and educational capital, but very soon he became one of the most impressive novelists and publicists of his generation.

Wells was an author of romantic social comedies, the bold and opinionated critic of the Edwardian England, and the pioneer of modern science fiction. He was one of the serious thinkers who expressed his thoughts and ideas through novels.

His first writings were the scientific romances, based on the orthodox beliefs. His success in his works helped him to join his fellow artists like George Gissing, Henry James, Joseph Conrad and others. Wells felt he had a lot of restriction as a literary artist, so he committed himself to journalism and public debate and continued writing his novels.

Actually Wells did not have any ready-made audience as such. He was a very provocative crusader writer and thus his intention was not to give the people what they wanted but to give what they needed.

He worked as a science teacher at the normal school of science in South Remington between the years 1884 to 1887. A Textbook of Biology (1893) was his first book and in the following year he joined the reviewing staff of the scientific Periodical Nature.

Most of his sociological books and almost all his novels upto the 1920s appeared first in a serial form. Wells' first scientific romance was The Time Machine (1895), which was a very brilliant literary invention.

The notion of science fiction did not yet exist, and Wells would not be seen as pioneering a new genre until such later.<sup>8</sup>

Right from the beginning Wells was appreciated by the science fiction readers. His articles continuously appeared in the Scientific Periodical called The Nature.

Grant Richard suggested plausibly enough that -

"Mr. Wells has an unusually vivid imagination which sometimes runs away with him"<sup>9</sup>

Wells was always compared to Jules Verne his predecessor in science fiction. But Wells was always held superior as he had a greater imaginative gift, a deeper and more philosophical understanding of science and a more vividly realistic style than Jules Verne.

I.F. Clarke has said :

"Wells books were only best known examples of the whole  
2 genre of prophetic war and invasion novels in the year up  
to 1914.<sup>10</sup>

Thus it was obvious that romance was in a critical state for the serious investigation of the future to which Wells showed inclination.

Science fiction is now being recognised as aliterary form having its own history and tradition. Most of the critics wrote their own opinions regarding science fiction.

Scott Sanders and Patrick Parrinder further discuss the nature of characterisation in Science fiction.

'... the supposed deficiencies of what have been repeatedly used, even by science fiction authors themselves, to deny the genre any 'real' literary status.<sup>11</sup>

Some dictionaries define science fiction as follows :

Longman Modern English Dictionary presents science fiction as :

'Fiction in which scientific fancy provides plot for adventure stories concerning, especially the future coindition of man and society.<sup>12</sup>

The Oxford Paperback Dictionary says :

'Science fiction - stories based on imaginary future, scientific discoveries or charges of the environment or space travel and life on other planets.<sup>13</sup>

The Living Encyclopedia Dictionary of the English Language -

Fiction that imaginatively uses scientific fact and speculation to create a fantastic situation.<sup>14</sup>

There are many such attempts of defining the term science fiction, but Kigsley Amis' definition in New Maps of Hell 1961 is worth considering :

'At least a dozen current practioners seem to me to have attained the status of the sound minor writers whose example brings into existence the figure of real standing.<sup>15</sup>

And Hillegas says that this above definition of science fiction is the broadest. Most accurate and most comprehensive one. And in this definition of this, there is this concept that science fiction is a kind of narrative derived from

'some innovation in science or technology, or pseudo-science or pseudo technology.<sup>16</sup>

Fantasy is a contrast to science fiction, which does not

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give importance to the fact but has a lot of supernatural and the impossible.

It is seen that these two forms called the fantasy and science fiction are not always pure i.e. either fantasy can have science fiction elements or science fiction can have fantasy elements. And it is noticed that the science fiction writers have always drawn as the literary tradition of fantasy.

While taking a quick look at the period before the seventeenth century we see that there was a new kind of imagination which began with the scientific revolution. Lucian wrote two books - the first True History, which tells us about a journey to the moon accidentally. The second Icaromenippus, a planned visit to the moon.

Another non-science fiction work was More's Utopia 1516 which started a new tradition and also stood as a part of background to Science fiction.

In the seventeenth century it was Kepler who published his Somnium 1634 which is the first example of anything like science fiction, but not a pure form of science fiction. A few years later Bishop Francis Godwin published his work The Man in the Moone 1638. this is a story of a Shipwrecked Spaniard, Domingo Gonsales, who discovers and trains birds called 'gansas' to carry him into the air. And these birds migrate to

the moon. In Cyrano de Bergerac's Voyage to the Moon and the Sun there is only a bit of science fiction and mainly it is satire fantasy and delightful.

Swift's Gulliver Travel 1726 was one more work which was immensely influenced by science fiction. But we see that the real science fiction is in The Vptage to Laputa in Book III of that novel.

Voltaire admired Swift a lot and his work Micromegas (1752) was influenced by Swift's Gullivers Travels. Here we see the hero who is 120,000 feet tall, an inhabitant of Sirius travels to our Solar System.

Lastly we see Bacon New Atlantis (1627) as a part of science fiction, but that is a part of Utopian tradition and unfortunately a fragment.

In the eighteenth century there appeared these voyages to a world underground. Actually it deals with two forms : one is a journey into great Caverns inside the earth and the other a journey into a hollow earth. The first significant journey to a cavern world is Robert Paltock's Peter Wilkins (1750), later it was Jules Verne's Journey to the center of the Earth, who presented a very developed form of this work.

Baron Holberg's Journey to Neils Klia to the world under ground (1741) was the first important voyage to a hollow earth.

Then came Symzonia (1820) an anonymous work which was a rather bizzare and a minor Utopian novel. It was based on the speculations of Captain John Cleves Symmer about a hollow earth open at both poles.

Pol was very much influenced by Symzonia and Symme's theory and he knew them thoroughly, which was reflected in his works - The Unparalleled Adventure of the one Hans Pfall (1835), 'The Ms Found in a bottle (1833) and The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym (1838).

And then finally came Jules Verue's late work 'The Sphinx of Ice' (1897).

In the nineteenth century lot of new science fiction themes or devices emerged, one of those is very obviously expressed in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein (1818), which is an immature work and is enormously influential. It was seen that Wells' The Island of Doctor Moreau (1896) and The Invisible Man (1897) were both influenced by Verne's Frankenstein.

In the early nineteenth century there appeared a new form of science fiction, i.e. the voyage to another world by optical means.

In Fitz-James O'Brien's Diamond Lens (1859) we see through a super microscope a world in a drop of water inhabited by a beautiful girl.



(Pol) and Hanthrone developed a lot of themes of stories of high quality and sophistication though not of greater interest.

Hawthorne's Dr Heidegger's experiment (1837) can be really called a science fiction. There the water from the fountain of youth changes old people into youth again.

Then comes Rappaccini's Daughter (1837) which like Frankenstein is right out of the romantic period. Rappaccini had raised his daughter Beatrice in such a manner that she was immune to the deadly scents of poisonous plants but was poisonous to other human beings.

Hawthorne further in his Birthmark (1843) tries to equate science with magic and makes it out an evil tampering with nature. Aylmer while trying to remove a birthmark and make her perfect, destroys his beautiful wife. Its philogophy is so much like that of Frankenstein.

In addition to this there are a couple of works which are fairly effective and represent the treatment of themes other than the voyage to another world.

The Fact in the case of Valdemar is the first one which deals with a man hypnotised (at) the point of death, and wakes up seven months later. This story is a science fiction built on a pseudo scientific hypothesis.

Von Kempelen and his Discovery (1849) is the second one which develops an ancient idea, the transmutation of lead into gold, but gives it a certain scientific plausibility.

Though there has been development in several new science fiction themes in the early nineteenth century, there was one more most common form of journey i.e. the journey to another world in space. Poë's The unparalleled Adventure of one Hans Pfall (1835) is a very good example of that theme. Menlonte Jauta (1849) is a satire in the form of an account of a balloon journey in the year 2848. Such themes were seen in Poe's work first because he was the one who understood the change which this journey was undergoing, and he discussed the new realism and found the old, familiar moon voyages necessary because they lacked 'plausibility'.

Lastly the voyage to the planet became very common theme during that period of Verne's trip to the moon.

After having taken a look at science fiction, its devices and some of its examples, lets take a look at some of the British science fiction writers.

Actually the modern science fiction is basically an American phenomenon and most of the work written in this genre was either written by American or by those writers who adopt American Idioms.

The sudden social change which awakened the public curiosity aroused an interest in the future and this was seen in American Society earlier than it did anywhere else. In American society there was a geographical concentrations of writers, publishers and readers, who welcomed new technology and they enjoyed novelty which brought changes and expansion.

Christopher Priest says :

"Science fiction, in the modern sense, has no actual existence except as a publisher's category. The only completely reliable definition of science fiction is that anything labelled as science fiction is science fiction and although at first sight this appears to be a cynical view point, it is essential to an understanding of the science fiction phenomenon.<sup>17</sup>

Until Hugo Gernsback created Amazing Stories in 1926 Science fiction did not exist as a separate literature. He was interested in abstracting a type of fiction from general literature like that of H.G.Wells, Edgar Allan Poe and Jules Verne, who were all science fiction writers of that period. It is from there that we see the growth of science fiction as the early Pulp Magazine existed, which attracted the writers who wrote by imitating and influencing each other, which is seen even today.

The science fiction has achieved eminent popularity which helps its author to make a lot of money and the educators and literary academics are studying it seriously. Science fiction has become so popular that the science fiction writers are very easily accepted as lecturers and television pundits.

Science fiction writers in Britain have a very uneasy relationship with the genre as the British and the Americans use the same language for communication, it had become very easy for the British writers to sale their work in States; as the science fiction markets have been literally closed to the other foreign language writers.

The British and the Americans, market the science fiction in the same way but they have a separate category for the genre. In Britain, now every well known commercial paperback house has a list of science fiction works. And the American has a paperback book of the mass market pulp magazines and other categories like thrillers, westerns, science fiction, etc. which have been lying there untouched.

Upto the second world war all the British science fiction magazines were usuallly copied from American Originals. 'New world' was created after the war by various British fans and writers, and was edited by E.J.Carnell for more than seventeen years. In its early years it looked more like the 'American Astounding stories' but later on it looked more like a

'Galaxy'. The contributors were mainly British and Australian and the stories were like the puzzle on an alien planet kind of a thing, which was found in the Astounding stories of that time.

The British Science fiction existed even before this temporary phenomenon as science fiction magazine came into existence. It is said that from the time the first words of fiction were written or uttered 'fantasy' has been an element of European literature.

Mary Shelley's Frankenstein (1818) was the first literary work which was a science fiction novel in the modern sense. In the preface to 1831 edition she describes the way the novel was conceived. During the summer of 1816, she, Byron, Shelley and a Doctor Polidori were staying on the banks of lake Geneva, all four of them started writing a ghost story after reading a volume of ghost stories, and Frankenstein was the result of their task.

Actually Mary Shelley wanted to write a ghost story i.e. a Gothic novel but she ended up writing a science fiction. But Frankenstein is very clearly a Gothic novel because it consists of most of the elements of that genre like

- the brooding atmosphere, the crazy scenery, the terrifying visitations, the brutal murders, the quest for revenge.

Mary Shelley was growing up in the society which was very interested in technology. Further on she described the madness of scientific ambition and created a phantasm i.e. the product of scientific method. The theme of Frankenstein discovered by Mary Shelley shows a great amount of the writing in Modern Science fiction.

Wells needs to be discussed as a typical science fiction writer because he had influenced John Wyndham to write his science fiction. Wells early scientific romances were popular with public, but John Huntington says that the science fiction of Wells was ignored by most of the critics. And surprisingly even Wells saw that in that period his early science fiction was being less important than his 'real' novels.

Wells sometimes could not distinguish between actual things and imagination of a possible scientific development. The description of an aeroplane from 'The argonauts of the Air' (1895) is the best example.

Wells was sixty when Hugo Gernsback published the first issue of Amazing stories. Wells work was always seen in the first issue along with Poe and Verne. Gernsback completely depended on Wells for his work. Wells helped to create the modern science fiction idiom.

There was nothing called as the 'British Science fiction' for the decades after the introduction of Amazing Stories and

the other rival magazines created by other companies. There were many British writers like John beynon Harris (who was later known as John Wyndham). William F. Temple and John Russale Fearn, who were selling their writings to American Magazines and also used a lot of pseudonyms, but whatever they wrote in differing respects was written with the magazines in mind and it was indistinguishable from the work of contemporary American writers.

We will have to mention Aldous Huxley, Olaf Stapledon and George Orwell when we talk about the science fiction writers or those whose work was very closely identified with the field.

Aldous Huxley produced a work of dystopian future and the projection was very lively and very appealing. It was in the "central London Hatchery and conditioning centre", where Huxley's novel began and that was a key to his Brane New World (1932). The fetuses were conceived and incubated in test tubes whcib produced groups of nearly ninety-six identical babies at a time.

Huxley's Brave New world has got a catchphrase, a shorthand meaning, so whenever the Utopian or satirical writing is discussed we see constant reference to it. And it is also suspected that now a days his work is not often read as a science fiction writing by science fiction fans and critics.

William Olaf Stapledon was the most distinguished science fiction writers in England during the period between the first and second world wars. He was deeply concerned with the future of human race like every thinking European of his time. He was more of a philosopher than a journalist and so he saw some slight rays of hope.

Stapledon's hope was cautious, which took different forms in different works. According to him the universe was in a state of evolution and the role of the human species in evolution was doubtful. There was no choice for mankind as it had so much power that it had to either destroy itself or improve itself.

Stapledon published a volume of religious poetry and a book on the relationship between ethics and psychology. He then produced his first science fiction: Last and first men. A Story of the near and far future (1930).

His other science fictions are Last men in London (1932), Odd John (1934), Starmaker (1937), Darkness and the Light (1940) and Sirius (1944).

Stapledon probably is the most isolated one, who has never been fully embraced by the science fiction world, inspite of his novels having visionary intensity and universal scope.



George Orwell was another writer who was known in the world of science fiction for his novel Nineteen eighty four (1948) and a little less for his 'animal Farm'. But somehow we cannot claim him as a science fiction writer because if we do so it would be like ignoring the major part of his work. His non fantastic early books and his other novels reflect his qualities as a political journalist.

Animal Farm is a satire on post revolutionary socialist, which Orwell had started writing in 1943 and published in 1945.

Nineteen Eighty Four was written in 1948 and not 1984 that particular picture was anticipated by the writer.

However Huxley argued,

later developments in science, technology, and politics suggested that the horrible future would be more like Brave New world 1984 than only it will arrive much sooner than six centuries from now.<sup>11</sup>

In the early 1950s British science fiction took a new turn, and at this time the American Science fiction itself was moving forward.

It was in this period that there was a lot of sales of magazines. New publications like Galaxy and The Magazine of Jantary and Science Fiction came into being. The editorial policies of these magazines were concerned with good writing

and gave no importance to pulp magazines than a lot of excellence American writers ~~came onto the same~~. And at last Britain had a regular and ~~own science~~ fiction magazines like New worlds, Authentic Science fiction and nebula the Scottish magazine.

It was during this period when John Wyndham came on the scene as a science fiction writer. We need not discuss more about him as we learn a lot about him at the beginning of this chapter.