



ISSUES OF WAR, VIOLENCE AND HISTORY : A LEARNING FOR HUMANITY IN EDWARD BOND'S PLAYS

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ABSTRACT

Trauma emerges as a paradigmatic discourse for defining the catastrophic, disastrous and injurious aftermaths of two world wars in 20th century. Edward Bond, a twentieth century British playwright discusses issues of war and violence and its consequences in his plays and lays stress on the need to think, act rationally and develop consciousness towards the problems of life that requires serious attention. By his Plays, the playwright makes public that human nature doesn't support evil and destructive actions in essence. The present paper is an attempt to study the selective works of Edward Bond which portrays trauma of wars and its catastrophic and disastrous effects on the people.

Keywords : Trauma, dehumanizing, war, power, technology

Edward bond is a realistic writer, and his plays reveal the way in which war affects humanity and the coming generations suffers due to its consequences. He is obsessed with man's plight in a society whose myths of justice and fair plays make it numb to its own brutality. Discussing concepts such as war and violence and shedding light on the mutual relations of human beings, playwright lays stress on the need to think, act rationally and develop consciousness towards the problems of life that requires serious attention.

For Bond, individuals are products of historical, political and social problems.(Plays: Two xiii) Bond claims that proper guidance for the future of humanity can be provided if we feel "the need to understand and to interpret rationally our past in order to use the experiences in our present and not to repeat the mistakes committed." (Klein,1995:408) By his Plays, the playwright make public that human nature doesn't support evil and destructive actions in essence. Most of his plays are in keeping with his concern for contemporary social issues and in keeping with the conditions of human beings in a technological society

which leaves dehumanizing impact and ignores human values in pursuit of power. He depicts through his plays how the very power structures designed for the promotion of social good; corrode the society to its roots. By his Plays, the playwright makes public that human nature doesn't support evil and destructive actions in essence.

For Bond, Science and Technology, the basis for the twin evils) Science and Technology are exploited for the interest of the ruling class. Technology is unable to guarantee the satisfaction of human needs to provide culture, instead deprives people of their humanity. (Lappin 2)

Bond belongs to generation of writers who had witnessed devastation and suffers immensely the aftermaths of world war. Born in 1935, Bond grew up in a war atmosphere. Bond had a difficult beginning of life. Even the education happened to him in limitations. The repression and oppressed practices of his class placed an indelible scar. Bond never fell prey to the indulgences and excuses. Unruffled he writes: "The working class survived through self-repression. They enforced it on

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each other by scorn and guilt. (Bowen 5)” Thus, class struggle and economic hardship suffuse Bond's work. At the outbreak of war, he was sent to the countryside, which was a disquieting experience for him. In an interview with the editors of *Theatre Quarterly* he says:

Being put into a strange environment created a diversion between feeling and the experience of things. (4)

Bond has focused on the complexity of psychological dimensions of violence and trauma in his works. But demonstration of violence is for social engineering. For Bond, History is the best way of learning about present. His play *At the Inland Sea* takes its audience and main character Boy by Bond's imagination from his bedroom to the inside of Auschwitz gas chamber of history and presents a picture where Cyanide gas chokes its packed victims to Death, and then he took back to present again. The experience of the boy is conveyed through these lines:

Their faces-they was like animals who knew they were in slaughterhouse.

(*At the Inland Sea*.27)

Later, he speaks that tin is like oven and people were roasted inside. They were groaning, grasping and crying by the atrocities committed by the Man of roof (another character) who is pouring crystals in the can. Inside the can, one can notice the whirlpool of flesh and bones.

This experience to the death chamber and his struggle with the unimaginable horror and his return to the bedroom, his world, his everyday life has changed him to an adult who learns about humanity. The challenge that the old woman(who lost her son in the chamber) presents to the Boy and his Mother in that small bedroom is to take responsibility for, to take account of, the suffering of the past.

So, on one level the Play is about the horror of the concentration camps, and the bureaucratic industrial system that ran them. The Boy knows that he has to take responsibility for the past that includes the concentration camp; he can't change history and this is not the world back to future. Tony Coult in his *Notes and Commentary* of the play mentions that the period of 1994 and 1995 was

notable for the news of some of the cruelest atrocities of the Yugoslavian civil war. It was not possible for the writer like Bond, whose personal and artistic animus against violence is so strong, to be unaffected by these events, sanitized and censored through they mostly through T.V News. Reports in some sections of the press were able to convey more of the true horror of what was happening, including the first images of the concentration camps and descriptions of mass murder in Europe since the end of second W.W. The Play's image of the woman clutching her baby comes from Auschwitz, but also from Bosnia or Burandi, of Vietnam, of the Congo, or any of the hundreds of the atrocity-ridden wars waged against the weak and the poor.(41) Bond expressed his views on Old woman of the play in his poem entitled *Face*:

And in her face I saw the sufferings of her age
Years in the cells and labour camps
The months of questioning
Prisoners paraded to watch executions
Children lining up to die
The bowls of the water -gruel-the crusts of bread
The dying stealing from the dead
To stay alive(Coult 41)

The another play *Jackets* deal with the problem of violence in different societies and periods of history. In *Coffee*, Bond examines the state of mind of those who commit crimes: those who pulled the triggers in the places of execution such as Babi Yar. In Bond's plays the soldier is never simply a killer by birth, he is also a moral being, who despite everything, manages to grasp and preserve his own humanity. Instead of simply following orders Nold in Bond's *Coffee*, refuses to kill the Woman and her mentally impaired daughter.

He kills his superior officer, who had given him the order, instead. Such human reaction can also be seen in Bond's earlier *War Plays*. Bond wants to highlight that even in places such as Auschwitz and Babi Yar there is still humanity, an intimate sense of justice which sometimes manages to overcome social submissiveness. In an interview with Glenn Loney Bond argues that our present age is in bad need of rethinking knowledge of the past. The rethinking of the such knowledge helps us highlight both the present and future: “our age like every

age needs to reinterpret the past as part of learning to understand itself, so that we can know what we are and what we should do.” (Bond 2006:45) Bond himself declares that he rereads the past in the light of the present to explore the secrets of human reality. This critical practice helps him to depict the social and political problems of the present by showing “ Why things go wrong and how we could correct them.”

In the play *The Tin Can People*, the economic system controls individuals' way of life. The Tin Can people become corrupted in a consumer society. On the one hand, they experienced a disastrous nuclear war in the past. On the other hand, they live in luxury in the present. Hence, they are stuck between the past and the present.

The tin cans, which are stockpiled in warehouses, ensure that this new society will not suffer the scarcity of the old, but they are also the visible sign of the previous culture, with its emphasis on possession and greed” (Reinelt 61). It presents seventeen years after the atomic holocaust. A gathering of survivors has shaped a tranquil collective living off certain stockrooms loaded up with metal jars of food. An outsider is heartily invited into their middle, however when one of the gathering drops dead, the outsider is thought to be tainted. As the toll of death raises the leader decides that the interloper must be pursued down and murdered. In this manner the survivors, who appear to put stock in old beliefs, change when they feel threatened to barbarity. The economic system detaches *The Tin Can* people from a productive way of life. Bond explains that “When the soul loses its mechanical basis it becomes reactionary. Limitless free consumption takes us out of the relationships which creates our humanity. We become like children without a reason to grow up” (Plays: Six 346). He is very much dissatisfied with the capitalist system, thinking the capitalist society ruled by money and power has grinded everyone and destroyed their souls. He directs our attention to the consumer culture pointing out it is obvious that in the world not many citizens can afford to enjoy the benefits of technological development. What goes with material affluence is spiritual poverty and injustice. (Yanhua,84)

In play *Restoration*, Bond demonstrates how the human imagination creates ideologies, which form violent and unjust cultures. At the beginning he writes, “England, eighteenth century - or another place at another time” (177). He gives the play a context and then immediately broadens it as an indication that the happenings of the play are not limited to any specific time or place. Thus, the specificity of time is relevant, yet violence and injustice are not time specific because they have existed since time immemorial. Daniel Jones opines “The present Social order is in its own form of violence, and that the man can change his society.” (517) Bond is against any kind of violence, but he feels sympathy for people crippled by wrong political moves because they are indeed the victims of the system. According to him, If a person is constantly dehumanized, he or she will lose some parts of their humaneness, eventually. The same thing inevitably happens to those who are dehumanizing them, under various traditionally legitimate and socially acceptable excuses.

As a playwright with a vision to change the society, he imagines a world of future in *The Crime of the Twenty-First Century* which explores the grave and alarming consequences of a nihilistic culture stemming from a destructive imagination. David Davis, in his introduction to the book titled *Edward Bond and the Dramatic Child*, writes, “The quote at the start of his play *The Crime of the Twenty-First Century* is Thatcher's, “There is no such thing as society” and the play explores the implications of the forces behind such a statement and the struggle against them” (xvi). The title of the play depicts the time period in which the play is perhaps set, and also of the nature of the culture that exists in it, that is, a criminal culture.

The setting of the play seems almost surrealistic because the desert like description of the landscape and topography, in the opening scene, is too desolate. Hence the first impression is that of starkness, but as the plot gradually unfolds, grave complexities of the human situation are exposed by Bond. The events of the play revolve around Hoxton, a woman in her fifties, who lives alone in a cell among the ruins, and a small group of individuals who come to her in search of food and shelter.

All the characters are victims of violence and hence fear and the instinct of survival is most prominent in their dialogues and actions.

The play reconstructs the horror of war crimes. Grig, a man in his sixties is the first to visit Hoxton, followed by Sweden, a young renegade in his twenties, and lastly Hoxton's adolescent daughter Grace, who she had abandoned because she was forced to choose her own life over her daughter's. Hoxton tries to chase each of these vagabonds away from what she considers her territory, even her own daughter, so profound are her sense of fear and the instinct of self-preservation. All the characters tell each other about their experiences in order to argue and defend their actions against each other or the society, for example, in the first scene, when Hoxton tells Grig to leave he says:

“Left me place-no permit. Wife was dyin ... I come away. Do no good there. The street“ll feed „er- or let „er go: best in the end” (223).

Sweden also tells Hoxton and Grig about the violence and cruelty he has been subjected to at the hands of the army, so much so, that he mutilated himself to extract a tracking device surgically implanted inside his body by the army to escape. Hoxton talks about being forced out of her house but says she doesn't remember much. Later she confesses to her daughter that she helped poor women abandon their children by giving them to childless couples in exchange for money. However, when she couldn't find couples who wanted to adopt children, she was forced to murder them because women kept leaving their children at her doorstep. Sweden also confesses that he was in prison for life because of car theft and arson. He says in the fourth scene, “Not that it makes no difference - get life for everythin” (236). Thus in an irrational culture, fiction can become reality because the circumstances force the human imagination to create that reality. The brutalisation by the army of civilians under such fictitious ideological pretexts, depicted in the play, is a universal phenomenon. The characters are not only pitiful but helpless in what they do. Hence none of them can be blamed as Hoxton says: Oo"s t' blame? I don"t build cities „n put people in armies „n prisons. If this is penance, I paid it (249-50). Sweden's murdering Hoxton

and Grace is a consequence of the helplessness he feels. He asks Hoxton before he stabs her in the seventh scene:

“Tell me „ow to live! Out there! No eyes! No face! Tell me! Suggest it! ... I want to“ live – not die there like „n animal - dog with no eyes! „Elp me t“ be Human!” (251).

The characters Hoxton, Grig, Sweden and Grace experience a pathetic living in the dilapidated wasteland as a result of atrocities of war. The characters are helpless. The play ends with a Song entitled *The Site* in which he poses questions:

How can we live in this paradox?

How can we turn a catastrophe in freedom?

How can we turn Crime in Justice?

How can we reverse all laws in this way?(57)

Bond is a socialist writer for whom the transformation of society is an urgent necessity. With idea of shock treatment, and violent imagery he re-invents the notion of catharsis.

Like psychoanalysis, his work invokes the dark, hidden layer buried deep within the recesses of the audience's unconscious with a purpose. Showing violent actions on stage, Bond aims at bleeding the abscesses of the mind so that the spectator could confront his real self, his real identity. He also shows how war and violence affects humanity and relationships and results in anxiety and frustration. The trauma suffered by the character creates a vision to learn. Bond adds that this kind of theatre helps to understand human beings and humanity and all the atrocities are happenings of the past and they present a lesson.

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