

Edward Bond's Rational Theatre and Violence of Saved

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Abstract— This research paper explores Edward Bond's play *Saved* to reveal that post war political playwrights adopted a different kind of dramaturgy for exploring the fragmentation and ambivalence of contemporary society. They do not propagate any political ideology but are committed to continue to question and unmask the existing hegemony. Bond looks at his work in terms of Rational Theatre, aimed to raise questions as political thinker, but it is not the task to supply answers as political playwrights. Edward Bond perceives human society as made of a number of smaller societies; each having its different history and culture. His characters are from these smaller sections of society and they bring on to the stage the contradictions in a stratified society. His idea of rationality and his images of violence seem to be diametrically opposite but when explored they are aligned on the same side attempting to articulate the consciousness of 'transindividual subject'. The concept of 'transindividual subject' was given by Lucien Goldmann, a Marxist. He argues that creative texts are based on transindividual mental structures; and this transindividual subject(s) may be a class (bourgeois or proletariat) or even a smaller group. The paper looks at *Saved* as interpretation of our age and culture, a reflection, conscious or unconscious, of contemporary social condition and it is not just deluge of facts and details, but is the reflection of the essence of society.

Keywords— Political theatre, violence, trans-individual subject, hegemony and alienation.

The whole point of violence in the play is that it was or at least, I tried to place it, in a context. So it wasn't the act of violence that was important but the context it was put into, the consequences that come from this violence and sort of society, which the violence indicated. Just talking about the act of violence, I shouldn't think, would be of much use.

Edward Bond

I.

It will not be far fetched to say that post-war British plays cannot be taken as individual texts only but must be reconstituted as a great collective discourse where the text is little more than individual parole or utterance. They are

able to articulate and textualize the acute experience and history of post-war Britain. As Jameson puts in the Political Unconscious that to understand the content of any given work we must move from "what we formerly regarded as individual texts . . . as 'Utterances' in an essentially collective or class discourse" (80). Edward Bond came of age in this milieu and became part of the explosion of new drama that perceived all theatre as political and vital. Political theatre frames plays that unambiguously reveal recognition of theatre's potential to stimulate ordinary man's critical awareness and question the accepted norms of society. Although, playwrights engaged with political theatre were very different in their selection of subject matter, dramatic style and in their perception of investing politics in art, yet a common thread binds their work; that thread is of questioning. Through their plays they seem to question:

How can theatre be entertaining and instructive at the same time? How can it be taken out of the hands of intellectual drug traffic and become a place of offering real experiences rather than illusions? How can the unliberated and unknowing man of our century with his thirst for knowledge and freedom, the tortured and heroic, misused and inventive man of our terrible and great century, himself changeable and yet able to change the world, how can he be given a theatre which will help him to master the world?

(Goorney 8)

There is no doubt that these playwrights have been inspired by Bertolt Brecht, which in turn has helped them to imbue in their works with a political and economic dimension. Put on the same plane their plays are politically engaging; they go on to deconstruct society through images, believe in 'minimalism' guided by the principle of 'less means more' and they do not provide us with neat answers at the end; no absolute or generalizing truth but only relativism because the fragmentation of a body and mind that they depict comes from fragmented reality of the contemporary times. In fact their experimentation with episodic form of narrative, is a critique of mass society, its fragmentation, its estrangement and its dehumanization. Their dramaturgy is an interpretation of our age and culture. It is a reflection, conscious or unconscious, of contemporary social

condition and it is not just deluge of facts and details, but is the reflection of the essence of society. Post-war years witnessed a loss of faith in truth, ethics, values, knowledge and a sense of loss of the real. This feeling of acute alienation brought to fore the metaphysical uncertainty and philosophical cynicism prevalent in society onto the stage; they injected into theatre a tremendous variety of ideas and themes revealing simultaneously their perception of the contemporary life and the anxieties of a war ravaged society.

They voiced a strong criticism of the existing conditions, bringing to fore "...the dual character of the theatre - while as a propagator of contemporary life and ideas it discussed immediate anxieties of a society, as a projector of the unformulated passions of the age it demonstrated great intuition into the spirit of the times" (Choudhari 11). Thematically, they were able to put on the stage the consciousness of the middle class men and women. At the core of these plays was the inability of the common people to comprehend an increasingly decentered world.

This drama depicted through the stage, the disorganized and drifting life of the people and also their restlessness and frustrations.. Thematically, the playwrights reveal a pattern of thought which is critical of the unequal relations in society. They display individuals as caught between incoherent psychological forces that outline their desires, and social forces that restrain fulfillment of these desires. It will not be far-fetched to say that their plays herald Antonio Gramsci's concept of 'catastrophism' that assumes that relations between the bourgeois and the proletariat will increasingly polarize as an inevitable consequence of capitalism. Frustration, aggression, alienation, violence, isolation and anger will be the corollary of this polarization. Their plays reflect an initiation of such a process. Edward Bond advocates 'Rational theatre' which highlights the need of immediate and radical change in society. As a political playwright he is of the opinion that it is not his task to supply answers to the uncomfortable questions that he raises as a political thinker. Explaining himself he says:

I have not tried to say what the future should be like, because that is a mistake. If your plan of the future is too rigid you start to coerce people to fit into it. We do not need a plan of the future, we need a method of change ('Author's Preface' to *Learn*).

For evolving the 'method' for change Bond feels first it is important to identify what we want to change.

II.

Edward Bond's contribution to the post-war theatre lies in exploring and expanding the margins of theatre by

imbuing his plays with the most challenging and debatable topical issues. Like his contemporaries Bond witnessed and experienced the war first hand; son of a labourer, he moved with his family to London, but their roots remained essentially rural. During the war he experienced a number of evacuations which, gave him a completely different outlook to the milieu he was living in. As a playwright, Bond is unparalleled in his view of the world and in his honest evaluation of the human potential.

Although his first play was *The Pope's Wedding*, performed in 1962 yet it was *Saved* first performed in 1965 which made people sit up and take notice, even if it was with disgust and anger. It was a play which offered a very bleak picture of the cultural poverty visible in the modern civilized world. The technique that Bond followed was that of "recording experience without analyzing it, a means of presenting and showing without overt comment a series of situations which are calculated to force an audience into asking who is responsible for the events shown on the stage" (Hay and Roberts, Bond 39). The play is divided into two acts made of thirteen scenes. The scenes are mostly either set in the living room of a small flat or in a park. The opening scene shows Pam bringing home, a working class boy, Len. Scene one depicts Len's sexual insecurity - he either invents interruptions himself or is interrupted by the old man. We see Pam trying to seduce a nervous Len. Thereafter he happily settles in her house as a lodger and plans to marry Pam. She however is bored of him and becomes increasingly impatient because her new love interest is Fred, whose child she bears. Fred does to her the same what she had done to Len, as he snaps off all his ties with Pam. Len, completely devoted to Pam tries to win her over by taking care of both her and the baby. So much so he tries to be a true friend and attempts to patch up the differences between Pam and Fred. It is during one such attempt that Pam argues with Fred in the park and exits in anger followed by Len leaving the baby behind.

What follows is the longest scene in the play as we see Fred's friends drifting into the park after a night out and turning their attention to the only object present on the stage with them - the baby in the pram. Bond lengthens the scene slowly to build up the assault on the baby. It begins by teasing the baby and moving the pram about. The tempo increases when the balloon bursts and the pram is pushed over to Colin. It starts again with Pete pulling the baby's hair; the rest of the group abusing it. Fred present in the scene does nothing, to save the child. The boys rub the baby's excrement on its face momentarily stopping to see Fred's reaction. Fred is goaded into coming near the pram to see what has been done to the baby. This time it is Fred who begins the

madness by throwing a stone. The men seem possessed and the 'atavistic fury' is palpably released and the baby killed. From a distance Len watches the entire scene but does nothing to stop it. The next scene is set in a jail cell, where Pam and Len, come to see Fred. Len reveals that he had been a mute witness to the killing of the baby, 'I didn't know what t'do. Well, I should a stopped yer' (86) airing a lack of strength to stop what is morally wrong. Act Two of the play is an account of Pam and Len's relationship following the pattern of slow and continuing estrangement experienced by Harry and Mary, Pam's parents.

Throughout the following scenes we see Pam rebuking Len; she holds him responsible for all her miseries and misfortune. Len is driven to Mary and a simple task of mending stockings turns into a game of seduction, which is disrupted by Harry. Later Mary and Harry argue about Len, and the argument turns into a fight, which Len tries to break. Len agrees to leave the house for good. Harry goes to Len's room and tries to convince him that what happens in his house is not unique or unusual and that things would be much the same elsewhere as well. The last scene of the play has no dialogue except for Len asking for a hammer to fix the chair broken during the fight. The four characters are all present in the scene, engaged in a silent deadlock and suddenly the bickering and the unhappy atmosphere comes to an end.

III.

In his discussion with Irving Wardle, Bond claimed:

I dislike anybody who imagines the answers to life are cerebral . . . I dislike that sort of cerebral activity that imagines problems exist somewhere out there and don't exist here. One lives in the world and must find one's way of living in the world (Quoted in Scharine 61).

The physical environment, plays a significant role in the play. Its sterility and constant inhumanity is evident in the "characters relationship with time, their world and with one another" (Scharine 64). In fact, the violence is detached, impersonal and perverted. For Bond, it is the gradual industrialization of society that has brought to the fore the latent aggression and violence. His characters are children of a society which looks at them as mechanical devices meant to perform their work efficiently.

The stoning of the baby is the most horrifying scene put on the stage. It reveals the dangerous unleashing of hostility; a barbarous acknowledgement of dehumanized society. In the first three drafts of the play the baby was not drugged; the scene was punctuated with its screams. It was only in the fourth draft the baby was heavily drugged and silent. D.A.N. Jones (Hay and Roberts, Bond 50) believes that the intention of the playwright was to present us a Greek messenger or a chorus, for the

audience does not see or hear the baby. It can only infer from the actions of the boys what is happening to 'it'. As the boys leave the park, the stage instruction reads 'They go off upleft, making a curious buzzing. A long pause' (82). Bond explains:

I like to find these moments where the known experience frays over into something which cannot be pinned down to very common usage, but is somehow suggestive of the experience. Instead of being an identifiable gang, their behaviour is so horrendous that it blurs over into something that can only be described in terms of the animal kingdom, and that's the buzzing of a swarm of bees - (Quoted in Hay and Roberts, Bond 50).

In the 'Author's Note' to the play, Bond remarks "clearly stoning to death of a baby in a London Park is a typical English understatement. Compared to "strategic" bombing of German towns it is a negligible atrocity, compared to the cultural and emotional deprivation of most of our children its consequences are insignificant".

In other words the victim and the victimizer are painfully stuck in the vicious cycle of aggression and violence, which stems from incompatibility of the biological man with the technological man. They are both "culturally and emotionally dead long before scene six" (Hay and Roberts, Bond 51). The scene symbolizes physiological and psychological battering of all through coercive institutions of society. The dead baby has no name, no sex, heavily drugged; it has no sense of its own being. It is nowhere near being a human; hence it can be killed without remorse. The same is equally true about the German soldier who was killed by Harry. It clearly states society's willingness to resort to violence for its own interest.

At the same time Bond has called *Saved* an optimistic play. In the last scene he gives us no dialogue; no exposition, no denouement. What he does give, is an image that of Len mending the chair; which for Bond is the most positive symbol and image that the chair is broken not the mender. Len has not been shown as either triumphant or completely broken as both the images would be extreme. The right thing to do would be to look at the "psychology of the moment" (Hay and Roberts, Bond 61) as Gaskell puts it. The playwright offered us a glimpse of Len's life and that kind of life does not offer too many options, as Harry puts it to Len that nothing would be solved. Bond's elucidation helps "if you go out of this house . . . you will open the front door you won't find yourself in the street, you will find yourself in a house exactly like this. So that for Len, there is no escape, all he can do is preserve his integrity, preserve his humanity" (Hay and Roberts, Bond 56). Bond through this play did not want the audience to be only concerned with

the effect of cultural depravity, he wants the audience to think about the causes of cultural aridity.

For Edward Bond his characters are the children of society, conveying the symptoms of the diseases afflicting it; allowing him to confront, the contemporary society in most categorical and explicit terms. Bond's characters are instruments used and abused by society. Bond explains.

Very often it's a question of what is being done to the character. One is describing the processes of society. . . . The situations are designed not to show the development of the character but to show the crucial situations an individual has to cope with, in order to produce what is of value to him (Hay and Roberts, Bond 60).

Bond's play *Saved* has two principle characters Len and the baby. Each is a part of a society whose functioning is not only difficult to comprehend but is impossible to decipher as well. They cannot find any 'method in the madness'. Right from the beginning Len is an endearing character; he changes his role from questioning, to observing and offering help and advice to everyone in the play. Initially he seems like Tiresias (*The Wasteland*) a mute witness to the goings on of other characters, but our opinion changes when we come to know that he witnessed Pam's baby being stoned to death but did nothing to stop it. Morbid curiosity that Len exhibits when questioning Fred about the murder further changes our perception of him:

Len: What was it like?
Fred: I tol' yer.
Len: No, before
Fred: Before What?
Len: In the park.
Fred: Yer saw.
Len: Wass it feel like?
Fred: Don't know
Len: When yer was killin' it.
Fred: Do What?
Len: Wass it feel like when yer killed it?
(113).

It seems Bond is asking, if witnessing a crime being perpetrated and doing nothing to stop it, is equal to committing it? This episode reveals that Len is not just standing on periphery of the action but is in more ways than one involved in it. Pam, Fred, Mary and Harry have been delineated to reveal the impoverished (emotionally, physically, economically and morally) masses.

Throughout the play the baby is treated as an object. It wails itself to sleep every night while the mother is busy watching T.V.

The baby screams with rage . . . she turns up the volume
(46)

Pam refuses to be a mother to child, in consequence redefining the concept of family. Pam wheels the baby on

to the stage (Park) solely as an excuse to persuade Fred to see her. The baby is drugged with aspirins so that it'll be quiet. Even after the baby is stoned to death there is no remorse only the audience is sitting stunned unable to come out of the theatre event. (Bond coined the term Theatre Event for something which goes beyond the story which is being told and is not contained by it).

Bond wanted to put in concrete images the moral illiteracy of dehumanized masses. Institutions of society have already killed them emotionally and culturally. The dead baby has no name, no sex, heavily drugged it has no sense of its being. In the last scene Len is shown mending the chair, because of this Bond has called his play 'optimistic', but the reality is that Len's life does not offer too many alternatives to pick from. Bond invites the audience to look closely at the problems of violence and aggression and also to question their sources. For Bond violence is shaped and determined by the social conditions of the individuals. Edward Bond perceives human society as made of a number of smaller societies; each having its different history and culture. His characters are from these smaller sections of society and they bring on to the stage the contradictions in a stratified society.

The play displays the destructive consequences of ineffective political action of these societies on individuals. Bond is a didactic playwright that is why the protagonists in his plays are sensitive to vacuum created in a society. For Bond his characters are part of the collective and to understand the collective degeneration and depravity in society he needs to showcase the same degeneration and depravity in the individual. Along with the protagonist Bond wants the audience to move towards serious and rational reflection rather than emotional contemplation of the incidents in the play.

He recognizes social aggression as cyclical in nature. His belief "the idea that human beings are necessarily violent is a political device, the modern equivalent of the doctrine of original sin" has been most eloquently put in his 'Introductory Note' to *Saved* (10). The industrialized fabric of urban society dominated by capitalism, breeds alienation from society in individuals. This alienation in their characters paves the way for frustration, aggression and ambiguity. These urban constructions also convey the author's idea of class divisions in society. For Bond violence that we witness in the contemporary world is in fact a "release of aggression created by the dehumanizing restrictions of an industrialized society" (Scharine 67). Pam, in *Saved* is a product of barren world and has turned emotionally barren since she feels no love or compassion for the child. In fact endorsing the play Sir Laurence Olivier said ". . . we can experience the sacramental catharsis of a very

chastening look at the sort of ground we have prepared for the next lot” (Scharine 49). The next lot is the product of an automated life and society, part of the fragmented dark looming urban structures.

Bond uses scenes of acute violence to stun the audience into regarding it as a social phenomenon and not isolated incidents. In *Saved*, stoning of the baby elicited furor from the audience but for Bond it’s essentially an image, which challenges our perception of technologically advanced world. In his dramaturgy a heightened awareness is a corollary to shock. This awareness is not only knowledge but an acknowledgement of self as socially constructed. In a series of images put on the stage Bond’s Rational theatre, wants the audience to acknowledge sickness, desires, deceits, malice, inadmissible yearnings, and also to confront society’s with its failings. The characters and the language are shown in a state of acute disorder. The stage itself becomes an image of struggling and alienated men and women, unhappy with reality. Bond talks about role of the playwright and the stage. “I must avoid any revelations, any explanations and sudden ‘seeing the light’.” He looks at stage “as an arena that has characteristics of society, and doesn’t merely represent it . . .” (Study 36). For Bond art is objective representation of reality; as reality cannot be so clearly worked out, art also cannot present graphically obvious consequences.

Bond, and the idea political theatre attempts to break, as a mark of protest, from the bourgeois standards of theatre. It is exploratory and critical and thus cannot fit into the simple structure comprising exposition and denouement. His commitment, lies in contemplating the human condition in twentieth century capitalist world, examining the role of constructed systems of society and the hidden ideological purpose of their operations, in initiating the declining sequence of transformation of human population into dehumanized beings. Political theatre offered space in articulating and locating the disillusionment and growing indifference of people. It had arisen out of loss of certainties and absolutes in the contemporary world. It vocalizes dissent and engagement, protest and commitment to unmask all that is taken for granted in society. These plays are interpreters of contemporary culture unraveling the dialectical relationship between a literary work and the historical conditions which frame it.

These writers in their work have been able to articulate the consciousness of ‘transindividual subject’. The concept of transindividual subject was given by Lucien Goldmann, a Marxist. He argues that creative texts are based on transindividual mental structures; and this transindividual subject(s) may be a class (bourgeois or proletariat) or even a smaller group. Therefore, for

Marxists a great writer is able to reveal the fundamental social and political conditions of the transindividual subject. At the same time the plays can be explored through the concept of dialectical criticism, as put by Fredric Jameson, which allows to look at plays as objects of study, in a distinct historical environment, which unmask the distinction between existing realities of the transindividual subject and its utopian aspirations. Georg Lukacs in *History and Class Consciousness* is of the opinion that only the dialectical conception of totality can enable us to understand reality as a social process (13). Marxist ideology helps to locate the dramaturgy of these playwrights as a relation between the immediate present and the totality of the historical process.

For Bond’s Rational theatre it is imperative to raise questions as political thinker, but it is not the task to supply awareness as political playwrights. Each of these playwrights adopted a different kind of dramaturgy for exploring the fragmentation and ambivalence of contemporary society. They do not propagate any political ideology but are committed to continue to question and unmask the existing hegemony. For them art is, as Bond puts it, “. . . it’s about how men relate to the world and each other; it’s not a private or even individual experience, but one of the ways society creates its identity; it’s not primitive and dark but rational and constructive Art is the most public of activities” (Companion 69). A playwright puts onto the stage, all that which enables his audience to recognize a common shared humanity, beyond the class structure of society. Art in general and drama in particular has an inherent capacity to articulate and to communicate all that is difficult and unacknowledged.

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