



A Philosophical and Political Analysis of Edward Bond's Play *Lear*

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Abstract— Baz Kershaw in *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention* opines that a play “have to be seen in their full cultural milieu; in relation to the aesthetic movements of which they are a part; in relation to the institutional structures of the art; in relation to the cultural formations they inhabit” (Kershaw 5). In this regard, an unequivocal reading of a postmodern drama turns out to be a betrayal of its pluralistic and multi-layered signification. Edward Bond's *Lear* is a quintessential example of a postmodern drama that weaves within its narrative fabric the aesthetic, philosophical, and political elements. First performed in 1971, *Lear* is a radical and violent rewrite of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. While Shakespeare's play dealt primarily about the politics of sovereign power, responsibility, and the problems associated with it, Bond's *Lear* is actually an allegorical tale depicting contemporary political issues and unreliability of democracy which in itself is vulnerable to slipping into an authoritarian government. This paper attempts a philosophical, political, and social analysis of the play *Lear*. The paper also analyses how ideas of Italian Philosopher Giorgio Agamben find an expression in the play. It also reads the play as a clarion call for practical activism and the need for public intellectuals to safeguard the true spirit of democracy.

Keywords— Political Theatre, Public Intellectual, Practical Activism, Bare Life.

Edward Bond is a powerful and radical voice in the history of English theatre and one among the few living dramatists whose early years were informed by the brutality and disillusionment of World War II. The climate of war and the related socio-political instability through which he survived eventually reflected in the style and manner of his plays. His plays ally with the ideas of Theatre of Cruelty theorised by Antonin Artaud that foregrounded violence and cruelty to deliberately unsettle the minds of the spectators “in order to expose [them] to a range of their own feelings that was unconscious and therefore normally in accessible to them” (Bermel 7). He borrowed some of his theatrical conventions from Bertolt Brecht and like him believed that plays must be cerebral rather than being cathartic. These influences went into his formulation of a new theory of drama that came to be known as Rational Theatre that forced the spectator to look

for reasons in his plays and to analyse its political dimension.

He believed that violence is not an innate trait of human beings. A man becomes so as a result of a capitalistic, technological society where man's fight to live with dignity is no less a Herculean task. This idea informs his entire oeuvre. Like the epic theatre of Brecht, Bond's plays have constantly revisited history to examine the social, ethical, and political roots of present situations in order to alter them. His maturity as a dramatist can be seen in the development of his dramatic skills and political philosophy. In the course of his theatrical activism he moved from depicting the problems of society, as in *Saved*, to demonstrating how these problems can be solved, as in *The Worlds*.

He identified himself as a socialist and vehemently critiqued capitalism. He strongly believed that

artists have the moral and ethical obligation to turn themselves into activists, thereby directing the society from darkness into light of wisdom and knowledge. Like Brecht, Howard Brenton, Dario Fo, and Jean Genet, Bond is one of the strong voices of political theatre. He stressed throughout his career the need to make the analysis of politics part of the aesthetic experience. He opined that art without politics is trivial and there is always a rationale behind every art that re-interprets political and economic processes underlying our history and culture. Bond's theatre is fundamentally an arena for stories of resistance – resistance to dominant ideologies, to exploitative capitalism and tyranny of political power. In the prologue of the book by Karoline Gritzner, *Adorno and Modern Theatre: The Drama of the Damaged Self in Bond, Rudkin, Barker and Kane*, she says:

Bond's attempt to rethink the relationship between drama and socio-political reality contains aspect ... of an aesthetics of resistance ... Bond's Aesthetic project seems to entertain a ... dialogue with objectivity, which aims to counter the isolation and atomisation of the individual in the modern capitalist society with theatrical image of resistance against oppression and injustice.(79)

Bond's *Lear* is a play shaped by the playwright's experience of growing up in war inflected London and contemporary political situations around him. British writers of Bond's generation were influenced by World War II and its aftermath. Being a socialist himself, the deviation of socialist nations from its own proclaimed ideologies left Bond in disillusionment with socialism. Socialism, seen by many as a hope for the future, turned out to be as aggressive, dictatorial, and violent as the authoritarian political system. Critics opine that *Lear* is Bond's open criticism against socialist government – an ideology he himself believed in – that has let-down its democratic ideals.

The true brilliance of the playwright lies in his ability to conflate the present experience in the timeless frame of the play. The play *Lear* is not just a theatrical imagination but a political reality aesthetically staged. As Althusser rightly points out, government works through violence unleashed by its repressive state apparatus like the army and police. The central theme of the play shows how violence is perpetuated by those in power, especially the sovereign ruling political power system and is a strong critique against systemic violence. The play is also a testament to the axiom that power corrupts men. Bond says that it is not the act of violence but the context it is

put into that has to be stressed. In the whole span of the play we can see that the nation is subjected to a rule of three different governments. First being King Lear, a tyrannical monarch who is obsessed with the construction of the wall to protect its territory from his imagined enemies. Lear orders death by fire squad on one of the workers for accidentally killing a fellow worker and for suspecting him to be a saboteur trying to destroy the wall. He instantly orders to kill him without allowing the man to prove his innocence. Bodice and Fontenelle, who first seems to be sympathetic and contrary to their father's nature, upholds violence once they come into power and turns out to be more brutal than Lear himself. Once again the existing government of the daughters is overthrown by a peasant uprising led by Cordelia, symbolising democracy or people's rule. Cordelia was once raped and made bereft of her husband by the daughter's army. Cordelia, who is now a victim of the frenzy of mighty power structure, seeks vendetta once she comes into power too. Here regime allows for brutal murder of Bodice by hitting her hard with a bayonet. She also makes Lear politically ineffective by making him blind.

Lear's brutally forced political ineffectiveness by Cordelia's men has great implications in today's situation. Lear, towards the end, turns to an activist figure and also that of a public intellectual. He attains realisation of his wrong doings and turns a strong critique of his own legacy continued through Cordelia. Towards the final act of the play Lear pleads to the farmer and his family who is heading to work for the wall resumed by Cordelia that, "I am the King! I kneel by this wall. How many lives have I ended here? Go away. Go anywhere. Go far away. Run. I will not move till you go!" (Bond 77). This is precisely the moment, the moment that happened to Ashoka centuries before, when he realised he cannot be silent or turn a blind eye to man's sufferings stemming from his own selfish actions. In the dialogue between Lear and Cordelia in the final act we see Lear maturing into a man of full conviction.

CORDELIA: You [pointing Lear] were here when they killed my husband. I watched them kill him. I covered my face with my hands, but my fingers opened so I watched. I watched them rape me, and John kill them, and my child miscarry. I didn't miss anything. I watched and I said we won't be at the mercy of brutes anymore, we'll live a new life and help one another. The government's creating that new life – you must stop speaking against us.

LEAR: Stop people listening.
 CORDELIA: I can't. You say what they want to hear.
 LEAR: If that's true – if only some of them want to hear – I must speak (Bond 88)

This is the primary responsibility of a public intellectual, to use their intellectual capacity, their ability to think, to inform the public the truth. In the real world all governments, be it a democracy or autocracy, have always adopted an anti-intellectual stand. In India itself we have several instances pertaining to this. We have instances on how writers like Arundhati Roy, Hiren Gohain, Stan Swamy were charged with sedition and penalised for anti-government comments, speech or writings. In every democracy there always is a loophole through which a democracy could easily slip to being an authoritarian government and institutionalise violence.. As Neera Chandhoke, writer and former professor of Political Science at Delhi University, points out in an article written in *The Hindu*, “Public intellectuals are the conscience of our country. They should be respected because they speak out against injustice wherever it occurs, not be subjected to punitive action. Public intellectuals are of value because they bring the sane, cool voice of reasoned reflection to bear on contentious and stormy public issues.”

This drama cannot be just considered as a play depicting man's lust for power and legitimization of violence as an imperative tool of control. Here, Edward Bond tries to point to the indistinguishability associated with sovereign or ruler of a state who is placed both within the law and outside the law. This thought was later developed by Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamban in his seminal work, *Homo Sacer*, published in four volumes from 1995.

WARRINGTON: We could refuse this war. We're old, sir. We could retire and let these young men choose what to do with their own lives. Ask your daughters to let you live quietly in the country.

LEAR (still saluting): How could I trust myself to them? My daughters are proclaimed outlaws, without rights of prisoners of war. They can be raped – or murdered. Why should they be held for trial? Their crimes aren't covered by my laws. Where does their vileness come from? (Bond 39)

Homo Sacer (Latin for "the sacred man" or "the accursed man") is a figure of Roman law: a person who is

banned and may be killed by anybody, but may not be sacrificed in a religious ritual. Under the Roman Empire an individual guilty of a certain crime was banned from the society and consequently all of his rights as a citizen were revoked. Such figures came to be known as *homines sacri* or sacred men, who, while significantly murdered by anyone without impunity, could neither be legally executed nor sacrificed in a ritual. Thus a *homo sacer* finds himself excluded from the law even as he is being included. This logic of *homo sacer*, being rooted in the state of exception is applicable to every one including the sovereign, the king or the president, who is also placed within the law (as one who could be tried too as any individual) and outside of law (as the sovereign who has the power to suspend the law for a time and place.) This is rightly pointed out by Lear when he says that his daughters are outlaws. They are outside the constraints of law but are still tied to the government run by Lear. The law system with which they rule the nation is not applicable to the ruler hence they stand outside the purview of law. Bond indirectly points out this zone of indistinguishability whether a government is within or outside the purview of law is what partially facilitates those in power to attain the status of an absolute ruler.

Agamben also introduced the notion of “bare life” in which he develops the Ancient Greek distinction between natural life—*zoe*—and a particular form of life—*bios* or political life. In western politics this *zoe* or biological life remained outside the realm of politics. But today, Agamben points out that our *zoe* is exclusively included in the domain of sovereign control. The soldier who is shot dead by Lear, violation of Cordelia, and the plight of farmers due to the construction of war shows how politics poses a threat to our biological existence. Thus *zoe* or biological life is exclusively included in the realm of political control. This notion, that is the indistinguishability of *zoe* and *bios*, prompted Agamben to develop the notion of ‘bare life’ which he defines as “‘life exposed to death’, especially in the form of sovereign violence”.

We can situate this play in modern society and democracy. We live in a society that guarantees a false sense of security. Be it the land we own or live in, or our own life can easily be appropriated and manipulated by those in power. When the king had to build the wall he could easily grab it from the farmers, making their life miserable. In any democracy everything comes under the purview of national property and if anyone fails to submit their own land for national cause he would be subjected to legal actions. Similarly several countries still practice conscription or compulsory military service where youths are left with no choice but to yield to the authorial

command and if they fail to they will be penalised. So what Agamben and Bond points out is the fact that there is only an imaginary line separating democracy and a totalitarian rule. At times it is the rule of a despot or an oligarchy that thrives under the guise of democracy.

The wall is a metaphor of a divided world. It is man's urge to construct his 'self' keeping it safe and secluded from the undesirable 'others'. In the first scene Lear says:

I started this wall when I was young. I stopped my enemies in the field, but there were always more of them. How could we ever be free? So I built this wall to keep our enemies out. My people will live behind this wall when I'm dead. You may be governed by fools but you'll always live in peace. My wall will make you free. (Bond 36)

Considering present border issues and refugee exodus, his metaphor of wall is a powerful social critique and we can also see a similar idea presented in the novel *Waiting for Barbarian* by J M Coetzee, a political allegory of the oppressor and the oppressed played out in the political arena of imperialism. There is no barbarian as such in the novel. Even if so, they are not in a position to wage war against the powerful. We later realise that the idea of barbarian is just a scandal with which those in power can institutionalise violence and make the people from the margins or less privileged in a state of perpetual subordination. Lear's imagined enemies never posed him a threat. His true enemies emerged from his own blood and action. Bond thus gives out the message that how hard we fortify a nation from external threats, the ultimate harmony and stability of a nation depends upon the democratic relationship between the government and the governed.

The deliberate use of anachronism can be seen as theatrical strategy. The modern workers building Lear's wall, the futuristic scientific device used to blind Lear, the electric bulb, mentioning of the photograph are some of the anachronistic techniques in the play. Here, Bond uses anachronism to disrupt the spatial and temporal continuum of the play and situates it in a universal and timeless space.

Conclusion

Lear is a well-crafted play depicting the political reality of the world and basic human disposition. The relevance of the play is never to die – it is relevant even today and will be for years to come. *Lear* is a synthesis of aesthetics, resistance, political activism, and philosophy wrapped up in epic manner of storytelling, which he believes should be the new form of drama as an epic play tells a story and says why it happened. In today's world it is imperative for

any literary work to analyse what is going wrong in the society and provide a practical solution for it. Bond's *Lear* reminds us that "our lives are awkward and fragile and we have only one thing to keep us sane: pity, and the man without pity is mad" (Bond 89). And this is Bond's exhortation to the world, to be compassionate, not to be silent against injustice, and to resist every force that reduce our existence into nothingness.

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