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The Discourse of Violence and its Causes and Remedies in Edward Bond's Dramaturgy

Sameeulhaq Nazki

Research Scholar
University of Kashmir

Abstract:

The present paper is based on the study of the use of violence in the plays of post war, British playwright Edward Bond. It also deals with the theories in which Bond explains when, where and how the violence originates, that is, it connects the origin of violence to the values propagated by the society. He is preoccupied with violence in his plays because of its frequent occurrence and presence in our society. By doing this he aims to redeem the society from the clutches of violence, as it's responsible for the wide range of misery and destruction of humanity. Bond is not interested in Antonio Artaud's 'Theatre of Cruelty' who has been accused of creating violent scenes for aesthetic preoccupation, but for Bond it's simply a fact of life, that recurrently comes about in society and it has to be dealt with realistically and artistically.

Keywords: Violence individual, social morality

Edward Bond was born in a working class family in London, and childhood memories of World War II bombings coloured his imagination and later his works. When Winston Churchill announced the peace, Bond remembers a voice in his head saying, "Now you will live" (Stoll 1976: 422). Bond found the education poor and the limitations placed on him by his class oppressive, he left school at fifteen. "The working class survived through self-repression. They enforced it on each other by scorn and guilt" (Bond: 1965). Thus, class struggle and economic hardship suffuse Bond's work. In 1958 Edward Bond joined the first writer's group at the Royal Court Theatre in London. Founded in 1956 by George Devine, the Royal Court promoted challenging and subversive writing. Their production of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* in 1956 heralded a shift in British drama towards a harsh aesthetics that Bond would push further in his plays. When the Royal Court produced Bond's second play *Saved* in 1965, a scandal erupted. *Saved* tells the story of youths, who suppressed by a brutal economic system, become monsters. Since the sixteenth century, plays for production were subject to the Lord Chamberlain's approval, although a loophole in the Licensing Act of 1737 allowed for private performances of unapproved plays, enabling London audiences to see Ibsen's *Ghosts* (*Dolls House*, 1879), Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge*, (1955) and Tennessee William's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955). Among the many exceptions Lord Chamberlain had with *Saved*, one was to delete the scene of stoning to death of a baby in its carriage. Bond refused to alter a word, claiming that removing this pivotal scene would destroy the play. But the Lord Chamberlain was not the only opponent of *Saved*. Critics called it 'revolting and distasteful,' and controversies broke out in the theatre. But Bond's strategy was to teach something rational and positive through these scenes.

Edward Bond directs the audiences to observe the social evils from a different perspective. The challenge or problem for the audience is two-folded. There is an escalating violence in Bond's plays which makes very tough demands on the audience, and there is no apparent escape from it. Bond believes that we must not write clever speeches but words must be means of action. Art to Bond is a close scrutiny of reality and therefore, he puts on the stage only those things that happen in our society. There are often violent things in our society, and

when they occur he depicts them as truthfully and honestly as a sincere artist should. But he is not interested in violence for the sake of violence. "I am interested in violence not as an aesthetic preoccupation, but simply as a fact of life." (Stoll) Violence is never a solution in his plays, just as violence is never a solution in human affairs, "violence is a problem that has to be dealt with" (Ian Stoll, 1976: 115). In Bond's plays violence is a defensive strategy to survive in an unjust and irrational system, "People turn to violence as they are deprived of their physical needs. Since man is alienated from his natural self, he becomes nervous, tense and begins to look for threats everywhere" (Bond, 1972: 10). He always tries to relate the problem of violence to society and doesn't see it just a theatrical technique. Bond's plays recuperate with incidents that insist on rational approaches in life by denouncing the irrationality which is the cause of violence in society. He is aware of the fact that violence is an overriding social phenomenon in the modern society. So the presentation of violence on the stage disturbs the audiences and generates a socio-political alertness. He describes images of violence in his plays as 'Theatre Events', "A theatre event in his dramaturgy is a complex movement of social analysis" (J. Spencer, 1992:17). Bond searches for an audience response that is political and not shaped by social imposition. The A-Effect includes images of violence that are shocking, irritating and unexpected. Bond directs the audiences to observe the social evils from a different perspective.

It is social injustice that is responsible for the most controversial scene in all Bond's plays, the stoning of a baby in *Saved* in a pram by a group of dissatisfied and frustrated young men, including the baby's father. Because of the outrage that this scene caused in Britain, Bond had to explain its meaning and its purpose. The scene, as he points out, shows a paradigm of violence at whose root is a child. This violence is not necessarily literal. The crime against innocence is performed on daily basis. The children are metaphorically murdered all the time by being taught to adjust to the demands of modern capitalist society. Their individuality is crushed and all the injustice that they are forced to accept makes them frustrated. This frustration causes numbness, madness and violence and creates various kinds of monsters in which Bond's play *Saved* abounds. Play like *Saved* urges the audience to examine society more closely, in order to better understand the violence that lurks beneath the surface. The gang's need of self-assertion comes out violently in the baby stoning action. They begin to take pleasure from hurting the baby. Barry says "less've a go! I always wan'ed a do that!" (78). Barry (working class youth) experiences an explosion of the aggression evoked by the alienating and dehumanizing restraints of society. They do not judge their actions according to their moral values. Bond seems to suggest that Society has taught men that they must be restricted or they will kill. Therefore when the restrictions are lifted they do kill. Bond explains that the boys' attitude stems from the legal system inhuman system that they are caught in. What Bond asks us to see in *Saved* is an image of social structure as a hierarchy of aggressors and victims, where the weak brutalizes the weaker, until the existence of whole is jeopardized by the murder of a child. The murder of the baby is presented as one of casual acts of violence which the gang of youth are indulged in. Nor it is surprising that a child should be their victim on the lower depths of a social scales where the brutalized derives a certain sense of superiority from brutalizing those still more powerless than they. "Our society has structure of a pyramid of aggression and as the child is the weakest member, it is at the bottom" (Bond, 1971: 9). A system in which the most deprived will kill to escape the fate of being a victim, and where the scapegoat for this society is inevitably the weakest and the most expendable of its members. The murder of Pam's baby signals the crisis point as the enraged beastliness of the workers breaks forth in an act of violence, violence that is, as Eagleton notes, "natural because human beings are cultural" (Eagleton, 127-135). The

purpose of the play, as Arthur Arnold suggests, “is to lay the corpse of the baby upon the doorsteps of society, to impress upon the audiences that the youths who stone the baby to death are no less victims of the society than the child”. (1972: 15-19). Their aggression has become an extension of the violence inherent in the system which governs their lives. Bond puts the stoning into *Saved* precisely because he finds it revolting and intolerable; but he finds what happens to the baby no more revolting than what happens to its mother and father, Pam and Fred, even though they remain alive. He knows that we would normally assume that their lives, even in deprivation, were ‘better’ than the state of the dead baby. Indeed, as Bond suggests, “the stoning of a baby in London Park is a typical English understatement. Compared to the cultural and emotional deprivation of most of our children, its consequences are insignificant” (Bond, 1965:13).

Bond continued to provoke the British establishment as in his play *Bingo*, (1973) he depicted the protagonist Shakespeare as a rapacious capitalist who signs away the rights of his tenants. His work is the evidence that he was under no crippling illusions about human nature, but he loses control because he won’t carry his insights into his day to day life. His refusal to oppose the enclosures is a public sell-out to his own financial security, but his final despair is brought on by the decaying of his close personal relationships. He makes no significant attempt to protect the Young Woman from whipping or from hanging, and Judith’s (Shakespeare’s daughter) reproaches seem quite justified: “You sit there and brood all day... I feel guilty if I dare to talk about anything that matters” (37). The point of the play was not to slander the Bard, but to ponder a writer’s responsibility to society. According to Bond,

“If you are an unjust person, it doesn’t matter how cultured you are, how civilized you are, how capable you are of producing wonderful sayings, wonderful characters, wonderful jokes, you will destroy yourself. And so, a writer, nowadays, has to put the cards on the table for the public, and say: ‘These are the consequences of your life; they are inescapable. If you want to escape violence, you don’t say violence is wrong, you alter the conditions that create violence’”. (Bond, 1973: p 7)

Edward Bond is one of the authors who became popular in the 1960s, but it is not until the premiere in 1965 of *Saved* with its provocative scenes involving the stoning of a baby in a pram that he became more of a household name. Unlike Osborne, Wesker and Arden, who were unable to live up to expectations after their early successes, Bond’s output throughout the 70s established him as one of Britain’s major contemporary playwrights. Bond cannot be said to belong to a particular school of drama, but the influence of Bertolt Brecht and Antonion Artaud can be found in his plays. More than any other English playwright Bond has concerned himself with the problem of violence. In *Lear* (1971) for example, two people are horrifically tortured and murdered on stage, and Lear himself is blinded by a complicated contraption in a scene that is reminiscent of Kafka’s short story “*In The Penal Colony*” (1919). In his foreword to *Lear*, Bond explains the importance violence has in his plays:

I write about violence as naturally as Jane Austen wrote about manners. Violence shapes and obsesses our society, and if we do not stop being violent we have no future. People who do not want writers to write about violence want to stop them writing about us and our time. It would be immoral not to write about violence (Bond, 1971: p 11).

However, Bond does not believe that Man is intrinsically violent. Instead, he is convinced that Man tends towards violence because the way in which society works, alienates him from his peaceful nature. The boys in Bond’s play *Saved* belong to a social system that they feel no

connection to; they are vehemently repressed and vent their frustration through aggression and anger. Bond suggests that the structure of capitalism is built upon this cyclical violence; the violent behaviour of the underclass provides justification for the ruling classes to further deepen the social divide. This injustice is then the foundation from which aggression grows. Bond identifies the heart of this comprehension: “In *Saved* the young men commit their murder in the park in order to regain their self respect. Anyone who does not understand this cannot understand the contradictions and torments of living in a modern city”. (Bond, 1963: 11) Bond is not suggesting that self-enlightenment is offered by the play, but rather that in recognising, or at least trying to recognise, why his young protagonists act as they do, we can learn something fundamental about our own society. Secondly, Bond agrees with many of his Marxist colleagues and sees the root of all evil in capitalist society’s alienation of mankind, and he is particularly critical of the division of society into ruling and ruled classes. He also sees the reigning social laws as reflective of an unjust social order and thus as latently aggressive. In his own words: “In this way an unjust society causes and defines crime; and an aggressive social structure which is unjust and must create aggressive social disruption, receives the moral sanction of being ‘law and order’. Law and order is one of the steps taken to maintain injustice”. (Bond, 1971:13)

Thirdly, for Bond, the roots of violence lie in something he calls “social morality”, by which he means a form of violence that is both initially invisible and indirect, and is internalised by the individual in the course of his/her socialisation process. Thus, only a fundamental change in society can truly abolish violence. Bond in *Lear* shows that the power structures of the ruling class are astonishingly firm. One of the central motifs in the play is the wall which, as the play progresses, comes to symbolise the political power that no ruler can do without. In this play, power is based upon a complex web of violence and vicious circles of oppression. He also uses the image of an imprisoned animal in a central scene in the play, indicating that “the individual is captive to a network of oppressive social norms and thought patterns from which he must free himself to achieve true humanity” (Bond, p 77). Hope seems inappropriate in the face of Bond’s view of society as unalterable and of violence begetting violence, but Bond can nonetheless not be regarded as a pessimist and he does not regard himself as one because he never lapses into resignation and inactivity but continues to believe in the perfectibility of mankind and society. This belief shows itself especially clearly in the figure of protagonist Lear who, like his Shakespearean counterpart, undergoes a process of self-recognition and learning which eventually gives him an insight into the truth about himself and others. The turning point in his development comes in the court scene when he looks into a mirror and thinks he sees an animal in a cage. What he actually sees is the individual who has become alienated from himself, trapped in a cage constructed of norms, roles, rules and regulations that contradict his true nature. The individual must be freed from this cage, must reconnect with his true nature before society can change. Bond uses the same animal imagery as Shakespeare, but reverses its meaning. Whereas the animal in Shakespeare stands for that side of the human being which must be eradicated, so that the forces of good can win out. For Bond it stands for that part of the individual from which he/she is alienated by society. Bond does not sanction his Lear the peaceful retreat of the farmhouse, because he has to pass through additional suffering in order to swot. Lear is cognizant now of the violence which occurred on the farm (murder of Boy and the rape of Cordelia), but he does not yet grasp the foundation of it. All the images (caged animal) which cause Lear’s distress are connected with death and violence, and they finally help him to comprehend the mistakes he committed and to understand why violence erupted, “I killed so many people and never looked at their faces. But I looked at that animal” (P. 54). In the autopsy scene Lear sees dead Fontanelle, and the sight of her body brings him to understand that man is not inherently evil,

“She sleeps like a lion and a lamb, a child. The things are so beautiful. I am astonished.... If I had known this beauty and patience and care, how I could have loved her” (p 77). The blinding of Bond’s Lear by a complicated machine symbolises the scientific, technological form which cruelty takes in industrial society. But the physical blindness is also a metaphor for ‘insight’ and wisdom, something which we know from Shakespeare’s plays. Bond concentrates on the theme of violence caused by a repressive power system, where humanity is lacking and where violence originates more violence. Lear asks about his daughters, “Where does their vileness come from?” (p. 9), unable to comprehend that the terrible violence is the product of his system. Fontanelle has already suggested the answer. As she and her sister are left alone, their plans for the overthrow of their father’s regime hardening, she says, “Happiness at last! I was always terrified of him” (p 8). Fontanelle also remembers her childhood companion, a horse who was shot dead by her father because it had grown a limp. Bond implies that violence is a whirling cycle that breeds more and more, until it is not hampered entirely. Therefore, he suggests “Those who are mistreated by wrong policy often resort to violence . . . They are engulfed by a social climate in which the need for justice becomes the desire for revenge and the need to create becomes the necessity to destroy” (Int. John Tusa, 2003:74). Edward Bond has described Lear as “a very grim play” (Bond, 1971: 13). Its importance, however, does not lie in Lear’s tragic vision but in the story of one man who, against all odds, takes action to change his world. On this journey toward enlightenment, Lear undergoes tremendous suffering. Bond has said that “we develop through our problems, not just solving them, but through clashing with them” (Bond, 1971:9). In many of his plays, this friction manifests itself in violence. Some critics have charged that the violence in Lear is excessive and unnecessary. In response, Bond contends that the play accurately reflects the consequences of the abuse of power. His intention in Lear is to show how individual acts of violence and the large-scale violence of wars and power struggles alike reflect the sickness of an unjust society. Bond’s *Lear* seems to suggest that the individual who has learned from experience should begin to tear down the walls erected by him and others. However, Lear’s death appears to indicate that Bond does no longer reckon with the possibility of a non-violent solution to the problem. The play’s conclusion is a measured account of the difficulty of action in an unjust society but it also demonstrates that rational attitude is the only moral retort in such a situation. All Lear can do at the end is to live out an idea, the idea of pity, non-violence and this is all he can appeal to at the end of the play.

In Bond’s plays the individual reacts to the irrational social system in two ways, complying with the system or revolting against the system or those who stand against the oppression of society and others who fail to resist the oppression. For Bond, people who comply with the system can be the most violent of all other citizens because they are encouraged by the authority. They make use of all the technology and power and “their use of power is justified as being for the sake of the well-being of society” (Bond, 1978: 9). Bond asserts that a rational society can only be achieved by morally healthy individuals who resist the cruel system. Bond’s characters resist the system either in a silent revolt or in an actively political revolt. Bond suggested that the drive of freedom is inherent for human nature; while it can be corrupted and suppressed it tends to assert itself again and again. Therefore, they either become violent to defeat their frustration or accept the power of the system over them; they cannot conceive of existence by defying the social order”. Bond’s Len in *Saved*, the Gravedigger’s Boy in *Lear*, Leonard in *In the Company of Men* (1996), and other characters in a number of other plays provide a means to understand Bond’s aesthetic and political purposes. Len is a jumpy young man incapable of bravery; the Gravedigger’s Boy in *Lear* is

the earnest young man destroyed too early by total war; Leonard is a needy, spoiled youth destroyed by big business. There is a sense in these young people that they are just starting out; inexperienced in the social situation, they are doomed to be failures. It would be appropriate if they are dubbed as 'Bond Innocents'. They are optimistic and inquisitive souls, identifiable in art and life.

Violence is a controversial subject. It exists in a range of guises, from global, large-scale wars to trivial domestic disputes; however, it is continually present in our society. The reasons and excuses for violence are manifold and discussions about the nature of violence are ongoing. It is not easily explained but neither can it be ignored. British playwright, Edward Bond, offers some enlightening thoughts on violence in his overall dramatic strategies including his themes and formal innovation. Though the primary focus of Bond's understanding of violence is that "the cause and solution of human violence lie not in our instincts (are not inherent) but in our social relationships" (E. Kind, 1973: p 125). For instance Lens relationship with Pam even in odds, Willy and Rose's decision to stay together at the end in *The Sea*. Bond highlights in his plays that the ultimate consequence for the lack of human relations will be one that of a disruption and violence. For instance in *Saved* the violence erupted because of Pam's inefficiency to build a relationship of sympathy with her child and in *Lear* protagonist fails to build a harmonious communion with his subjects. Therefore, Bond is constantly preoccupied with the frequent patterns of violence in his plays and his major objective is to eliminate the violence and redirect his audience towards a society free of corruption, wars, injustices and violence. Bond's contribution to modern drama lies in the fact that he believes society can be changed and freed from the corrupting influences of violence. He is probably one of the finest contemporary playwrights who seem to understand the commitment of his plays to the human values.

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