



Edward Bond and Discourse of Violence : A Study of ‘Use of Images’ in the Play Lear

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Abstract

The present paper is the study of use of images in the play Lear by Edward Bond. While reworking on the Lear theme Bond reshapes the image of Lear as a chief source to comment on the plight of human societies victimized by the political whims of the ruling class. Through ‘Lear’ Bond focuses attention on the contemporary rulers who need to analyze their ideologies by thorough rational introspection. 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. 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 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.

Key words : Edward Bond, capitalism, alienation, dehumanization, social institutions

Edward Bond plays have always been a source of puzzle for his audience, readers and critics. Critics have debated the issues like the meaning of his plays, his use of imagery, and especially

the shocking display of violence on the stage. He is a playwright who strives for the innermost attainable truth, and in some respects gives a fuller vision of the past than the historian. He gains something by his greater degree of independence in the imaginative appropriation of the past. As a sensitive artist he reveals more of the essential truth of history than a historian, who is more strictly limited by the facts and must subdue his imagination to the controls of scholarship and accept the primacy of his evidence. As a playwright, he is concerned with re-enactment, resurrection, of historical material in a vital, immediate way, because he has to deal ultimately, not with bloodies abstractions, but with people on a stage who are required to move and be. This is an important point to grasp about Bond. Often seen as a despairing nihilist whose plays are filled with images of violence, he retains a stubborn faith in humanity which he calls the contradictions of "human-ness". J.R Taylor praised Edward Bond as the most technically ambitious dramatist of *The Second Wave*, who is rarely 'experimental' in the sense that he rarely tackles a style of writing for which there are no sound precedents, but who are not afraid to attempt difficult, unusual task and to seek the fresh impact through the familiar form. He further says:

Within his variety of plays, Bond retained certain distinctive stylistic features: one was his pointed, austere and polished language, and another was his use of violent images.(54)

His fascination for particular themes can also partly be explained by the socio-biographical facts of his life. Born in 1935, Bond grew up in a war-atmosphere. At the outbreak of war he was sent to countryside which was a disquieting experience for him. In an interview with the editors of Theatre Quarterly, he said that "Being put in a strange environment created a diversion between feeling and experience of things." His parents were farm labourers and lived in the countryside. Right from the beginning society seemed to him strange. Religious belief of the day, working class background, war time education all bewildered and puzzled him. When as a child he saw Donald Wolfit as Macbeth in the old Bedford Theatre, he realized that somebody was actually talking about his problems, about the life he had been living, the political society around him. He says, "I got from the play a sense of human dignity- of the value of human beings." The impression can be perceived in his characterization of Lear. He uses language metaphorically in

order to communicate his meaning and to enrich the dramatic depths of the play. He uses imagery as a powerful medium to give expression to his creative powers.

The images themselves reveal the deeper meaning. It often even resembles a second line of action running parallel to the real plot and providing a counterpart to the images on the stage. (The Development of Shakespeare's Imagery,p-89)

Bond sees man as not merely man but man in a social context. When it was pointed out to him that his plays are "structures of images", he replied:

Certainly, one of the natural abilities of a dramatist is to think in images, but this is not to escape the disciplines of intellectual thought. The images come with a notation of the truth.(Ibid-109)

The attraction the Lear myth has for Bond can be explained at different levels, in terms other than the concern with violence; violence in itself being a result of interaction amongst human beings. He finds Lear as a contemporary men trapped by his existence that is unconsciously led to an awareness of the meaning and relevance of his life. He is less concerned with the juxtaposition of good and evil and more with the parabolic element. In *Lear*, Bond shows that the power structures of the ruling class are astonishingly firm and stable. One of the central motifs in the play is the wall, which, as the play progresses, comes to symbolize 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.

The characters, especially the character of Lear, can best be understood in terms of images. The image of Lear in the play appears to be a myth about human condition that expresses the absurdity of existence. Knowledge suffering highlights the growth of Bond's Lear in terms of his

political thinking. The play opens with the king visiting the construction site and we are at once introduced to the wall, which is an image, which goes on accumulating new meanings as the play grows. It is a political necessity and a wall, which is meant to protect his people, but right in the first scene it also leads to the division with his daughters, it is almost an instrument of torture where his people are concerned. It has obliterated for the king the difference between right and wrong, life and death and utility and mercy. Though meant for purposes of defense and protection, it has in fact become a symbol of destruction. The issues are much deeper than they seem to appear at first sight. The boy reveals that he took all the men from his village for building the wall and even their condition is pitiable. As Boy reveals:

BOY: You died of work or they shot you for not working. There was a disease-

LEAR: They tried to stop that.

BOY: “Wall death’ Their feet used to swell with mud, the stink of it even when you were asleep! Living in a grave! He should come here-I’d go back to my old job and dig a grave for him! We used to dig his wall up at nights, when they were working here.(Lear-25-26)

The wall reflects various facts-its dimension hints at the use of energies at a big level, it alienates the country people from outer world. It encloses people in a sort of a prison and deprives them of their freedom. A similar mentality is obvious in Cordelia’s behaviour when she wants to force her life with her husband and keep out all outsiders (p.26). By keeping others out, she would also be keeping out compassion, understanding and common humanity. Thus at this level the image of the wall acquires the meaning of being one’s own ego. The image of the wall also represents Lear’s lack of Judgment in political terms. The issues, raised by Bond, are not private; they are concerned with Lear’s public role. His actions influence the whole society. Suffering first leads

to self-pity, then introspection and finally to a realization on the part of the protagonist. The king's sense of desolation, which is externalized through the king's talking to self, is portrayed through the images that the king uses in the play:

LEAR. My daughters have taken the bread from my stomach. I am old and too weak to climb out of this grave.

LEAR. The mouse comes out of his hole and stares. The giant wants to eat the dragon, but the dragon has grabbed the carving knife.

(Lear.17)

Lear is brought down to the condition of a tramp from that of a king in Scene V. The councilor leaves him by assuring that he will bring some food for him. Lear is alone and the stage is bare. An empty jug, a plate and a piece of bread heighten the effect that Bond wants to produce. His eating the piece of bread is a rich dramatic metaphor that Bond uses to emphasize the point that how overpowering is the nature of hunger. Bond associates this presentation of Lear's state with his pathetic speech in which he says:

My daughters have taken the bread from my stomach. They grind it with my tears and the cries of famished children—and eat. The night is a black cloth on their table and the stars are crumbs and I am a famished dog that sits on the earth and howls.

(Lear. 17)

The image produces rich effects of Lear's pitiable condition, which has reduced him to the state of a dog. His taking the piece of bread and eating it is again an action, which often can be seen in terms of a hungry dog. At this stage Lear realizes that he has grown old and weak. Dramatic

metaphor is applied by Bond for the king's moral blindness and later on his coming to self-knowledge. His repentance for whatever he has done earlier becomes clear when he says:

I am the king. I kneel by this wall. How many lives have I ended here? Go away. Go away. Go far away. Run I will not move till you go.

(Lear.66)

Lear's blindness first makes him think of physical death as an end to his pain and suffering but when once he has accepted his position as an abandoned old man he is transform into a Christ-like figure. The farmer addresses him as 'father' and he begins to relate to other people as such. He addresses them as 'children' and makes a public confession of his guilt (p.66). Lear's being taken in by the farmer is very different from the earlier protection offered by the Boy (p.25). The boy's protection is offered out of pity but on the basis of incomplete knowledge. The Boy would not have offered help to the king whom he hates and for whom he'd be willing to go back to his old job of grave digging and dig a grave (p.25). The farmer realizes the true identity of Lear but he feels:

Poor man. If you take on some place they'll beat on an' chain on. Let on be he's at home in the fields. Let on bear his cross in peace.

(Lear. 66)

Bond's play is concerned with Lear back in the house of the Boy, this time with John, Thomas and Susan in Act III. Blinded and much chastened by his own assessment of his past, he is transformed to a changed man. He tells others "I am not a king. I have no power"(p.74). The power which he now exercises, is one of the compassion, Lear has changed sides. He is now on the side of the rebels, but his methods of rebellion are different from the violent once they adopt. Bond's Lear is comparatively milder in his curses, though animal and nature imagery enters his speeches. Bond's use of imagery is also not limited or confined; he uses it at various levels. Lear's relationship with his public is clearly reflected in the lines when he says:

They are my sheep and if one of them is lost I'd take fire to hell to bring him
out. (Lear.87)

He sees himself in terms of a shepherd in charge of a flock. Corresponding to this he views his enemies in terms of wolves. When Bodice and Fontanelle declare that they are going to marry North and Cornwall, Lear tells them that they have deceived them and the only aim of North and Cornwall in marrying them is to get over the wall. He says: Can't you see they only want to get over the wall? They'll be like wolves in a fold. (Lear.6)

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 him, 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 stands for that part of the individual from which he/she is alienated by society. The image of a caged creature is also eloquently used by Bond to heighten the pathos of his Lear's passionate frenzy in Act II as:

No, that's not the kind.. This is a little cage of bars with an animal in it. No,
no, that's not the King! Who shut that animal in that cage? Let it out. Have you
seen its face behind the bars? There's a poor animal with blood on its head and
tears running down its face.

(Lear.35)

The highly charged nature of the image makes Bodice's response extra ordinarily shocking: 'Yes I've locked this animal in its cage and I will not let it out! (35)

In the trial scene the king sees himself in terms of a bird whose wings have been cut. He intermixes the animal and the bird images into one and sees himself as a helpless figure. Bodice gives Lear a mirror with the expectation that he would recognize himself as a king because of the

belief that mad people can recognize their original selves when they are made to see their image in a mirror, but the human condition. He sees his image in the form of an animal that is being mutilated. He says:

Look! Look! Have pity. Look at its claws trying to open the cage. It's dragging its broken body over the floor. You are cruel! Cruel!

(Lear. 35)

The house of the Boy reflects pastoral comfort. Life is quiet and peaceful there. But Lear is a man who carries pestilence wherever he goes. When he enters their world their peaceful life is destroyed. Ruby cohn comments on the use of animal Imagery that "These diverse images accumulate into a power-ful illustration of Shakespeare's great line: "Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor bare forked animal as thou art."(194). This "poor bare forked animal," especially as depicted in Lear's metaphor of an animal in a cage, effectively describes the condition of the individual in society; however, the metaphor must be extended if it is to serve as a description of the relationship of men to each other.

Images of dismemberment occur frequently. When Bodice and Fontanelle torture Warrington, they wish that his organs should be chopped off. They order the soldiers to cut his tongue. Fontanelle says, "Kill his hands! Kill his feet!" (p.14). Bodice pokes needles into his ears; the treatment of the Warrington torture scene in Lear is characteristic.

FONTANELLE Use the boot! (SOLDIER *kicks him*) lump on him! (*She pushes Soldier.*) A lump on his head!

(Lear.14)

Their frustration is reflected in their actions. When they come to know that their husbands have defeated the king and hence also their schemes of marrying Warrington they took for satisfaction through revenge and drive a sadistic pleasure from conflicting pain on the former object of their

love. When Warrington is tortured his loyalty gives way and he makes an attempt to kill the king. Warrington and the Concillor both desert Lear.

Bond in his interpretation compresses and unifies the various thinking of the past and by this way his use of the Lear myth becomes relevant in its immediate context and also at the same time, represents its historical continuity. Through his reworking the audience is made aware of the king's relationship between a myth and its significance in understanding the present experience. Bond's effort involves not only the reinterpretation of a past myth from thematic point of view; through it he gets a chance to evaluate a tradition with the continuity of certain feeling and concepts. The value of man as a human being is sacrificed at the altar of power and this power acts as a divisive force between the king and his people and between the father and his children. Bond's play is pervaded by the image of barrenness except in the house gravedigger's Boy. The very first sentence of the play begins with the importance of water. Though the setting is outdoor nowhere any signs of fertility can be seen.

The blinding of Bond's Lear by a complicated machine symbolizes the scientific, technological form which cruelty takes in industrial society. Bond makes use of the imagery of sight and blindness to describe the king's moral blindness. In the preface of the play Bond says that:

Lear is blind till they take his eyes away, and by than he has begun to see, to understand.

(Preface, *Lear*)

But the physical blindness is also a metaphor for 'insight' and wisdom. Lear seems to suggest that the individual who has learned from experience should begin to tear down the walls erected by him and others. The figure of a ghost, who exists in a shadow world between life and death, is the perfect image for a double which operates on the border between reality and hallucination, partaking of both and neither. Partly an imaginative construct of Lear's nostalgic desire for a Golden Age and partly an independent being, the Ghost reflects Lear's own lack of a critical evaluation of reality.

Ruby Cohn is quite correct in her characterization of Bond's theatre as "fabulous" (185).Indeed, Bond's work develops a resolving man's fable of our times. Where the traditional Fables of

Aesop use Animals to demonstrate human foibles, Bond's modern fables utilize a similar if more subtle, version of this technique by surrounding characters with images of dehumanization or metaphors connecting them to animals.(Castillo-78). Lear is one of the examples. The play is full of images which confine, images of the wall, of the cage, of the prison, of the straitjacket and finally of power. It is only when Lear offers himself as a sacrifice in the final scene that he becomes a symbol of freedom. The action moves in a cyclic manner: it is like the parable of the man and the bird where the pain of the bird is transferred to the man. Bond's use of stories and images of Bible communicates a rule of life and moral code. Bond presents a direct representation of violence on the stage, which he thinks a fit medium to expose the evil effects of the violence in society. The meaning of the play can be fathomed only when the outer layers are removed when the meaning of the images helps the reader to make a breakthrough. Thoughts are much deeper then they appear to be at first sight.

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