

Revisiting History & Creating Humanness: A Study of Edward Bond's Play *At the Inland Sea*

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Abstract - Edward Bond 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. He is concerned with re-enactment, resurrection, of historical material in a vital and immediate way but in fact they reflect a deep truth about the nature of history. The present paper is the study of play *At the Inland Sea* in which he takes its audience and main character Boy from his bedroom to the inside of an Auschwitz gas chamber as cyanide gas chokes its packed victims to death and back to the present again. By this type of presentation he feels to think rationally and tries to discover the causes of present problems.

Index Terms - Humanness, Imagination, Reality, Humanity, Past, History, Future

I. INTRODUCTION

Edward Bond is concerned with the strong association between the past and the present. 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 an Interview with Philip Reports, Bond himself outlines this idea as follows

It became necessary for me to understand the situation more and to see why things went wrong...And my plays since then have been an exploration of the problems of the being a human being in the twentieth century and try to find out why things go wrong and how can we correct them. (Bond 1985:65)

Tony Coult in his book **The Plays of Edward Bond** highlights the reason behind the social and political problems of the present:

Bond writes about the past in order to discover the causes of the present problems. (Coult 1977:36) He claims that proper guidance for the humanity can be provided only if we feel "the need to understand and interpret rationally our past in order to use the experiences in our past and not to repeat the mistakes committed." (Klein:1995:408)

Bond examines the past and foretells what will happen in the future through the medium of the present. Often seen as a despairing nihilist whose plays are filled with images of violence, he retains a stubborn faith in humanity: what he calls the contradictions of "human-ness". This learning can be pointed in his play **At the Inland Sea**. The play also performs an exciting act of synthesis. The play is about Imagination, and its absolute centrality to the state of being human, but it also sets out consciously to create the very imaginative power in its audience that is its subject matter and Imagination is its subject and also means for interacting with the play. Bond links the importance of Imagination to being human by showing it working in the transition from childhood to adulthood. On the other hand he takes historical situation to put a question in front of reader to ask 'What it means to die in a gas chamber?'

The essential link between Theatre and Imagination, for Bond, is not simply that Theatre uses the audience's Imagination to function, but that Theatre itself is Imagination, made concrete and vivid in real time and space. The Boy's bedroom is his theatre. The play's beginning is bone-simple. A Boy gets ready to school to sit exams. His mom bustles around, anxious for him, proud of him. Mom is anxious that he won't pass because he doesn't concentrate. The image of Mother presents that she is aware of 'what's at stake in the harsh world outside'. She has faced the hard realities of life. She knows it is an unacceptable system but she speaks for it all the time. She comments upon the rebellion that rises in a woman's heart against working conditions in many a time smothered by the authority of the male in the family or by the pressure of circumstance. Every time she comments on her condition. Her image conveys the frustration of the working lady. When the Boy is staring out of window, then, into this ultra-domestic,

recognizable world, extraordinary, the utterly unforeseen comes:

The Boy starts to tremble slightly. He studies the mug with both hands and wedges it against its chest. His head rises a little as if he looked at something beyond the room but his eyes focus on space just in front of him.

(At the Inland Sea.2)

The Boy, who stares out of window, finds a new world of imagination. A Woman has risen from the bed. She is in ragged clothes, and carries a baby wrapped in a bundle. She is the very image of atrocity and disaster, and her first words, half sung, are:

The world's a stone. The world's a stone.

(At the Inland Sea.2)

In this extraordinary moment all are the built-in clues that tell the audience how to work with the whole play. The play presents a world where the extraordinary invades the ordinary; where the past-or the geographically distant present-can intrude upon the everyday. In Bond's theatre, actions create their own logic and create the imaginative tools with which one reads the performance. Through this image of physical action, he makes it possible for this kid in a room to be the cause of profound and apparently miraculous happenings. Although he is so ordinary, but he can identify the, sense of something of extraordinary in people. It is also to deal, at some level of people's mind, with what is causing this thing to happen. There are implied questions, whose answering stimulates the juices of imaginative understanding that are necessary for the whole play.

Already the Boy is moving into a different mode, a different imaginary world. His Mother, bustling around him, notices the proffered cup, but not that the tea is spilt. A little later she sees the spilt tea and tries to take the cup away. In the process of pulling it away from the Boy who is no longer 'there', the cup gets broken. The mundane agent of mediation between the Boy and the ordinary world of schools and supermarkets he lives in- the cup- is broken. Later in the play, a man is described deliberately spilling crystals from a tin into a cement room full of people and so there is a tension between the two that asks a question. So the cup isn't just an abstract symbol, but it is part of a theatre language of meaning that the play creates for us to understand it. Nothing in the play is meaningless and the play creates its own keys of understanding. Because the story is, in a sense, about the making of theatre itself and with the Boy's imagination channeling extraordinary phenomena into the stage of his bedroom and the conventions that govern how this happens are not fixed. That real Woman from the real and terrible past who turns up in a Boy's bedroom is not a sample of pigment of his imagination, but she is there because of her need for survival. Her need for justice is overwhelming and she stands

for all the victims, all the dead and damaged of the age of power. Even more so, image of Old Woman in Scene IV appears from some distant future to cast a mocking light on the obscenities of the twentieth century. However once these events are enacted as theatre, as living, feeling metaphors, the logic becomes the story telling logic of theatre.

The image of the Old Woman in Scene IV changes the conventional ground rules again. This time, the Boy's Mother can see her but it is as if he has infected his Mother with this power in a way that makes sense as a theatre fact, if not as physical or even metaphysical logic. As the Boy, shocked, tells her what is happening/has happened in the gas chamber, the Old Woman starts to laugh. She laughs not out of cruelty and indifference, but apparently out of sheer astonishment that such horror could ever have been committed. The boy says about the people in the tin that:

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

(At the Inland Sea.27)

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

The Old Woman has her own store of atrocity stories, which she tells, and reduce her to helpless laughter as well as forcing, at the very least, profoundly disturbing smiles and laughter from the audience. When the Boy can stand no more of this, the Old Woman so knowing, so sorted, lifts her smock. Beneath is all the evidence that her sense of comic absurdity of human evil is not naive or ignorant. She wears the history of the world underneath her white smock. It is 'a dress, filthy, bloody, torn, scorched, soot marked, foul with corruption'. Images and stories of disaster and atrocity are caked upon it. It is a piece of pure theatre design, simple and rich, that conveys meaning rather than decorating the action. Now the Boy's Mother becomes a child herself, crouching beneath the smock to touch the scenes of devastations, to learn, at least for a moment that her own sufferings and anxieties are shared. When at last the Old Woman makes to leave, she reveals who, or what, she is:

He thinks I'm Old. I'm not yet born. One day I will be. One day I will live on this earth.

(At the Inland Sea.29)

The challenge that the Old Woman 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. It is a moment of calm and knowledge, and it comes about because the Old Woman has come into the theatres of the Mother's, and the Boy's mind. She leaves the room, sobered and serious. It is as if her laughter was at first uncontrolled, but now her reasoning

has brought her back to earth. In the space of calm created by her presence, the Boy knows that, though he has to take responsibility for the past that includes the concentration camps, he cannot change history. This is not the world of back to the Future. He knows that the baby died with his mother. In Scene V, he is back once again in the gas chamber dying, and although horror pours back in, he has a chance at least of learning from it.

After the Boy's visit to the death chamber and his struggle to deal with the unimaginable horror of what he and the audience are imagining, he returns to his bedroom, his world, and his everyday life. In the end, his experience becomes a rite of passage into adulthood and he enters into full humanity through it. By this imaginary journey, Bond in a way, opens a possibility of learning and transformation. Like Artaud, Bond's technique is shock treatment. He bombards the audience with powerful images in order to make them to react emotionally, and generate strong emotions.

In drama imagination seeks the extreme situations, which will take its audience to the limits of meaning, which is where humanness is defined. It takes into the extremity of the self. It seeks to show how people must finally come to the extreme situations in which they lose every illusion about themselves yet hold on to their humanness or suffer what follows when they know they have lost it because that is the only way they can hold on to it. The characters in the play, the actors and the audience, define themselves in their reactions to these extreme situations. It is only in this extremity that the radical need to the human is found and humanness created.

Jenny S.Spencer in **Dramatic Strategies of the Plays of Edward Bond**, emphasizes the element of historical consciousness in his Plays: "Bond's Plays immerse actors and audiences in questions involving history and politics that more popular playwrights may not prefer to face." (Spencer,2006:14) In the preface of play **The Bundle** Bond's introduction titled **A Note on the Dramatic Method**, he states:

Play should deal; either comically or seriously, with situations accounts and characters, which concern the audience in their daily life. But a dramatist need not always deal with the present. The past is also an institutional owned by society. Our understanding of the past will change with our developing consciousness. This is not a partisan rewriting of history but a moral discovery of it.(*The Bundle*,1996:130)

In his essay titled **History** Bond comments on the nature of truth in History: "The architect knows that a roof is supported by the building's foundation... in history-like the physical laws of nature comes from foundation.(Bond, 1978:111) For him, the purpose of theatre is to enable audience to identify, imagine and understand problems which are encountered in everyday life. It gives individuals a great opportunity to stop being ignorant about themselves and the world that surrounds them. It is playwrights task to hold up a mirror and to make

individual see short-comings as society, and individuals, so that individuals can improve themselves, both personally and collectively. The purpose is clear in his autobiographical poem **A Writer's Story**:

I am a citizen of Auschwitz and a citizen of
Hiroshima
Of the place where the evil did evil and the
place where the good did evil
Till there is justice there are no other places on
earth:
There are only these two places
But I am also a citizen of a just world still to
be made (Bond 2000, 2).

Bond's subjective review of the events of history through his dramatic imagination and innovative presentation leads to various ideological questions.(Shodhganga:271) In Bond's dramas imagination seek the extreme situations, which will take audience to the limits of meaning, where humanness is defined. It takes audience into the extremity of the self. It seeks to show how people must finally come to the extreme situations in which they lose every illusion about themselves yet hold on to their humanness or suffer what follows when they know they have lost it because that is the only way they can hold on to it. The characters in the play - the actors and the audience - define themselves in their reactions to these extreme situations. It is only in this extremity that the radical need to the human is found and humanness created.

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