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Violence and Surrogate Victims in Edward Bond's Plays

ABSTRACT

What is most striking about Edward Bond's plays is his unconventional representation of visible violence and insanity on a Gothic scale. His Gothic impulse finds its most intense manifestation in his treatment of varied forms of aggressivity. In other words, Bond's refusal of the conventional limits and his critique of society is located primarily within a Gothic structuring of the elements of violence and madness. The main argument of the article is that Bond challenges all misleading rationalist and realist interpretations, myths, and fallacies of violence and dismantles them through the concept of surrogate victims of aggression and irrationality. To substantiate the argument, the article employs Jean-Marie Domenach's concept of vague aggressivity, and chance victims to reveal the real horror of violence in all its transgressive excesses, ambivalence, and graphic visuality in the modern world.

Keywords: Violence, Victims, Politics, Gothic, aggression

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Introduction

Bond's plays deeply probe political, economic, and societal norms and values in provocative and thought-provoking ways for which he has often been compared to such contemporary British playwrights as Pinter, Brenton, Osborne, and Arden who profusely use violence and cruelty in their works. As Bond deploys violence as a form of monstrosity and irrationality, the lens of violence can explain more effectively the social political injustices and other forms of irrationality in Bond's plays and relate it to his political vision more clearly. John Worthen (1975) in "Endings and Beginnings: Edward Bond and the Shock of Recognition," contends that Bond's use of violence in his plays is not intended to horrify the audience; rather, it is a dramatic device to give the audience a shock that eventually leads them towards self-recognition and an awareness of the world they live in (6). Violent situations in his plays are properly contextualized and emanate logically from the situations initially presented. Even endings are a logical corollary of the initial situations and appear recognizable.

In Bond's play *The Pope's Wedding* (1977),the play's main character Scopey kills an old recluse Alen without any sound motive. This instance of motiveless malignity can be explained in terms of Jean-Marie Domenach's (1981) idea of vague aggressivity on "a chance antagonist." She argues that the pent-up aggression of "the common man is 'let out' in many different ways, expressed through vague feelings of aggressiveness, which all too often become focused" on a surrogate victim (p.34). Paulo Freire (1970) also regards this tendency of the oppressed to strike out at their fellow human beings as a manifestation of a "type of horizontal violence" (p.62), which can be defined as a form of violence of the oppressed against their own kind. Freire (1970) further cites the example of the "'astonishing waves of crime in North Africa' when 'the niggers beat each other up'" (qtd. in Freire 62). Although Freire gives the example of the aggressiveness of the colonized man against his own people, his main argument is that since the oppressed cannot clearly perceive their circumstances, they tend to strike at people of their own kind. It is interesting to analyze how Bond's plays integrate these ideas of horizontal, "home-made" (Mertens, 1981), and vague aggressivity into a complex web (p. 215). For Scopey, Alen is a chance antagonist on whom Scopey vents outs his unmeasured fury. The absence of any lack of motive for murder is an instance of unreasoning violence as Scopey fails

to find a reason for killing the reclusive man and yet he kills him. It is an act as irrational as the Greeks' attack on Troy.

As in *The Pope's Wedding*, the baby in the stoning of the baby scene in *Saved* is a "chance antagonist" on whom the vague horizontal aggression is "let out." Likewise, Hatch's hacking of velvet curtains in *The Sea* is another such example of dormant aggression. His attack on Colin's corpse later in the play is yet another example of how this violence is vented out on a random surrogate antagonist. In *The Crime of the Twenty-first Century* Sweden who himself is a victim of human violence releases his pent-up aggression on the poor mad woman Hoxton who has taken refuge on a wasteland. He slashes her arms, stabs her in the back, and finally slashes her breast. Like Scopey and the rowdy youths, Sweden also fails to find answer to the question of why he killed her (pp. 252-55; sc. 7). In Bond's (2003) most recent play *Innocence*, one of the characters, the poor Ancient Crone, finds a baby in a carrier bag abandoned by the Woman, the child's real mother. She takes it out of the bag and when the Woman claims that it is her baby, the Ancient Crone refuses to give it back to her. Instead, she slashes the baby's forehead repeatedly. In short, random objects such as the baby, the velvet curtains, Colin's corpse and other oppressed people are chance objects, "surrogate victim[s]" or "random victim[s]," as Castillo (1986) calls them, (pp. 84-5) which allow the aggressor to vent out his ambivalent feelings of aggression, which may have been lying dormant in them, on other victims of the oppressed community.

Another concept that lends complexity to Bond's treatment of violence and is closely related to the ideas of horizontal violence and vague aggression is Hay and Robert's concept of "displacement activity." While discussing the deliberate ambiguity with which Bond treats the death of the Tramp in *Stone*, Hay and Roberts (1978)argue that since the Man in the play fails to direct his rage at "the real cause for his sufferings and frustrations (his self-imposed burden), he turns against another victim like himself" (p. 227). They term it a "displacement activity" as the violence is directed against a chance antagonist, a scapegoat victim. This concept of "displacement activity" is similar to Domenach's concept of "chance antagonist" (p. 34) on which the common man vents out his aggression during brawls and riots. Although Hay and Roberts in their critical analysis refer only to *Stone,* such displacement activities are scattered throughout Bond's entire dramatic corpus. In *The Swing* Skinner's aggression is another example of this kind of displacement

violence when Skinner's aggressivity becomes focused on a chance victim Fred who, Skinner imagines, has raped Greta.

Bond's *Early Morning* (1977) also dramatizes the enigmatic and complex nature of violence. Set in a cannibalistic heaven the play's world is inhabited by figures who are ceaselessly devouring one another, eating, and raping themselves apparently for any lack of motive. Bond sets into motion the Gothic impulse by presenting cannibalism and rape as the most primitive, complex, and enigmatic forms of violence, which establish the relation of Bond's plays to the classical dramatic worlds of Euripides and Seneca. Like his early works, Bond's subsequent plays also reveal the same ambivalence and complexity of violence. In *The Pope's Wedding* Bond (1977) does not provide any finite answer to why Scopey kills Alen. Likewise, the unnamed protagonist in *Stone*kills the Tramp for no sound reason. He just vents his aggression on someone he encounters during his journey. Likewise, in *Lear*, *Narrow Road to the Deep North*, *The Worlds*, and *Jackets* he delineates violence in all complex manifestations of coercion, revolutions, counter-revolutions, and terrorism. The complexity and ambivalence of violence is nowhere more evident than in *The Swing* where Greta's rape is not rationalized and is left ambiguous. But the penultimate complexity of violence is exemplified in the scene where the alleged rapist Fred is tied to the stage platform and bulleted by the stage audience which applaud the incident as they participate in the shooting as a part of entertainment while the response of the live audience to the shooting of Fred remains ambivalent.

Violence in Bond's recent plays *Coffee*, *The Crime*, *Innocence*, *A Window*, and *The Balancing Act* is equally problematic. Violence and aggression in these plays is presented as an evil, as a threat to civilization as Smith (2007, p. 100) argues, but Bond problematizes the issue of human aggressivity by raising questions about the origins of "evil" within civilization. The scene in *The Sea* where Hatch hysterically attacks Colin's corpse under the delusion that Colin is an alien that has come to capture their earth graphically portrays the elusiveness of evil and the threat that it signifies. The menace that humanity is facing, perhaps, is not external but internal. Through Hatch's character Bond dismantles these thematic traps that hold conventional view of violence. Bond's treatment of the phenomenon in these plays demystifies the notional traps of aggression which misleadingly overlook its enigmatic nature. His plays exemplify the idea that there is no monolithic interpretation of violence and that it is misleading to reduce violence to simple definitions and dogmas and also

that the threat that aggression poses to humanity is not from without but from within. As Heitmeyer and Hagan (2005) rightly argue that the central paradox of the age remains: "Whether it repeatedly devours its own postulates of reason and cultural achievements (in the form of processes of recognition, for example), and so constantly releases further violence that manifests itself in many different individual, collective, and state variants" (6).

Heitmeyer and Hagan's (2005) statement draws attention to another feature of violence in Bond's dramatic world: its paradoxical dynamics, which lend violence all its complexity. Pierre Mertens (1981) states that the violence that is generally referred to these days and which makes the headlines is "almost invariably that of the rebel, the 'desperado'. . . but the "context of this violence" is generally "not mentioned." In reporting such violence, he continues, the media simply reflect "the ideological stance adopted by the ruling power." Mertens' main argument is that the violence of the dissidents is, in fact, often no more than a retaliation in response to "prior violence, which, although less obvious, is as profound as it is insidious, because it is embodied in an institution." Mertens uses the term "home-made violence of 'amateur' retaliation as contrasted with the 'professional' violence practiced "by a regime which, by its abuses of power, has shown itself to be oppressive" (215). Bond's plays dramatize this central paradox of violence which presents acts of violence that can have different connotations and consequences in different social contexts and political systems. Many of his plays hinge on the central Gothic element of paradox. In *Early Morning* the central paradox is that the perpetrators of violence are its victims too. In *The Pope's Wedding* the oppressed become the oppressors when they turn violence upon a defenseless old man. In *Lear* the victims become the tyrants when Cordelia overthrows the dictatorial regime of Bodice and Fontanelle and eventually becomes an oppressor like them. In *The Worlds* Trench who is the perpetrator of economic violence against his workers becomes its victim when the terrorists abduct him. It is his encounter with the terrorists that shows Trench the true picture of a world where violence and terrorism are rife and where the poor are starving. The line "The rich are getting ready to blow it up. Terrorists threaten with guns? We do it with bombs. One well-heeled American with his finger on the button" (82; part two; sc. 6) perfectly sums up the paradox of victim/victimizer binary. Through the dramatization of these paradoxes of violence, Bond dismantles the institutionalized concepts of violence which portray violence either as a pathologized, personalized state or reality, or present

it in simplistic perpetrator/victim structure and a morality that clearly identifies good and evil.

Apart from its complexity and paradoxical ambivalence, the physicality of the experience of violence in Bond's plays is carried to Gothic extremes and excesses. Fred Botting (1996) defines Gothic literature as "a writing of excess" (Introduction 1). He further says: "violence is not only put on display but threatens to consume the world of civilized and domestic values" as it emerges as "the awful spectre of complete social disintegration in which virtue cedes to vice, reason to desire, law to tyranny" (Introduction4-5).Nick Groom (2012) in *The Gothic* quotes an excerpt from the appalling tale of "Lamkin" or "Long Lankin" which tells of the cold blooded torture of a baby simply to rouse his mother, the lady of the house:" 'We'll prick him, and prick him / all over with a pin…' // And the nurse held the basin / for the blood to run in" (qtd. in Groom,p. 35). This appalling extract from a ballad serves as an uncanny verse parallel to the visual act of stoning of the baby in Bond's *Saved* (19). The graphic horror of the killing of an innocent victim is uncompromising in its gruesome description:

BARRY. Is it a girl?

PETE. Yer wouldn't know the difference.

BARRY. 'Ow d'yer get 'em t'sleep?

PETE. Pull their 'air.

COLIN. Eh?

PETE. Like that.

He pulls its[Baby's]hair.

COLIN. That 'urt.

They Laugh.

The rowdy youths even throw the baby's dirty nappy in the air; spit in its face, hit, and punch it, and all the while they are giggling and laughing. The scene is steeped in the horror of unmeasured pain that the hapless child must have undergone:

MIKE. Still awake.

PETE. Ain' co-operatin'

BARRY. Try a pinch.

MIKE. That ought a work.

BARRY. Like this.

He pinches the baby. (75-77; sc. 6)

Pete is the most violent of all as he punches the baby and jerks the pram violently which knocks the grin off the baby's face (p. 78; sc. 6). The

horrifying visuality and corporeality of violence in pushing, spinning, pulling, and pinching the baby in the play as well as in verse narrative constitutes a form of unprovoked aggression that slowly builds but defies any clear, rational explanation-- a haziness that defeats clarity. The visuality of scenes of violence in Bond's world has obvious Gothic undertones. In *Early Morning* cannibalism and self-rape emerge as not only the most complex and enigmatic but also the most visual amplified forms of violence. Bond's placement of cannibalistic activity in the heart of enlightened Victorian England makes Bond's view of violence a visual statement about the dark side of modernity. The graphic nature of eating of flesh and bones is an example of graphic violence. Likewise, gouging out of Lear's and Sweden's eyes, torturing of Warrington, Hatch's attack on Colin's corpse, the stoning of the baby, slashing and hanging of the baby in *Innocence* are some more examples of Bond's graphic presentation of visible excesses of violence.

Bond's visual catalogue of violent episodes continues in his recent plays: *Olly's Prison*, *Coffee*, *The Crime of the Twenty-first Century*, *The Balancing Act*, and *A Window*. The graphicality of violence in Bond nullifies all the rational narratives of progress and exemplifies "the murderous potential of dynamics of coercion and discipline" (qtd. in Eisner:41). In *Olly's Prison*, Frank who is a representative of destructive force of authority asks Oliver to break everything in the room. Oliver obeys the order and breaks the TV, glasses, chair, furniture, and china ornaments. This lesson in violence is not enough as Frank suddenly attacks Oliver viciously, hits him in the face, and kicks him (Bond, 2003:63; part three; sec. 5). Suddenly, the room changes into a "large grey space" (65). Frank hits Oliver repeatedly as a result of which Oliver goes blind. While Frank exults in Oliver's blindness, the victim of aggression, "crawls round the floor in a circle trying to reach the door" (p. 68), and finally sits on the ground "like a doll. . . . The bloody rag is on his knee" (p. 70). In the play's final scene, Oliver is sitting in a high chair in the hospital ward. His bandaged head "gauzed unevenly so that parts of it show through" clearly recalls the bandaged figures of Warrington, Harry, Sweden, and Derek. Violence perpetrated on Oliver and all other bandaged characters is a graphic reminder of the institutional violence of the ruling authority.

Likewise, in *Coffee* the famished woman stifles her daughter because she cannot provide for her. When the Girl tells her mother that they will have a feast in the forest, the old Woman mutters to herself, walking and hugging herself instead of responding to her daughter. She puts her

hands on the sheet over her daughter's head who is continuously talking about food and feast on the table. The Girl asks her mother to put some food, just a "bit" under the sheet and further tells her that she will play afterwards. "*The Woman tightens the sheet round the Girl's neck*"(Bond, 2003:155; The Second House). The mother tells Gregory that the Girl is sick and starving but she is still alive. She then requests him to help her kill the girl as the poor soul will find relief only in death. "*She presses one hand on the sheet over the* Girl*'s face*" and the sheet becomes "still"(p. 157). The Woman eventually strangles her daughter as she cannot see the poor girl waste away by hunger and famine inch by inch. The graphic nature of this act of visible violence makes the Woman a murderer but the real cause behind the murder is hunger and starvation. When Gregory tells Nold that she killed the Girl, the Woman says: "I forced 'unger down 'er for years. Yer came 'n said yer'd feed 'er. Yer was famine itself. Put 'er through that again—dirty bits 'a bread like foot prints t' 'er grave? She's better off like this. She deserves it" (159; The Second House). She prefers to kill her daughter than see her prolonged slow death by starvation and the graphicality of the scene of killing enhances the destructive nature of the exploitative human world with its tools of destruction.

In *The Crime*, a similar graphic scene of a victim killing another innocent person underscores the nature of horizontal violence of the oppressed against their own fellow human beings, equally vulnerable like them. In the play, Sweden who himself is a victim of war kills another hapless woman Hoxton who has been living on a wasteland with only one working water tap to sustain her. Sweden also comes to the same place for refuge. He asks her to help him and when she sees Sweden waving a knife in the air, she agrees but then he tells her that it is now too late. He rips her clothes, slashes her arms, and stabs her in the back. He holds the knife in her back, and then drives it in her chest. He even licks his hand that has the poor victim's blood on it (Bond, 2003: 253; sc. 7). The horror of the killing does not stop here. He holds her jaw and makes her taste her own blood. Sweden (*turns to face* Hoxton): Not dead. (*He gropes back to her and stamps on her*) Dead? (254; sc. 7). He even dances with the dead woman-- "*her body sways, her feet drag on the ground*" (255; sc. 7). The Gothicity of violence in all these scenes is clearly reflected in the macabre description of one victim slaughtering another. It also reveals the pernicious growth of aggression and how one form of violence leads to other more sinister forms of destruction that afflict and engulf everyone. Bond particularly attacks the "normality" and "reduction" traps in these scenes of graphic violence that either trivialize

violence by presenting it as natural or reduce it to personal characteristics of individuals and withdraw from the great complexity of the phenomenon. He presents a savage picture of abuse and irrationality through tangible forms of aggressiveness which beget wars and other ills such as madness, injustice, hunger, and starvation. However, by presenting violence in its naked visible forms, Bond runs the risk of making his plays melodramatic. But the Gothic physicality of violence in Bond's plays is not melodramatic; rather, it is presented as an irrational act of the so-called civilized world. Melodrama imparts to audience a momentary sensation and evokes an emotional response to onstage violent spectacle; it never urges its audience to rationalize an act. Contrarily, when presented on the Bondian stage, visible violence and madness emerge as extremes of irrationality, but Bond divests them of their melodramatic and sensational elements by urging people to contextualize violence and redefine its traditional concept.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be argued that Bond's discourse on violence develops through hisportrayal of surrogate victims. It is through his chance victims that Bond engages not only with rational fallacies that surround the phenomenon of violence but also tests the limitations of his own rational theatre. In questioning the limits of reason and critical approaches to aggression, Bond's random victims of violence afford another way to approach the problem of violence which can help the world understand its complexity and develop its typology. Bond's narrative of violence developed through these victims acquires a powerful political voice to serve a political purpose.

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