

ACROSS THE BORDERS OF MADNESS: THE 'WASTE LAND' OF EDWARD BOND IN GREAT PEACE

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Abstract

Edward Bond, l'enfant terrible of British contemporary theatre, depicts violence and the injustices of our world in all his plays since the sixties. The playwright is determinant in his criticism to the present drama far from reality and the needs of questions for society. In *Great Peace*, the third play of *The War Plays* trilogy, Bond presents a 'waste land' with apocalyptic shades after a nuclear bombing. Humanity has disappeared and a Woman, with no name, begins her journey to self-knowledge with an imagined bundle. Across the borders of madness, she is forced to survive in this desert to understand the killing of her baby. This 'mother courage' figure will provide the audience the possibility to reflect upon maternity not as a blood tie but as a connection to justice on the community's benefit. Bond proposes the deconstruction of the traditional mother and a redefinition of the term in which solidarity and social awareness would replace self-interest.

Keywords: Edward Bond, great peace, contemporary theatre, motherhood

Introduction

Since the scandal of *Saved* in the sixties, Edward Bond has always argued the topic of violence in his plays. Bond's techniques are created not simply to depict the present but to make us critically aware of how and why we can respond to the past. Bond's treatment of history investigates about the possibilities of change in all his plays since history, for him, is a test to learn.

The War Plays' trilogy (*Red, Black and Ignorant, The Tin Can People and Great Peace*) presents the scenario of a 'waste land' with apocalyptic shades. The post nuclear environment of the plays reflects the atmosphere of the historical period when it was written. The beginning of the eighties saw the debate about nuclear weapons and strong discussions about the Thatcher administration in this respect. In 1983, Ian McEwan wrote about the fears of the common people in his famous book *Or Shall We Die?:*

"I was struck by how deeply the lives of individuals had been shaken by the new cold war [...] People described the pointlessness of planning ahead, a creeping sense of the irrelevance of all things they valued against the threat of annihilation" (McEwan, 1983: 9). This is the feeling and the background of the trilogy but *The War Plays* seem more contemporary than ever.

I.

The two first parts of the trilogy set the scene and provide descriptions of horrors after nuclear bomb devastation. Starving people gorging in the ruins depict the extreme of consumerism. As Howard points out: "The Tin Can People are more than Bond's image of suicidal materialism; the play is given nauseating weight by their language, for it dwells remorselessly on the past; they are fixated with the dead and the physical horror of the catastrophe" (1996: 137).

The starting point of *Great Peace* is based on a paradox. A soldier returns home with orders to choose a baby from his street and kill it. Two babies live in his street: his mother's and a neighbour's but unexpectedly the soldier kills his mother's child. From this beginning, Bond depicts a horrific world in which humanity has disappeared after the nuclear disaster to the point that characters are nameless: WOMAN, SOLDIER, SON or DAUGHTER. This dust land is presented as a kind of dead environment in which life should sprout. Bond points out:

The characters are not named because although they are not symbols their lives are social forces –and the forces are clarified by the crises. But there is another reason. They have lost their names because they have lost themselves. Names are a sign of our humanity. In a nuclear age we still have to create our humanity (2002: 361)

The tragedy of Woman in the play becomes the traumatic acceptance of the killing of her son by his own brother. This dilemma with Herodian traces provides the opportunity to begin a journey to social conscience. For Bond, this violence against the socially marginalized portrays the unjust system of our world. The reversal of the expected killing blurs the boundary between inside (family) and outside (stranger) as a deconstruction technique. Bond suggests a more humanitarian concept of maternity beyond blood ties; a definition of a social mother. The Woman becomes the guide of the audience in a journey to sanity through madness in this wilderness scenario. Different outsiders along her evolution will force her to confront her implication in the killing of her baby and the need to change the reduced concept of family to a broader nucleus.

Through a wasteland of radiation and a nuclear winter, the end of the World becomes the new landscape on stage. Absolutely traumatized by her son's action, Bond's Woman is discovered wandering alone, ragged with a

false baby. The creation of the bundle stands as the central image of *Great Peace* and the clear representation of her dead baby. In an endless solitude, all her hope is concentrated on receiving a sign of life from the bundle and fantasises with its voice as her last possibility to survive.

In a series of parable episodes, the Woman meets other survivors but in this bare desert relationships remain silent only forced by hunger and robbery. The central scene of the play narrates the encounter between the Woman and Pemberton, a colleague soldier of her son. Pemberton, the only name in *Great Peace*, forms part of a group of soldiers with filthy uniforms and rags. They believe they are dead but still pound human bones into soup in an inexplicable need of survival: "*The SOLDIERS go into a dry hard hysteria. Each stays shut himself. They rock their bodies and cry into the ground- they glance at each other only once or twice*" (Bond, 2002: 171).

Their constant hunger embodies the emptiness of their souls and the need to replace the hollowness of their existence. With the collage technique, flashback images project their suffering:

SOLDIER 4. Woman with a dead nipper
SOLDIER 2. Patted its 'ead.
SOLDIER 1. I saw that.
SOLDIER 3. The nipper was fallin t' pieces.
SOLDIER 2. Arms twisted the wrong way round
[...]
SOLDIER 1. The 'ole kid was fallin t' pieces
SOLDIER 4. An the old man.
[...]
SOLDIER 4. A mouth in a puddle of blood.
SOLDIER 3. The mouth was sayin-not shoutin-
[...]
SOLDIER1. The woman who tried t' crawl in the crack
(Bond, 2002: 172-173).

The example of Woman and her belief on the living bundle provide these soldiers an opportunity to trust on a new life. Nevertheless, Pemberton cannot admit this possibility and forces them to recognize the reality. Despite the extreme cruelty of their action, the soldiers rip the rags apart to discover only an empty sheet:

WOMAN. No no please I carried to so long- I pressed it against my side so its 'ardly bin born!

SOLDIER 4 is on the ground fumbling with the bundle.

PEMBERTON. Spread it!

[...]

Look at it!

What is it? An empty sheet!

[...]

WOMAN. My poor baby (Bond, 2002: 182-183).

The obsession to impose discipline leads Pemberton to reaffirm cruelly the soldiers' submission. For him, violence is a form of desperation but also the reassurance of the limbo in which the soldiers live. This micro-community preserves itself in a hermetic isolation from the rest of the world to the point that the Woman is an invader to their peace. Pemberton preserves his sanity in his conviction of being dead:

PEMBERTON. [...]She says we're not dead: she's wrong!

But she opens 'er mouth an yer believe everything that comes out!

You're not ready! Not trained! Not soldiers!

[...]

We're dead! All of us!

No one could live through what we went through –or want to go through it again! (Bond, 2002: 184)

Indeed Bond seems to ask again whether suffering can absolve or reform us, but the need to face reality forces the audience to draw parallels between the Woman's tragedy and the soldiers' nightmarish life. The Woman needs to believe in her bundle while the soldiers need to believe they are dead. Spencer points out: "the blurring of 'reality' a metatheatrical gesture that reminds the audience of the imaginative work the play itself is demanding of its viewers" (1996: 239). The challenge on reality gradually advances to the end of the scene acts, Pemberton firing at the Woman with bad ammunition, and the final gunning of his own soldiers. The last image of the play with the perished soldiers dancing freely to death shapes a grotesque form of self-sacrifice:

SOLDIER 2 (joins SOLDIER 1 and SOLDIER 3). Yeah!

Let's be dead an enjoy it!

Dead an free!

Dead an dance! (Bond, 2002: 188).

Absolutely conscious of the parallelism, Bond depicts the representation of this dramatic device with a recognizable picturesque image: "Goya: The Third of May 1808". Pemberton and his soldiers perform the

most brutal acts in the play "revealing to the audience a fundamental truth about himself and the society he represents" (Spencer, 1996: 239).

Immediately after this crude scene, Bond provides a complete reversal of the soldiers' scene in order to portray the first traces of the new society. Bond finally allows the Woman's psychological state to evolve to recognition. The journey from madness to sanity is constant along the play including the voice of the bundle speaking which distorts the boundary between fantasy and reality. The hardest moments of madness in the Woman's nightmare reside in the silence of the bundle. The desperation for the truthful representation of the baby forces her violence:

Im sick t'death of carryin yer!
I'll be glad t'get rid of yer!
The WOMAN hits the bundle.
Soddin little bastard!
Don't stare at me!
I'll black yer eyes for yer! (Bond, 2002: 195)

This violent reaction is considered the last shade of her past life and the beginning of a new woman. The therapeutic effect of the meeting with the loving Daughter and the Mother provides her the means for human reconnection. As she explains to the Daughter: "When you dumped your mother on me — its all right Im glad you did— I started t'remember: yer see an gave me a new life too" (Bond, 2002: 222). At the beginning, the Woman mistakes them for her neighbour, Mrs Symmons and her baby, and considers the possibility of killing the Mother. The images and people of her past life constantly bind her to her earlier life and imply the remembering and recognition of her mistakes. The example of true love between a mother and a daughter provides her the strength to take care of the sick woman while the daughter's absence. These two nuclear survivors learn to sleep together in order to maintain the heat: a symbol of humanity. As Howard explains: "Women comfort one another across the borders of self-interest and madness" (1996: 142). The sacrifice of unravelling the bundle as a pillow for the Mother becomes the unambiguous step to change for the Woman. This unequivocal symbol of solidarity reflects the global concept of motherhood proposed by Bond. Beyond horror and traumas, another society seems possible when humanitarian values are present.

This is a part of this moving passage:

BUNDLE. It hurts... gently...
No mummy must I carry her head its so heavy...?
WOMAN. My precious-she's so ill-she must rest or she wont come through (Bond, 2002: 206).

Two months later, the DAUGHTER comes back with a MAN from the new community. Due to the cross-casting, the WOMAN is forced to draw a parallel between the MAN and her son. At this moment the double casting complicates the issues of truth and appearance reinforced by the MAN's pretending efforts to convince the Woman. Absolutely destroyed as a person, she cannot even eat the food from the new world: "You're so used t' rubbish your body cant 'andle goodness" (Bond, 2002: 210).

In this new community, cooperation and hand-made work seem to be the basic elements. This new society becomes the embodiment of Bond's political ideas, the changes in property and the absence of religion constitute some of these marks: "We're not so ignorant we have t' invent gods t' teach us 'ow t' be 'uman" (Bond, 2002: 226). Whether Bond's new community will provide an alternative model is one of the important debates along the play. The nuclear devastation of the beginning of *Great Peace* seems to be a consequence of the tyrannical system of soldiers and weapons. His criticism over the failure of democracy and its evolution to despotism is very present at the end of the play through the words of Man:

When they spoke shit came out of their mouths
They weaned the kids on it
They died for the right t' eat it
They blew the world up t' defend it
In the end democracy was just the way the military gave
orders to civilians
We don't 'ave t' live like that-work for their owners-drop
their bombs-eat their shit
Why should we vomit up the ideas that'll let us live?
(Bond, 2002: 227)

The idea of the 'military orders' closes the circular structure of the play and connects the cause-consequence of the dramatic structure from the beginning to the end. Despite the good expectations of this new community, the Woman cannot form part of the real world. She has suffered too much to impart any kind of wisdom or to be some kind of 'guru' to the new humankind. She has accepted her part of responsibility in the tragedy of her sons and her guilt becomes infinite: "Oo can wash my 'ands?" (Bond, 2002: 235). The Man's insistence to recover the Woman turns impossible and finally leaves her in the wilderness with a light-blue padded coat. This is the only colour present in the whole trilogy. This symbol of hope is constructed from the Woman's example. She cannot overcome her hatred for her son and also for herself so she wants the new community to be free of her mistakes. With her death, she is providing a new beginning for the Man and the other members to succeed in the construction of a better world.

Bond explains: "If we do not understand her, she would point to our bombs and call us mad. She pretended her rag was a child, we pretend bombs are our salvation— and do it on the say-so of rulers who own our culture and decide what passes for moral sanity" (2002: 357). The Woman's death, alone in the wilderness, reflects upon the question of the natural relations between mother/child. The end to the Woman's quest falls upon the knowledge about herself and her maternal condition. Bond proposes the deconstruction of the traditional mother and a redefinition of the term implying "the caretaking of the community for one another, beyond property, beyond blood, toward peace and justice" (Reinelt, 1994: 70). The Woman's example speaks about the refuge of exile as a way to preserve sanity from the madness of a violent world in which children are ordered to be killed. Abandoning civilization, the heroine overcomes her nightmares and depicts an act of compassion and solidarity. Stuart has pointed out that the Woman's death should not be interpreted as something negative but as "an insistence that the survivors experience and survive the Woman's tragedy" (1995: 85).

Conclusion

The pessimism of the play and its apocalyptic visions could be obviously argued. However, the militaristic obsession and the reality of nuclear threat make us wonder about the truth of these predictions. Bond opened the scenes up for fundamental debate- the clash between the use of weapons and the need of armies against what it is the essence to be human. Bond explains in his notebooks:

Im warning against the horror of nuclear wars. Im also using the extreme situations it creates to show basic working of human beings so that we can learn from this in a world where there haven't been a major nuclear war, where the learning could help us to prevent them and where it could help us to live differently even apart from nuclear questions. But note: nuclear questions aren't extra to our present life, they arise from our way of life and our present situation. They aren't a disturbance to it: they are a consequence of it (Stuart, 2001: 218).

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