

TREATMENT OF VIOLENCE IN KING LEAR AND BOND'S *LEAR*

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ABSTRACT: *The purpose of this research paper is to examine Bond's Lear in relation to which it "stands to Shakespeare's great original" (Smith 194). Both plays deal with the issues of political and economic power and investigates the relation of aggression and violence present within nature of human beings when it comes to their struggle over supremacy and rule. This paper focuses tendency of ruling individuals to assert aggression and violence and research work tends to explore both plays in the light of Bond's Preface to his version of Lear.*

KEYWORDS: Violence, Society, King Lear, Bond's Lear, economic power, and political struggle

INTRODUCTION

Many animals are able to be violent, but in non-human species the violence is finally controlled so that it does not threaten the species' existence. Then why is the existence of our species threatened by its violence? (Bond, *Author's Preface* 03)

This question posed by Edward Bond in *Author's Preface* raises a series of thought-provoking arguments. Majority of the critics agree that unchecked and uncontrolled violence in human race leads to terrible results. Political and social worlds of *King Lear* and Bond's *Lear* evince it. The aggressive struggle for power amongst the leading characters of both plays create a world of unrest, disharmony and continuous threat. However, all the same, as far as the treatment of violence is concerned, there is a difference between two plays. The focus of Shakespearean *King Lear* is more on psychological issues, ensuing from violence, whereas, Bond's *Lear* presents a disintegrated family, using Brechtian stage-craft, a world where "violence shapes and obsesses ... society" (Bond 03).

In the very first scene of the play, Bond portrays hostility between Lear and his daughters. Bodice and Fontanelle reveal to their father that they will marry his enemies, the Duke of North and the Duke of Cornwall, then tear down Lear's wall. Lear responds that he has always known of their maliciousness. When Lear leaves the stage, Bodice and Fontanelle reveal their plans to attack their father's army. Lear and his daughters are literally at war with one another; when presented with Lear's death warrant, Fontanelle eagerly signs it. At his trial Lear seems to reject his children altogether, saying he has no daughters. Yet in prison, Lear shows a desire for a relationship with his daughters. (Bookrags n.pag.) The famous animal image in a cage develops here, which surfaces rest of the play. The animal image depicts the tendency of man to be violent and aggressive. Lear in Act II, Scene I cries out at the death of his daughters; "My daughters have been murdered and these monsters have taken their place! I hear all their victims cry, where is justice?" (Bond, *Lear* II.ii.127-29).

Justice, as explained by Bodice, a little earlier, in the same scene, is a relative term. She asserts, "politics is the higher form of justice" (Bond, *Lear* II.ii.17-18) and political judgement should not be clouded by "family sentiment" (*Lear* II.ii.19). In order to climb up the ladder of power

and politics, she is ready to justify her action of sacrificing the life of her own father in the name of need and morality. Thus, in other words, the play presents an innately aggressive society where "[a]gression has become moralized, and morality has become a form of violence" (Bond, *Author's Preface* 05).

Similarly, in Shakespearean *King Lear*, one comes across same kind of violence, but this violence is less overt. The most violent act of Shakespearean *King Lear*, i.e plucking out an old man's eyes on stage; "Upon these eyes of thine I'll set my foot" (Shakespeare, *King Lear* III.vii.69), seems less violent when compared with Warrington's fate. Bodice destroys the eardrums of a tongueless captive with her knitting needle while Fontanelle screeches, "kill his hands! Kill his feet ... I want to sit on his lungs"(Bond, *Lear* I.iv.79-84). Thus, violence in Bond's *Lear* is more overt, which according to Nightingale points to "covert violence ... institutionalized in a society" (Nightingale 404).

Further, one may find the traces of this covert violence in the character of Shakespearean King Lear. The most discriminating mark of Shakespearean *King Lear*, Lear as a character, as seen by Aaron Hill, in *The Prompter*, was "the violent impatience of his temper" (Hill 06).

He is obstinate, rash and vindictive, measuring the merit of all things by their conformity to his will. He can not bear contradiction, catches fire at first impressions and inflames himself into a frenzy by the rage of his imagination. ... He has mercy, liberty, courage, wisdom and humanity, but his virtues are eclipsed and made useless by the gusts which breakout in his transports. He dotes on Cordelia yet inherits and leaves her to misery, in the heat of an ill-grounded resentment, for a fault of no purpose or consequence, and to punish his rashness, by its effect on himself, was the moral and drift of all those wrong which are done him. (Hill 06)

Hence, one act of Lear; his violent temperament, "his violent impetuosity" (Hazlitt 23), his one rash decision – "to divest us both of rule, / Interests of territory, cares of state, – / [on the basis of] Which of you shall we say doth love us most?"(Shakespeare, *King Lear* I.i.41-43) – lead circle of "ungoverned violence" (Richardson 10) in action. The social harmony gets disturbed and violated. Duped by hypocritical professions of love and duty, as Coleridge maintains, the fond father and "archetypal king and patriarch" (Novy 85), King Lear, not only fails to protect his territory from being slipping away in the corrupted hands, but also suffers from "parental anguish of filial ingratitude" (Coleridge 89).

William R. Elton claims that "[to] sum up Lear's development is to rehearse the development of the play, it's gigantic inversions and it's complexities" (Elton 260). King Lear, in the capacity of an individual character, makes a spiritual journey while undergoing consequences of his violent temperament.

Benedict Nightingale asserts in his article *Lear* that where "Shakespeare's Lear makes a spiritual journey, Bond's makes a more political one" (Nightingale 402). He explains further that "[i]n defeat, he's [i.e. Bond's Lear is] at first maddish, self-pitying, vindictive ... [but] when he is captured by his daughters' soldiers, he shows a genuine altruism by trying, unsuccessfully, to protect those who have protected him" (Nightingale 403). In this sense, Bond's Lear is politically more shrewd than King Lear. In James P. Discroll's words, King "Lear's structured progress through three archetypal stages toward the final Christ symbol constitutes a quest for wholeness involving great suffering" (Discroll 159). King's Lear quest is, thus, spiritual in terms of the kind of progress he makes. As C.G. Jung elaborates:

The goal of psychological, as of biological development is self-realization, or individualization. ... Through a Christ symbol, a man can get to know the real meaning of his suffering, he is on the way to wholeness. (qtd. in Driscoll 159)

However, be it political quest, or spritual progress, both kinds of developments involve suffering and daring to bear the heat of aggression.

Thus, violence, internal as well as external, has been one of the major themes of both plays. The world of both plays are clouded by political issues. Both plays depict governments which are "not strong enough to protect good or to punish evil; and strong enough to protect [themselves] against [their] own weaknesses and save [themselves] from corruption" (Bond, *Introduction to Lear* ix). This is equally appropriate for Bond's *Lear* as well as Shakespearean *King Lear*, where government fails to protect themselves from within and without violence.

In Shakespearean *Lear*, "violence is not the effect of pre-meditated malignity" (Richardson 309). In his essay *On the Dramatic Character of King Lear*, William Richardson argues, that, though, *Lear* is "extravagant, inconsistent, inconstant, capricious, variable, irresolute, and impetuously vindictive[;] ... his weakness are not his crimes but the effects of misruled affections" (Richardson 308). Being "not willing to renounce the love of women" (Freud 55), as discussed by Sigmund Freud, in *The Theme of the Three Caskets*, is one aspect of his "misruled affections" (Richardson). The violence within him; the violence of his temper, and the aggressive rash attitude, springing in part from the "prerogatives of kingship" (Novy 85), remains with him till the time his violence encounters equal violence in the attitude of his elder daughters. "Goneril's and Regan's treatment of their father ... reverses power of rule" (McLuskie 98). After reversal, King *Lear*, "till on his knees, with arms upraised and head thrown back" (Dickens 73-4) suffers from psychological violence and mental agony. Victor Hugo, declares the torments of this psychological violence as gloomy destiny.

To live after the flight of the angel; to be the father orphaned of his child; to be the eye that no longer has light; to be deadened heart that knows no more joy; from time to time to stretch the hands into obscurity and try to re clasp a being who was there ...; to feel himself forgotten in that departure; to have lost all reason for being here below; to be henceforth a man who goes to and fro before selpulchre, not received, not admitted, - this is indeed a gloomy destiny. (Hugo 249)

Moreover, Shakespearean *King Lear* never recovers from this gloomy destiny, as Bond's *Lear* does:

"I am not as fit as I was. I can still make my mark" (Bond, *Lear* III. iv. 22-23)

It might be so, because, as Samuel Johnson quotes Mr. Murphy that primary source of distress of *King Lear*'s disordered mind is not the loss of kingdom but cruelty of his daughters. (Johnson 158). Majority of the critics have viewed the "cruelty of daughter" (qtd in Johnson 158) to an old father, as the most violent action ever heard of. William Hazlitt finds the character of Goneril and Regan so violent, dreadfull and hateful that he assumes that many readers would not like to repeat their names. He comments in *Characters of Shakespeare's Play*:

The true character of the two eldest daughters, Regan and Goneril (they are so thoroughly hateful that we do not even like to repeat their names) ... (Hazlitt 7)

Kathleen McLuskie, a feminist critic, however, challenges this view of blaming King Lear's elder daughters solely responsible for exhibition of power via aggression and lust for control. She argues that "Lear in his madness fantasies about the collapse of law and the destruction of ordered social control. ... [He blames] women's lust ... as the center and source of ensuing corruption" (McLuskie 99). However, in contradiction to this, Lear himself has been guilty of "patriarchal misogyny" (McLuskie 98). Freud's words supports her argument that "the dying man" (Freud 256) does not give up the love of women, while it's his "fast intent/ To shake all cares and business from our age ; Conferring them on younger strengths, while we/ Unburdened crawl towards death" (Shakespeare, *Lear* I. i. 31-34). Even Samuel Taylor Coleridge, views Lear's "intense desire of being intensely beloved ... [as] selfish" (Coleridge 20). Thus, one may safely say that, Goneril and Regan access to throne can be viewed in purely political terms. Goneril and Regan were less privileged before the transfer of power. They used love-test as a tool to gain upper hand. Once, they accessed new order, in which they were having an unjust privileged position, there was an aggressive need to reform old order, introduce a new law, a new morality i.e. a new social morality, as in Bond's words: "social morality is a form of corrupted innocence ... (Bond 7)

People with unjust social privileges have an obvious emotional interest in social morality. It allows them to maintain the privileges and justifies them in taking steps to do so. It reflects their fear of an opposition that would often take away everything they have, even their lives. This is one way in which social morality becomes angry and aggressive. (Bond, *Author's Preface* 05)

Similarly, Edward Bond's version of Lear's story embraces myth, superstition and reality to reveal the endemic violence of a rancorous society. Set around the symbolic building of a great wall, Lear exposes false morality as the source of the aggressive tension which may ultimately destroy ... all. ([sheffieldtheatres n.pg](#))

In the issue of *The Guardian*, dated 29 Sept., 1971, John Hall quotes Edward Bond:

Shakespeare took this character and I wanted to correct it so that it would become a viable model for me and ... for society. Shakespeare does arrive at an answer to the problems of his particular society, and that was an idea of total resignation, accepting what comes, and discovering that a human being can accept an enormous lot and survive it. He can come through storm. What I want to say is adequate now; that it just does not work. Acceptance is not enough. Anybody can accept. You can go quietly into your gas chamber at Auschwitz , you can sit quietly at home and have an H-bomb dropped on you. Shakespeare had time. He must have thought that in time certain changes would be made. But time has speeded up enormously, and for us, time is running out. (*The Guardian* 10).

Violence, thus has been permeated in society. It shapes society, as Bond argues in his preface, and Marxist-political realities tend to offer certain justification for it too. Daniel R Jones, in his article suggests that violence as presented in Lear's world. It can culminate only by acknowledging the reason of violence, which lies in repression and then taking responsibility of it by action. Jones suggests that King Lear's last words lack hope or at least life.

No, no, no, life!

And thou no no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more,

Never, never, never, never, never ! – (Shakespeare, *King Lear* V. iii. 307-09)

However, in contradiction to it, politically more shrewd than the classic King Lear, Bond's Lear, displays sign of heroism till his death. He tries to act once he has accepted the responsibility of his earlier actions.

At the end of the Bond's play Lear is killed for attempting to destroy a wall that, significantly, he had built. His act, an acknowledgement of his responsibility for making society repressive, shows that he now believes society can be changed only through his personal involvement. ... The ending implies one of Bond's primary views; action will lead to change, acceptance will not. (Jones 505)

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- This paper also takes into account author's preface to *Lear* by Edward Bond, his Introduction about Rational Theater, and articles on Bond's *Lear* by Leslie Smith and Benedict Nightingale as a useful resource to explore and compare different forms of violence present within society, individuals and social orders.
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