

JOHN ARDEN'S COMMITMENT IN DEBUNKING INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE IN HIS SELECTED PLAYS

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John Arden is generally acknowledged to be one of the major playwrights of the post war British theatre. He is well known for his innovative treatment of social and political themes. For him theatre became a tempting medium for something to say. He expanded and transformed the areas of life, which could be treated in the theatre, and made it seem much more directly relevant to present day lives and problems. Human self exist in definite relationship to other selves. Relationships among selves matter, its values, its dignity on which only large buildings of any institution can stand. The study of violence and the politics of violence is a problematic issue. It is a matter of serious concern not only for social activist but for artist and writers as well. John Arden not only deals with the issue of violence but he also tries to debunk its justification with his new interpretation. He interrogates justification of violence in war itself and unveils the hallow rationalization of violence.

An astonishing fact of the etymology of the word violence is (a combination of two Latin words –vis (force) latus (fero) to carry) that the word violation comes from the same root as the word violence which suggests to us the interesting idea that somehow a violation of something that carrying a force against something constitutes in one way or another violation of it. This connection of violence with violation is very powerful and stimulates us to reread violence in terms of violation and in terms of human relations. The fundamental of violence becomes relevant inhuman relationship. A person is a person because of his body. There are two facts about this one-what his body does and second what is done to his body. From existential point of view the second thing is dignity or esteem of man.

In our opinion the problem of morality is not whether people are good or bad, but whether the consequences of their deeds are good or bad. And it is not so important to know whether they intend what they do, as it is to know whether they are aware of it.(Derriennic 363) Regarding Arden's *Serjeant Musgrave' Dance* much ink has been spilled at the play being political. But we notice violence is working with power –a power of politics which includes force that is a feature of violence. It is worth mentioning here that Foucault sees power in the modern world as a positive means for producing useful persons. Arden writes his play as a kind of protest against the use of violence and unjustified war:

Protest is a kind of futile activity in the theatre.... It's highly unlikely, for instance, that supposing President Johnson and Mr Mc Namara come to see this play, they would say, 'oh dear, we've got to pull out of Vietnam'....The only thing that you can do is to keep on saying you don't like , so that even if the forces that are continuing the wars of the world, even if they finally win and we do have another world war, one will at least be able to say no before it was too late.(Trussler 22)

However, John Arden's play becomes relevant on the issue of Iraq invasion. Arden said, You write to show people there are things that need to be stopped. We live in a world where if we are hit we easily hit back. If voices cannot be delivered to the people in charge, we have no choice but to strike. (Hunt 62)

Arden's vision is essentially anarchic. Ideals of organisation and reason distort human life. War itself is the result of imposed ordering on human existence. His individuality consist in treating political subjects in a very apolitical manner, the strength of the social organization and the rebellion of the individual against the establishment are facts in his drama, but these facts are given a treatment very different. He refuses to be completely preoccupied by social tensions but questions the role and functions of politics as the sole measure of our life's significance. The explorations of relationships between groups and the impact of political organisations on individuals are his special care and throughout he focuses our attention on the social man. He visualises his characters and their actions in their interpersonal relationship that is over shadowed by violence. His characters are men of this world, intensely responsive to social situations, vitally interested in the affairs of the world, burning with a kind of consuming energy. They behave in a unpredictable manner at the critical moments they suddenly burst into violent actions that seems to be for them a final solution of their problems. Arden declares his commitment in debunking violence in the introductory note of his plays collections,

I have endeavoured to write about the violence that is so evident in the world, and to do so through a story that is partly one of wish fulfilment. I think that many of us must at some time have felt an overpowering urge to match some particularly outrageous piece of violence with an even greater and more outrageous retaliation. Musgrave tries to do this: and the fact that the sympathies of the play are clearly with him in his original horror, and then turn against him and his intended remedy, seems to have bewildered many people. (Arden 13)

The study of violence and the politics of violence is a problematic issue. It is a matter of serious concern not only for social activist but for artist and writers as well. John Arden not only deals with the issue of violence but he also tries to debunk its justification with his new interpretation. He interrogates justification of violence in war itself and unveils the hallow rationalization of violence.

Arden's characters are men of our society, intensely responsive to social situations, interested in the affairs of the world and burning with energy. Strange comic possibilities to the theme, urgency of tense situation are consequences of their behaviour in an unpredictable manner at the critical moments. His plays bear progression of political forces, their zig- zag course and the delineation of human character and their relationships in a wider scope and on a large canvas. The characters are brilliantly responsive to situation; they grow with and group themselves with other characters and new visage of their personality come into sharp relief against the fluctuating background.

In analyzing Arden's plays, we need to be aware that they have been written in the context of a continuous struggle to create new working relationships and this struggle too is part of Arden's commitment. His plays are just plays about individual people affected one way or another by these issues that burst in violent retaliation in their interpersonal relations.

John Arden's *Live Like Pigs* was produced in 1958. This play can be studied as confrontation between two ways of living, acceptable enough in themselves, but mutually destructive in confrontation. The play is set in a post war council Estate in a North Country industrial town and deals with an obvious social problem: what happens when one forcibly put a group of gypsies

into a council house. It tells the story of what happens when a family of gypsies the Sawney is put into a council house next door to would be respectable family, the Jacksons'. The Swaney's attract a much more extreme group of Romanies, one of whom howls in the street at night: and eventually the 'respectable' neighbours are themselves roused to violence. At the end of the play, the police have to rescue the lawless gypsies from the fury of law-abiding householders.

Arden is interested in building up a detailed picture of what it is like to live in a house in Barnsley. He is showing a social process at work: and so he takes character that can be quickly read as accepted comic types, and then shows what happens to them when they are placed in an unexpected situation. He manifests very clearly the potential violence in an apparently cozy neighbourhood. Arden has turned music hall gag into an image of the violence their presence has unleashed. The anarchy of music hall is linked directly with the anarchy of a social situation. He uses the music hall idiom; therefore, to present a clash of opposites, he shows us a situation in which conflict is inevitable.

The final scene of *Live Like Pigs* is built around a series of contradictory images. There is a lullaby, and a sound of the mob; a ragtime tune and broken windows; children's charm punctuated by the ringing of ambulance bells; the killer sailor like helpless with a broken leg. The contradictory images are concrete expressions of the central paradox—that we are being shown outlaws rescued from the lawless violence of law-abiding citizens by the police. This play is not talking about human nature. It is talking about a concrete situation, what the play does assert is that if you put people into an unreasonable situation then they are likely to behave unreasonably. In avoiding condemnation of either the Jacksons or the Swaney's, Arden is not taking up an amoral position. He is, on the contrary, showing a society whose way of treating people does violence to the way they want to live. Arden said,

When I wrote this play I intended to be not so much a social document as a study of a differing ways of life brought sharply into conflict and both losing their own particular virtues under the stress of intolerance and misunderstanding. (Hunt 46)

Arden wants to show in his plays that love and harmony between any two individuals replaced by suspicion, hatred and violence, and therefore social relations imperilled and society in danger. He has a vision for our contemporary life that our century is getting violent than anything else. Faith is shattered and ideology is created only out of destruction and values are in hand of violence. Violence is not only physical but it is getting prominence in emotional, verbal, organised and judicial as well crawling from public affairs to the private affairs of man, destroying buildings of human self. Man is beware of man itself.

John Arden's *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* first presented at the Royal Court Theatre, London, Oct. 22, 1959. In this play Arden's concern is undeniably to show the futility and cruelty of war but he has keen eyes to look into the interpersonal violence deciding human future and human values. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Hamlet was forced to take revenge of his father's murder to his uncle Claudius. His father's ghost was the motive force behind his action. Revenge is an intended act of physical violence. Hamlet's relationship with his mother was affected by his feeling of revenge when it changes into verbal violence in rebuking his mother for her second marriage. This hidden violence behind the feeling of revenge destroys all his relationships; it takes in its grip his beloved Ophelia, his mother, his uncle and eventually his own self. But in the case of *Musgrave* the degree of violence intensifies much more. His horrible feeling of revenge was revealed in his strange logic to multiply the past action for five times. *Musgrave's* resolution to gun down twenty five people in retaliation for the five innocent natives killed in the colony is

really a proof of his horror of violence. In an inverted kind of logic he argues that this violence to be peaceful in its purpose as it awakens people to the real situation in the colonies. He finds violence as the final solution. The very fact that war has negative value in the play and that it is assumed the audience accepts this is an indication that the play is not about the dichotomy between war mongering and pacifism. We are meant to agree that Musgrave's aim is desirable that his intentions to his actions, from his desired end, which we share, to his means, which in turn, produce their own ends, ends which contradict these excellent intentions becomes corrupted by the means employed for its accomplishment.

When the play *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* opens we see Hurst and Attercliffe playing cards on a canal wharf at evening. Sparky sings a song in which he indicates his joining of army, his desertion and court martial. As he sings Hurst stands in anger, he seems to be hurt by his words and begins to scold Sparky for singing this sort of song. Slight strikes of words disturb the peace within Hurst that come out in an outrageous retaliation from time to time as if igniting fire is already there to catch all, those try to touch or tease it-intentionally or unintentionally. His fragmented self and personality cannot bear the pressure of words against the teasing words of Sparky. Further, Sparky indicates a Galting gun and Bargee hates calling him soldier. He says, "By lovely. What a life the bloody army." (Arden 15) Both Bargee and Sparky seem to be disillusioned from the designation of a soldier in the post war period. They want to escape from their past reality and identity as well. Here appears Musgrave who reminds them of the soldier's duty. "We have our duty. A soldier's duty is a soldier's life." (Arden 16) But Bargee seems to be totally destructed from the concept of duty and patriotism, he sings in a funny way, "The Empire Wars are far away, for duty's sake we sail away." (Arden 17) Annie, a bar girl is also shattered of the idea of war, is disturbed in her heart. Her rushing out of the door and clattering a tin tray full of tankards onto the floor indicate her anger that is disturbing her peace of mind. On the other hand the Mayor of the town is planning to hire the soldiers for his purpose to end the strike in the town. He too finds violence as a reliable source to end violence; oblivious of the fact-once violence is liberated one does not know when to lock it up again. Violence only breeds violence. Further, through the conversation between Mrs. Hithcliff and Musgrave we come to know that Annie was given a baby by a soldier who went to war for his call of duty to which he used to say rebellion. Here we can see an evidence of disastrous biological impact of war on the post war generation when she tells him that the child was of bad shape, pale, sick."

Commands and gestures of characters are given a significance by the dramatist 'violently', 'sharply', 'threatingly', 'menacing', 'out bursting', these words are used as frequently in the play perhaps to generate the mood of the play well suited to the mood of the character according to their time's mood and the author's himself. We can observe verbal violence interacting between Hurst and Musgrave,

"The only right you have is a rope around your throat and six foot six to drop from." "And you stand in my power....my power is the power of God." (Arden 23)

Musgrave's desire to dominate others has the seeds of unconscious violence that can come out consciously if his desire will not be fulfilled. His relationship with his subordinate is spoiled from time to time because of this power game. Musgrave himself becomes victim of this power game by Slow Collier and Pugnacious Collier, "You fight for pay...against what you call rebels and you shoot men down in streets. But not here these streets are our streets." (Arden 24) The words 'our' and 'yours' are emphasised to show their position and a particular area of

domination with a sense of monopoly. Musgrave is also one of the soldiers who are not only means of violence in organised violence of war and this violence is devouring his psyche now. Degree of violence increases as the theme accelerates with verbal, psychological and hidden violence and demonstrates into physical presence on the stage in the form of death and blood. The relationship between the two characters is very complex and almost incomprehensible. Arden is not using Musgrave to make the Bargee to cut Musgrave down to size. The two of them illuminate aspect of each other. Bargee's gestures make aware of an element of self – dramatization in Musgrave's position. And Musgrave's sense of purpose remains impressive. Throughout the play Arden builds up a dialectical relationship between the two of them. Musgrave at one place very effectively expresses the futility of organised violence of war, "We belong to a regiment is a few thousand miles from here, in a little country can write British subject after their names. And that makes us proud."(Arden 28) The atmosphere of interpersonal violence seems to be intensifies with the beating of drum by Hurst frantically. His disturbance of peace of mind and frustration come out when he begins to dance with demonic fury, waving his rifle. He seems to be a poor victim of psychological violence that is haunting in his psyche. Musgrave's emotion of anger also reaches to a pinnacle of frenzy and fury and he joins his madness. There are tense moments of struggle behind the gun in the play and this dramatisation of violence keeps the audience on the edge of their seats for a serious contemplation of horrifying violence working in human psyche. When Hurst goes forward to the crowd to run away and is shot and collapses on the stage-violence is visualised physically by vanishing total entity of a being.

We are introduced to Musgrave indirectly through the effect he has on others. His soldiers prepare us for a man look up to: organized commanding and demanding respect. Because of his uniform and his confident manner he attracts our respect for the qualities our society admires: order, organization, God fearing and above all logic. But these are the very qualities which drive him to his horrifying conclusion. His intentions are good the result insane and destructive. His method of eradicating war is not only unacceptable but futile. Killing twenty five villagers will never eradicate violence.

Despite the much greater acclaim it has received, *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* is as widely misunderstood as *Live Like Pigs*, but in this case the play, although suffering from certain structural weaknesses, is perfectly well in possession of its theme and idea. Almost universally described as an "anti-war" drama, Musgrave is nevertheless a source of extreme bafflement precisely to those viewers who persist in seeing it that way. Its militant pacifists come to ruin, its denunciation of war seems confined to colonial aggression, and it seems to throw up its hands in the face of the problem of violence. Indeed, regarded as a political exhortation, Musgrave is extraordinarily ineffective, a lame sermon; but it is not a political play except in the sense that Arden wishes to test certain modes of political action by more rigorous standards than that action can ever provide in itself and in so doing test something more profound than politics.(Brown 111-12)

Now to sum up with the words of Robert W. Corrigan, The English theatre in its most creative periods has always had as one of its chief concerns the probing of the existing forms of human organization.... [The] community must continue to exist and must continue to celebrate itself, even if this is done only in the minds and imaginations of its playwrights. By relating himself to the most creative parts of his native tradition and at the same time maintaining his disturbing modernity, John Arden is, I believe, one of the most vital and significant playwrights

of the contemporary British theatre. (Corrigan 324) And it is not possible in the wake of violence and if we take violence as the final solution because violence only breeds violence. As for Arden, he sees the world a violent place where violence is an essential and indispensable theme. He understands violence as an expression of the question of dominance and subservience where human self and personality is being violated by means of violence. He creates a scene in which the victim and the victimizer are the same as subject and object.

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