

The Politics of Cannibalism in Edward Bond's Plays¹

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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 of which cannibalism or man-eating is but one manifestation. Bond's refusal of the conventional limits and his critique of society is located primarily within the symbolic treatment of the phenomenon of cannibalism. 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 motif of cannibalism. The article's main contention is that Bond employs the concept and symbol of cannibalism in all its transgressive excesses, ambivalence, and graphic visuality to make a political statement about the capitalistic exploitation of humans and the indifference and callousness of man in the modern world. Cannibalism emerges as a powerful Gothic image of monstrosity and evil in Bond's dramatic world, which evokes strong associations with barbarity and all that is inhuman and irrational.

Keywords: Politics, Cannibalism, Gothic, Barbarism, Imagery

1. Introduction

Edward Bond's dramatic corpus exhibits a striking array of uncanny, grotesque, and terrifying image patterns that strongly evoke the image of a dark Gothic world. These evocative Gothic images and symbols serve a socio-political purpose as they develop into an impulse or force through which Bond challenges, interrogates, and critiques an unjust irrational society and fallacious discourses on civilizational progress. A close reading of the plays exhibits Bond's use of public, pictorial, verbal, and theatrical images and symbols: ghosts, spectral figures, Gothic doubles, cannibalism, insanity, rape, Gothic laughter and horrors associated with enclosing spaces are features common to the Gothic and to Bond's dramatic world. This article focuses on images of cannibalism in Edward

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Bond's plays. Cannibalism emerges as a powerful political image of monstrosity and evil in Bond's dramatic world, which evokes strong associations with barbarity and all that is inhuman and irrational in modern world.

2. Literature Review

Fred Botting (1996) states that monstrosity is one of the central themes of Gothic tales (p. 21). Abundance of monstrosity distinguishes Bond's (1977) *Early Morning* and cannibalism primarily emerges as a symbol for a grotesque world characterized by violence and irrationality. Bond picks characters from Victorian royalty - the Queen, Albert, Florence Nightingale, Gladstone, Disraeli, and royal brothers, Prince Arthur and George who are Siamese twins. In the play's review in *The Guardian*, Cordelia Oliver (1985) states that Bond takes all these characters and puts them in totally "unhistorical, bizarre, horrific situations, transposing mental into physical cruelties. What you are seeing, he is surely saying, is our own aggressive, abrasive, callous, cannibalistic society with its roots in repression and emotional starvation (*Writersp.* 17). Ronald Bryden (1985) holds a similar opinion of the play when he says that the play extends the same image of Britain into a gargantuan Swiftian metaphor of universal consumption: a society based on cannibalism, in which all achievement, power, and even love consists of devouring other lives" (p. 18).

3. Research Methodology

This article employs qualitative and descriptive paradigms of research. This qualitative literary study aims at producing new meaning in a text. It offers a close textual reading of the primary texts to explore and describe the concept of cannibalism in context of Edward Bond's plays.

4. Discussion: Politics of Cannibalism

In *Early Morning*, Bond (1977) presents literal and symbolic forms of cannibalism. Cannibalism appears in the play as a spectral extreme as it is perpetrated on earth and continues ceaselessly in the play's heaven. In the author's note to *Saved*, Bond raises a very important question about cannibalism: "do cannibals hunt and eat each other because they are hungry [?]" Bond's answer is: "they wage war on each other for social reasons" (p. 9). Bond's *Early Morning* exemplifies this answer as in the play cannibalism emerges as a political symbol for exploitation, conspiracy, irrationality, and also signifies the destruction of man by man

through violence. The play's opening scene set in Windsor castle makes the reader or the viewer immediately perceive an atmosphere of conspiracy, hypocrisy, hate and crime. Prince Albert is plotting Queen Victoria's death with the help of Disraeli, and Gladstone. For the coup, Albert also enlists his son Arthur's support whose Siamese twin brother George is either neutral or supports his mother Queen Victoria. After a series of plots and counter plots, Victoria kills Albert with a garter sash. Arthur eventually conspires a scheme to kill everyone ending human suffering. After everyone has been killed, they all ascend as spirits into a heaven where cannibalism is rife, but people grow back. The cannibalism in heaven echoes an earlier scene set on earth in which a modern couple Len and Joyce are put on trial for killing and then eating a man in a cinema line. The Gothic strain of cannibalism becomes evident in the mock trial scene presided over by the Queen. Despite the gravity of the murder charge, both the Londoners adopt a casual tone as if eating human flesh were a normalcy and not a deviance. Len's description of the murder is Gothic in all its horror and graphic visuality. Irritated by the long wait in cinema queue and the pangs of hunger, Len finally erupts into sudden aggressiveness when he finds the man, "the sly bleeder" taking cuts ahead of him. "so I grabs 'is ears," Len recounts, "jerks 'im back by the 'ead, she [Joyce] karate-chops 'im cross the front of 'is throat with the use of 'er 'andbag, and down 'e goes like a sack with a 'ole both ends-right?--and she starts stabbin' 'im with 'erstilletos, in twist out, like they show yer in the army." He then drops a manhole lid on the victim and crushes him. And "the queue moves up one" (p. 150; sc.4). The account is macabre and the casual tone of narration, in fact, intensifies the Gothic horror of the murderous act. But the ultimate horror of the account comes when Len tells the court that after mutilating the offender's body, they ate him. Not only that, they offered it to other people in the line as well. He says: "Yer can't nosh an not offer round" (p. 150; sc. 4). The crowd also asks for it and someone even steals the victim's leg lying on the pavement. Joyce even drops a few bits of meat and bones in her handbag and she and Len have a "little nosh when the lights went down." She also expresses her dissatisfaction with the "stuff they bring round on sticks" referring to animal meat drumsticks that she compares to eating a "nasty mouthful a splinters in the dark" (p. 151; sc. 4) and which she doesn't like. The couple regards cannibalism a casual pastime activity, an excellent snack for noshing around in the cinema during the show, and a suitable punishment for an offender. They treat it as a norm. Commenting on the scene Castillo (1986) states: "Psychic, cultural, and moral hungers are

intensified under the irritation and pressure of the queue, and the suppressed aggression of the socialized beast combines with these other pressures to find explosive release in Len and Joyce's murder and cannibalization of an anonymous bystander" (p. 83). The play's preface states: "Although one of the funniest stage works of recent years, it is not a comedy, but a deeply felt modern morality, dipped in gall and in the horror of our time, when cannibalism, real or symbolic, is not beyond the borders of possibility, and the little goodness we can perceive in the world has a scant chance of surviving, let alone multiplying" (Bond (1977; Preface p. xi). Pervasive cannibal activity in the play symbolizes a behaviour normally considered by the modern civilized world as primitive and unnatural. But Bond ironically establishes a world where eating human flesh is a normalcy to an extent that not doing it is an anomaly. By portraying barbarism as normative behaviour and reducing the macabre images of cannibalistic practice to a commonplace activity, Bond intends to shock the audience into a more rational frame of mind as they can now readily differentiate between what is normal and what is irrational, primitive, barbaric, and therefore, repulsive and unacceptable.

However, Arthur, the play's central character refuses to eat human meat and tells others also not to indulge in cannibalism. When Len confirms that Arthur had asked them not to eat each other, Queen Victoria says: "But he [Arthur] knew he was asking something unnatural and impossible. Something quite, quite impossible" (p. 221; sc. 21). Mutilating the human body and eating it, hacking it with the sword and devouring human teeth are forms of mindless, abject violence that threaten all social and moral order. In its connection with primitive cannibalistic practices the episode erases the boundary between the animal and the human, and the primitive and the civilized worlds. Harold Hobson (1985) in his review of the play in *Sunday Times* describes the third act of *Early Morning* as "unspeakably horrible in the undisciplined rapture with which it shows us Queen Victoria, Prince Albert, and their children reveling in cannibalism in heaven . . . [A] melodramatic farrago of the deliberately disgusting and obscene . . . its horrors are altogether too much. . . . As far as I could see the prolonged rending of human flesh in the last act did not produce sickness in any member of the first-night audience. But first-nighters are notoriously tough" (pp. 18-19). According to Bond (1977), examples of violence are vivid symptoms of a society that itself is a "sustained atrocity perpetrated by the strong upon the weak. You cannot ride on a bus or strike a match without committing cannibalism: You don't eat anybody

physically, but you eat their despair, you eat the waste of their lives . . . we clothe the sides of our cars with human skin, because people have been abused to make them” (qtd. in Nightingale, p. 388). Here Bond is actually referring to the economic and spiritual cannibalism the literal form of which he portrays in *Early Morning*.

The play begins and ends in cannibalistic practice. The play’s final moments depict Arthur’s rise from one zone of heaven to the next. He rises slowly like Christ as a representative of a heaven where people eat people and feel no pain. While Arthur rises slowly in the air “*with his hands half raised against his chest*”, the Queen offers Florence food and Len also asks Joyce to pass him leg (p. 223; sc. 21). Although David L. Hirst (1985) calls these scenes of the play “intensely comic” (p. 94), they are a bizarre spectacle and the grotesque verges on the Gothic as the idea of chewing human flesh and bones is revolting to the modern civilized conscience. Even the comic form of cannibalism would be discomforting to modern rational mind that defines civilization as a movement away from such primitive practices. The literal and symbolic form of chewing of human flesh is emblematic of man’s aggression against his own fellow human beings. It is a symbol for a self-destructive society that eats itself and engenders aggression and violence from within. It also signifies the spiritual vacuity of the people who have lost their psychic centre namely their faith in humanity and religion. In heaven cannibalism must appear even more unnatural than it is on earth but ironically it is a normalcy in paradise where Arthur’s refusal to eat human flesh is regarded by the inmates of heaven as a deviance. Bond (1977) presents cannibalism as a form of irrationality, the cannibal heaven as “unjust”, and an “unjust society,” Bond argues, “must be violent” (*Lear*; Author’s Preface p. 9). The act also signifies the political oppression, conspiracy, exploitation, and hypocrisy of the mighty against the poor in a capitalistic world and cannibalism emerges as its most emphatic symbol. Cannibalism, therefore, has social reasons. Bond argues that the play is about working class life. In response to the presence of surreal, anti realist elements in the play, Bond critiques realism as a mode of presentation. He believes that the plays based on social realism quite often seem to him “fairy stories, and setting them against an immediately recognizable background doesn’t make them any truer. So what I wanted to do in *Early Morning* was to take away all the known landmarks that might have led to false assumptions. It’s like taking the labels off tins, so that you have to open them up to see what’s inside-- because so many of the labels were false anyway” (Bond 1977;

Interview;p.19). Bond here admits the limitations of realism in capturing true evaluations of reality and advocates an unconventional approach to interrogate the truth about human situation. The centrality and physicality of the repulsive and surreal act of cannibalism that continues unabated in the play is Bond's political statement on how humans still live in a Gothic world characterized by violence and chaos. The heaven in *Early Morning*, thus, becomes a haunted space inhabited by ghostly human shadows, Gothic doubles, and invaded by the violence of cannibalism. In the play, the Gothic locates itself in cannibalism and in Bond's shifting of Gothicism's remarkable wasteland to heaven.

Another play in which cannibalism manifests itself as a grotesque image of racialism and exploitation is *Grandma Faust*, one of the Double-bill of two short plays collectively known as *A-A-America!* (1976). Much like in *Early Morning* the images of cannibalism in this play are very emphatic. Bond subtitles the play as a "burlesque" in three scenes. The play's subtitle indicates that it is a parody of the Faustian allegory. The devil, however, in this play is a grandmotherly figure in a wheelchair. She promises Uncle Sam all the silver fish he can catch provided he ensnares the soul of a black simpleton named Paul. But for this, he must first lure Paul into looking him in the eye so that he will be so entranced by the evil in Uncle Sam's eyes that he will take a bite of Sam's loaf of bread which contains a large hook to capture his soul. Paul is eventually captured and put to auction to be sold for *Nigger Foot Pie Day*, a celebration equivalent to Thanksgiving in which people eat pie literally made from Negroes' feet. The grotesque description of the festivity in the text emphasizes the difference between exaggeration and reality, excess and normality by presenting white people as distorted, racist figures and by placing cannibalism at the heart of progress and civilization that America and Americans signify. The auctioneer Sam tells the crowd at the auction: "May be you wanna keep him around an fatten him up a little 'fore 'n for chop him up for pie. Jist let him run loose in the back yard. An he'll soon plump out for slaughtering" (p.13). Sam's description of how white people can make Nigger Foot Pie more delicious by fattening the Negro before slaughtering makes a serious comment on racial prejudice in America and elsewhere. What is striking about the macabre image of chewing of bones is that Bond reduces the festive activity of *Nigger Foot Pie Day* to its primitive literal level in its association with Negroes to underscore the symbolic dimension of violence and racial prejudice. Bond's treatment of cannibalism in *Grandma*, however, is different from that of *Early*

Morning. Whereas in *Early Morning* the pervasive chewing and unabated rending of human flesh is actually and graphically demonstrated, in *Grandma* it is only narrated.

Bond (2003) employs the imagery of cannibalism in another innovative way by employing its variant forms in *Coffee* and *The Crime*. He, once again, presents a world invaded by cannibalism. In *Coffee*, he equates it with hunger and destitution. When two characters Gregory and Nold enter the surreal dark forest world, they encounter the Old Woman and the Girl who are half crazed and famished. Gregory gives a rag doll to the Girl. She tears it with her teeth repeatedly saying that she must eat it as she is hungry. The doll “hops away across the ground. The Girl jerks it back on the string.” The Doll cries in pain and requests the Girl not to bite her so deep (p.143; *The Second House*). The Girl tells Nold that when she eats the Doll, her mother sews it up again. Nold says: “When yer cried it was like stitches breakin inside yer” (p.144; *The Second House*). Bond here fuses the image of the Doll with the figure of the Girl and creates an uncanny surreal effect through cannibalization of the living doll. The fusion of the living rag Doll and the famished half dead Girl in a world marked by hunger presents Bond’s scathing indictment of a dark unjust world of the privileged classes who eat humans and drain their blood like the cannibals of *Early Morning*. As a form of violence, cannibalism in the play is a social dimension of irrationality that signifies subversion of all social and moral codes as the Doll is personified as a human being while the living Girl is presented as a creature that is half-dead and famished because of hunger--a creature less than a rag doll.

The “grotesques microcosm” (Hirst 1985, p. 101) of *Early Morning*, *Grandma Faust*, and *Coffee*, in fact, evokes a Gothic world. Discussing the visual images in *Early Morning* in detail Hirst argues that Bond uses images as “pointers to the significance of the action and not as symbols.” Hirst, however, does not discuss or analyze the nature of these images as pointers. Contrarily, if seen from the perspective of the Gothic convention, these images of ghosts, shadows, dark doubles, and cannibalism acquire a symbolic aspect. Dismemberment and disintegration of George, visual images of man-eating, self-rape, uncanny description of *The Nigger Foot Pie Day*, and eating of a rag Doll are Gothic symbols of irrationality and not just pointers to actions. Bond makes a strong political statement about contemporary capitalist world and racial aggression through these uncanny image patterns. His use of devouring, all engulfing cannibalism of heaven and hell as a form of irrationality also raises questions about generalized notions of civilization and human progress.

Ghost imagery and cannibalism constitute one strand of Bond's Gothic world. Another powerful image in the Gothic narrative is rape which signifies a threat that spells destruction. Strewn across the pages of Gothic fiction are numerous scenarios that pose this real or hallucinatory menace. In *The Castle of Otranto* Isabella faces this threat when Manfred forces her to marry him. Likewise, in Matthew Lewis' (2008) *The Monk*, Antonia is dishonoured by her own brother Ambrosio, and in Coleridge's (1981) *Christabel* the heroine faces a similar threat from Geraldine in a more menacing and subtler form. Bond's *Early Morning* also introduces and extends the concept of rape through certain shocking subversive images. For instance, Queen Victoria's rape of Florence and her insistence that Florence address her as Victor (p.157; sc.5) is reminiscent of how Christabel faces a similar threat from Geraldine in a more elusive form in Coleridge's poem. Although the text never makes it clear, there are indications that Christabel has been lured and seduced by Geraldine. Bond in his play adds a further dimension to the rape motif by introducing the idea of self-rape when George, Arthur's twin, rapes himself. Although self-rape is an impossibility much like the pope's wedding, George's self-rape on a symbolic plane is suggestive of how humanity is raping itself, divesting itself of all vestige of dignity, and all that is honourable. In *Lear* (Bond 1977) also the soldiers of Lear's daughters' army rape Cordelia and do not take pity on her even when they know she is carrying. Her rape is suggestive of how those who have power vent out their aggression on the defenseless, chance victims. In *Narrow Road* (Bond 1978), Georgina is raped by her brother Commodore. Likewise, in *The Swing* Greta is allegedly raped as a result of which she loses her hold on sanity. However, the circumstances that surround alleged sexual assault on Greta are kept ambivalent much like Geraldine's seduction of Christabel which is never rationalized. Greta herself and her mother are uncertain about whether or not she was raped in the first place and who the culprit was. The nature of assault and identity of the assailant both remain a mystery till the play's end. Rape and its variant forms signify threat and overt Gothic structure of violence in Bond. Rape also emerges as an image of irrationality as all those who are raped lose their hold on their rational selves.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Bond's highly evocative Gothic image patterns and symbols of cannibalism underpin the political relevance of his plays to the contemporary world. Interestingly, Bond (1978) labels his work "rational theatre," yet his work abounds in tropes, thematic motifs, and images that are Gothic in nature and scope. Christopher Innes (1992) also expresses a similar view when he points out a contradiction in the term "rational" that

Bond uses for his plays and his themes and images that are quite antithetical in nature. Innes argues that Bond labels “his work ‘rational theatre’, yet madness is one of his major themes, and his images are almost unprecedented in their visceral effect. . . not rational persuasion, but causing extreme moral discomfort” (p.168). In sum, the Gothic strain manifested in Bond’s cannibalistic imagery provokes his audience both emotionally and intellectually as he refuses simple solutions to complex problems.

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