

Shakespeare: A Self-Reflexive, Iconoclastic and Prophetic Tool **(A Study of Edward Bond's *Bingo: Scenes of Money and Death*)**

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Abstract:

Shakespeare is an undisputed legend whose works speak of his immortality. His works have touched a universal chord. Doesn't this fact raise him to a pedestal where he is responsible for what he says and what he has done? Edward Bond, a British playwright, exploits this archetypal impression of Shakespeare. He uses him as a metaphor to contemplate upon the role of a writer, who is not only a citizen of the state but also a responsible human being. Bond regards Shakespeare as a touchstone against all his reflections about life, money, family, professional prosperity and individual integrity. This play transcends from the Marxist realm to the Existential. Bond not only compels his readers and viewers to contemplate on these delicate affairs but also showcases how everything becomes as arbitrary as a game of Bingo. It shall continue to be so until one realises his/her role and responsibility as a writer and a human being. The play portrays a loss of agency and the predicaments that follow. However, what shall all these discussions lead to? My paper investigates how important a writer is in the world? How far Bond succeeds to use Shakespeare as a self-reflexive, iconoclastic and prophetic tool?

Keywords: Shakespeare, agency, writer, self-reflexive, prophetic, society, Marxism, Existential.

Shakespeare is an undisputed legend. Literary field holds him in great honour, but can we ever imagine that he will be criticized vehemently for his own being? Bond tries to question the position and being of Shakespeare, in turn raising doubts about his stature and role as a writer. He questions his art, lacking a purpose. Bond not only attacks Shakespeare but also targets his social responsibility. In a way is he questioning the purpose served by the entire clan of writers? Or is he trying to set a political regime of his own through his prophetic expectancies? This paper tries to address such overlooked angles. It delves into the need of writing altogether through a social framework.

Bond uses Shakespeare's position to be all supreme as a god and thinks him capable of influencing the society and imparting justice. But he brings in his hamartia, in which he questions the interest of Shakespeare in Enclosing act of Welcombe. The drama begins at this point and travels into lanes of social, personal, economic, political, philosophical and psychological dimensions.

The contrast in the social approach can be well observed by the difference in the languages. There seems to be local language and a dignified language countering and complementing each other in order to bring forth the dispute between the internal and external conflicts or the private and public dilemma. The Old woman, the old man and the son along with other minor characters speak the colloquial language as a representation of the injustice done against them by enclosing the lands, whereas the language spoken by Combe, Shakespeare and Johnson represents the caretakers who have turned into their enemies. The interaction between these classes form the base of the unveiling of the entire motif of the play.

All the characters are inter-dependent on each other and form the narrative of relations. The two families i.e. on the one hand the old woman, old man and the son, and on the other hand Shakespeare, Judith his daughter and his wife, are all unhappy creatures, struggling through their own battles. They all are responsible for each other's misery and thus Bond forms the undertone of the society that we all are victims of each other. Judith asks a pertinent question to the Old woman which encompasses all the politics of the relationship they share: "Has your marriage been happy?" (10). Shakespeare also falls trap to this question as Judith again implicitly asks the same question to him. Judith rebukes him for supporting the Young woman who has been the cause of misery for the old woman; as the old man was having an illicit relation with her. She charges him regarding her mother:

JUDITH: How could I let him enjoy while his wife...? She's had a hard life, father. You don't notice these things. You must learn people have feelings. They suffer. Life almost breaks them.... D'you know why mother's ill? D'you care?
 I'll tell you why she stays in bed. She hides from you. She doesn't know who she is, or what she's supposed to do, or who she married. She's bewildered – like so many of us!
 (18)

Judith approaches a righteous way to showcase the frailties in Shakespeare. She targets him of being irresponsible and not caring for people. This in turn showcases the incapability of Shakespeare to understand the plight of the people for whom he is responsible as a citizen. He is only interested in his own security. He enters the play with a set of papers and signs it with a condition that he is secure despite the fact that the other common people will suffer because of his decision. He replies Combe when he was asked to support him:

SHAKESPEARE: ... I'm protecting my own interests. Not supporting you, or fighting the town. (7)

While Combe reminds him of his power, as Shakespeare is the only person in Stratford who can counter this enclosing:

COMBE: ... You're one of the biggest rent holders. You're respectable. They probably think you've got friends in London. You could make out a strong case against me. (6)

Despite being aware of his position, he chooses to be self-centred. Bond questions this casual attitude of Shakespeare, if at all this is expected of him. Though Bond presents an alternative

possible side of Shakespeare. He contemplates the role of a writer and of a civilised being of the society. Shakespeare might be the representative of the entire middle class mentality i.e. of serving the self first rather than the community. He uses Shakespeare as a metaphor, or an icon to break his image. This iconoclastic approach of Bond is a matter of further reflection on the role of the writers' clan. In an interview he states:

It seems to me to be the job of rational people, of writers, of dramatists to plead for a just society, in their plays to rationally argue for a just society, to state clearly the conditions under which we live and try to make everybody understand that they must bear the consequences of the sort of life they lead. To show that our society is irrational and therefore dangerous-and that it maintains itself by denigrating and corrupting human beings-that is what *Bingo* is about. (Stoll 418)

Bond emphasizes on the action of every individual. He dismisses the "silence" of Shakespeare, as an account of impotency by dismissing the responsibility of his stature. Shakespeare justifies his being before Johnson as what a common man or a writer would have done to safeguard his own self:

Every writer writes in other men's blood. The trivial, and the real. There's nothing else to write in. but only a god or devil can write in other men's blood and not ask why they split it and what it cost. Not this hand, that's always melted snow.... (42)

When Shakespeare was about to die, after a bout of realisation, he accepts how careless he had been by ignoring the greater cause that his counter decision might have served. He says: "I can think now, the thoughts come so easily over the snow and under my shroud" (42) all the misery that he faces is the result of his greed, of money and the ultimate being his death knocking at the door. He was desperate to know: "was anything done?" (50). This in turn was a self-reflexive moment when for the first time he gives importance to his agency and contemplates on his art of writing. He was lying on the white snow just as the paper is white. He regards the text as: "white worms excreting black ink. Scratch. Scratch" (47). Shakespeare is helpless and the notion of "scratch" is nothing but being transformed into victims.

All these pitiful situations were the result of "Money", which not only Shakespeare but also each of the characters in the play were greedy of. No one realised the power of economy that can reduce the intelligent beings into mere pawns in the hand of fate, depriving them of relations, respect, peace and well-being in the end. When the young woman comes to the garden in the beginning of the play, Shakespeare questions: "Stay, stay. You'd rather have money not food?" (2). This is a significant question because he also preferred money over his responsibility and confesses before Judith:

.... That other age when I ran away, I couldn't cut you out, you were my flesh, but I thought I could make you forgive me: I started to collect for you. I loved you with money. The only thing that I can afford now to give you is money. But money always turns to hate. If I tried to be nice to you now it would be sentimental.... (41)

Shakespeare makes money as the standard of all living. He compares the emotions with money. Bond is antagonistic of this idea of materialism and that he seeks for a common power that would serve all strata of life. He induces a sense of Marxism and Socialism that focuses on the equal wellbeing of all citizens. He critiques that if the expected intelligentsia of the society fall prey to the consumerism then what shall be the fate of the people who look

upto them. This can even be exemplified by the plight of Johnson who says: “I had to borrow money to bury my little boy. I still owe on the grave” (38). Isn’t it a pitiful state that engulfs the fundamental right. Bond in his introduction to *Bingo* writes: “We have no natural rights, only rights granted and protected by money.... People come to think of these things as products of money, not of the earth or human relationship...” (x).

The subtitle of the play “Scenes of death and money” signifies how entangled are these two concepts and the play proceeds on the idea that how a materialistic thing like ‘money’ can be so powerful and determine the fate of characters resulting in death. The title also represents the arbitrary relation between all the characters and their troubled fate which is as uncertain as a game of ‘Bingo’. The economic power-play culminates into psychological and neurotic experiences which Bond represents as the result of neglected actions. Bond is concerned with the social responsibility of the artist in an unjust society. As the Hindu philosophy emphasizes on the concept of ‘Karma’ and ‘Dharma’, in the same way Bond regards Shakespeare’s awareness for the society as his Dharma and as he was incapable of maintaining his Karma (ought to be done task), he loses his life to utter neurosis. The pessimistic tone that surrounds the death of Shakespeare is a clarion call that we all are responsible for what we do.

Bond touches upon many philosophical ideas of life, death, morality, religion, individual aspects etc, which in turn are lessons for the society and the elites who are the guardians of the less privileged. He intimates these ideas to the audience by “shock”. The young girl who bargains her morality for money, caught by the men of Combe is gibbeted which disturbs the old man and Shakespeare the most. The old man who doesn’t have a proper mental balance speaks the truth. This is very ironic because the sane couldn’t understand what his madness could detect:

OLD MAN: They’ll hang her. O dear, I do hate hanging. People runnin’ through the streets laughin an’ sportin. Buyin’ an’ sellin’. (19)

Shakespeare realises that he is old and that nothing can be done anymore. Through Shakespeare Bond presents the life cycle which goes on continuing without ceasing and that one starts contemplating about one’s purpose on the earth:

SHAKESPEARE: There’s the house. People I’m responsible for. The garden’s too big. Time goes. I’m surprised how old I’ve got. (31)

Johnson also strikes at an important note that no matter how insignificant your life seem to be, there is still a purpose in your life and that you are responsible for whatever you do:

JOHNSON: A minor character who comes on for five minutes while the lead’s off changing his clothes or making a last effort to learn his lines? Shall I tell you something about me? I hate. Yes. – isn’t that interesting! (33)

He even draws the imagery of violence which shall affect the audience and compel them to contemplate whether they should act or not, or abide by the irrational restraints such as puritanism of emotions and morality that has been depicted. Bond renders the audience helpless to question, who the real decider of justice is. The Son kills his father and portrays that it was the work of the opposition yet on the other hand it might feel as justice because the father was lusty and troubled the old woman a lot. The excessive imagery of violence can be

exemplified by the following when the humans (in this case the gibbeted young woman) are juxtaposed with God:

SON: Death bring out her true life, brother. Look, her eyes be shut again the truth. There's blood trickle down the corner a her mouth. Her teeth sap at her flesh while her die. Be solemn, brother, think a lord god. That's the face us turn to him even when us prays... (23)

Bond paints a horrific image of the young girl's death and unveils the hypocrisy that the society stands upon. He leaves onto the viewers to realise and distinguish reality from illusion. His work has a cathartic effect yet the qualities of an epic theatre persists, compelling us to contemplate the cause and result of each action in the play. This in turn knocks at the human sensibility to be rational and not be a prey to blind beliefs. In this manner the audience is forced to think of its own actions, imparted with a didactic effect.

Bond strikes an existential note throughout the play. By making Shakespeare a metaphor he tries to form an interplay between thought and action. Shakespeare broods about the purpose. He realises what wrong he has done and expresses it with powerful and horrific images and considers himself incapable of continuing his life:

SHAKESPEARE: What does it cost to stay alive? I'm stupefied at the suffering I've seen. The shapes huddled in misery that twitch away when you step over them. Women with shopping bags stepping over puddles of blood. What it costs to starve people. The chatter of those who hand over prisoners. The smile of men who see no further than the end of the knife. Stupefied. How can I go back to that? What can I do there? I talk to myself now. I know no one will ever listen. (26)

Shakespeare becomes hysterical and neurotic in his soliloquys, comparing the present squalor and irrationality to the characters of his works. He relates the life inside his text and outside his texts. Bond compares his two characters Lear and Shakespeare, on the one hand Lear despite of his pitiful conditions chooses to exercise his agency and will power while on the other hand Shakespeare choose self-loath and no action. And when there is no way to escape his own actions he takes recourse to alienation, discarding every attachment and responsibility, finally taking his own life out of guilt by consuming poison:

SHAKESPEARE: There's no higher wisdom of silence. No face brooding over the water. No hand leading the waves to the shore as if it's saving a dog from the sea. When I go to my theatre I walk under sixteen severed heads on the gate. You hear bears in the pit while my characters talk. (26)

....

I quietened the storms inside me. But the storm breaks outside. To have usurped the place of god and lied..... (27)

Shakespeare realises that he has tried to usurp the place of god. By enclosing the lands, he was taking the entire reign into his own hands. This act of enclosing and inclinations towards one's land is also a symbol of territorizing one's land and rights. Is it a way of immortalising one's right by the mortgage of such a mortal element i.e. the body? Bond is hinting at the notion of power that has been bestowed externally on the one hand, whereas on the other hand he tries to take it per force ignoring the future of the helpless. He realises that he has been ignorant of his responsibilities. Even though he deliberately chose not to talk but now at his death bed he understands how wrong he was:

SHAKESPEARE: How long have I been dead? When will I fall down? Looking for rings on beggars' fingers. Mistakes.... Mistakes.... Was anything done? Years waiting... fed.... Washing the dead... was anything done? Was anything done? Dead sugar. Was anything done? (50)

He keeps on emphasizing the need of action that he should have understood long back. Bond also focuses on the same realisation through the metaphor of Shakespeare. In the theatrical directions and the play, the word 'Shakespeare' has always been written as 'SHAKESPEARE' (21). Bond reduces Shakespeare to a device or tool through which he himself reflects upon his duty and responsibility as a writer, thus making it a self-reflexive act of writing. It was also brave enough for him to challenge the majestic image of Shakespeare making him an icon of social justice. As Plato followed that the purpose of writing should be to enlighten the mass, in the same way Bond tries to be the torch bearer against the injustice and irrationality the world is facing now. He justifies his stance as follows:

You could say that Bingo is a pessimistic play because it ends with a suicide. That is a possible approach to the play. You could say that even Lear is pessimistic. But for me this is not true, because I see them as the working-out of the rationality of society. You cannot cheat in life; you have to bear the consequences of the life you lead. Society has to bear the consequences of what it is. If you want to avoid those consequences, the only way you can do it is not by applying a remedy on top but by altering the nature of the problem below. So it seems to me that Bingo is a demonstration of the working-out of certain truths about society which are rational and coherent and from which the audience can learn. (Stoll 421)

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