

The Political theatre of John Arden: A Study of his Select Plays**Supervisor:****Dr. Roshan Benjamin Khan****Professor Dept of English (S.A.B.V. College Indore M.P)****Written by:****Gowhar Ahmad Wani****s/o Abdul Ahad Wani****R/O Pathan Pulwama****Kashmir 192301****ABSTRACT:**

Arden is a thorough socio-political playwright; every one of his works is steeped in social issues, politics and is the product of an imagination for which non-political reality, private myth, insular fortune, the discrete ego that would seem to have no independent standing as material for drama. For Arden, however, there are no clear choices, which is what pitches him above ideology; although there is clear necessity to act publicly which is what keeps his plays anchored in a perception of social actuality. He questions something we might call the “humanness of politics” in British context, its role and function as the process and measure in our life is common. That public life has to be organized, and that power has to be exerted, are the assumption, with their roots in a tragic awareness. It is this awareness which generates the “drama” of his dramas. Almost universally described as an “anti-war” drama, his most famous plays *Sergeant’s Musgrave Dance* is nevertheless a source of extreme bafflement; its denunciation of war seems confined to colonial aggression, it seems to throw up its hands in the face of the problem of violence. It is regarded as a political exhortation. *Musgrave* is a pacifist play by Arden to show the injustice and barbarity of imperialism. It deals with the realities of war and the resistance put up by people. *Armstrong’s Last Goodnight* is about impurity, about the brindled colors of politics and the devastation brought about by the perennial conflict between the general and the particular in society, the rival claims of authority and the individual. Arden’s characters do talk about the nature of war and liberty, the conflict of public and private goods but these discussions are not the climatic scenes of the plays. Moreover, they explore and present a moral situation from several view points, rather than speak for their author’s opinions. That is what makes him something extraordinarily different from a traditionally “political” playwright.

Key words: Discrete ego; social actuality; tragic awareness; barbarity; humanness in politics; exhortation

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John Arden was born on 26th October 1930 in Barnsley, Yorkshire. Arden was trained architect, well-read Marxist intellectual and astute art historian. Arden is one of the very few dramatists to be mentioned in the same breath as Shakespeare, Moliere, and Brecht. His work bore the heavy influence of Brecht and the Epic Theatre. He first gained critical attention for his radio play, *The Life Of Man* (1956). He also wrote several novels, including *Silence Among Weapons*, Which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1982. Arden wrote several Plays in collaboration with his wife, Margaretta D'Archy, which are highly critical of British presence in Ireland. His plays constantly invoke legend, historical precedent and the politics of colonialism in Ireland. He had a long history of being associated with radical left-wing politics in the U K and Ireland. In Ireland he was for a while member of Sinn Fein. Being a supporter of civil liberties, he was critical of government's anti-terror legislation, as demonstrated in his 2007 radio play *The Scam*.

John Arden is noted for satirical and innovative treatment of social themes. The name most frequently evoked in connection with John Arden's works is that of Brecht. Basic to Arden's drama is something strikingly akin to Brecht's celebrated alienation effect on stage where conflicts take place without participation of the audience. This is achieved largely through an unashamed and deliberate resort theatrically, various formal devices which keep the viewer constantly aware that he is in a theatre watch in a play. Like Brecht, Arden

realizes his dramatic conflicts in terms of social situations and pressures, rather than in emotional or spiritual developments. But where Brecht sets forth the morality as message of his plays, however controversial, contradictory or infuriating that moral may seem, Arden's even-handed exposition of motives leaves his audience without even a single disputable guideline. By understanding the villains we are tempted to excuse them, they don't seem to be villains. This device and difficulty projected in his plays namely *The Waters of Babylon* (1957), *Live Like pigs* (1958) and *The Happy Heaven* (1960). In these drama's his embattled characters struggle against their treacherous environment, though in the latter drama's the environment is ostensibly benevolent.

The events of Arden's plays are not simply dramatizations or aestheticized analogues of historical happenings, and that the poetic interest he takes in the events is not greater than his reportage. Arden is a thorough political playwright, every one of his works is steeped in politics and is the product of an imagination for which non-political reality, private myth, insular fortune, the discrete ego would seem to have no independent standing as material for drama. What is at issue is the fate of the political subject matter in Arden's plays, the apolitical uses to which he puts it, the transformations it undergoes in his half-lyrical and in polemical sensibility. What is the nature of political reality and how does man relate to it in the crucible of power, rule and social governance? What are the prices that political necessity exacts from the moral self and the psyche? How does one celebrate life in the midst of abstractions? Such are the chief energizing questions of Arden's plays. They are what make him something extraordinarily different from a traditionally "political" or "sociological" playwright. For Arden, however, there are no clear choices, which is what pitches him above ideology; although there is clear necessity to act publicly which is what keeps his plays anchored in a perception of social actuality. He questions something we might call the "humanness of politics" in British context, its role and function as the process and measure in our life is common. That public life has to be organized, and that power has to be exerted,

are the assumption, with their roots in a tragic awareness. It is this awareness which generates the “drama” of his dramas.

Almost universally described as an “anti-war” drama, his most famous plays *Musgrave* is nevertheless a source of extreme bafflement; its denunciation of war seems confined to colonial aggression, it seems to throw up its hands in the face of the problem of violence. It is regarded as a political exhortation. *Musgrave* is a pacifist play intended by Arden to show the injustice and barbarity of imperialism. It deals with the realities of war and the resistance put up by people against it.

Armstrong's Last Goodnight is about impurity, about the brindled colors of politics and the devastations brought about by the perennial conflict between the general and the particular in society, the rival claims of authority and the individual. In any case, it most fully exhibits Arden's new species of post-political and post-ideological drama, resisting partisanship, disclaiming solutions, this drama is neither hortatory nor tendentious, yet strenuously involved in actuality. *Armstrong's Last Goodnight* (1965), subtitled “An Exercise in Diplomacy” continues Arden's fascination with the game of power politics. This is a play about violence, and the Sergeant's self-imposed mission is to impress on England the sinfulness of the colonial war from which he has come, and the pointlessness of the killing on both sides.

Arden's characters do talk about the nature of war and liberty, the conflict of public and private good; but these discussions are not the climatic scenes of the play. Moreover, they explore and present a moral situation from several viewpoints, rather than speak for their author's opinions. The climax of an Arden's play is usually a confrontation, or dance, or celebration, or as in *The Workhouse Donkey*, a defeat of one party in the knowledge that neither side has made a permanent impression on other, or on itself. Arden as a major political dramatist of twentieth century and his contribution towards the growth of political drama: It might be said of the two outstanding British playwrights who were born in 1930

that both had great talents one for the epic and the other for a theatre .Arden is the nearest Britain has produced to a Bertolt Brecht (even considering Edward Bond and Howard Barker) as the range of his talent was enormous. He thought on a large canvas so that even when his plays are produced in a small intimate they give impressions of size and space. Arden had the same virtues and failings as Brecht, writings out of a passionate desire to educate and make his audiences think, while sacrificing style and his own artistic integrity where he saw a possibility of increasing the weight of his message

The play *Live Like Pigs* (1958) which depicted the squalor of the underside of society so realistically that it invoked an outcry. Another play *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance* (1958) whose protagonist is a soldier returning from the Crimean war preaching pacifism and revolution. The Works House Donkey (1963) one of the first attacks on that element in the labour party which become more interested in the trappings and patronage of power than in advancing socialism .In *Armstrong's Last Goodnight* (1965) Arden cope with Scottish dialect, but this was toned for London. His hero once again a rebel against authority. Arden is a thorough political playwright; everyone of his work is steeped in politics. Arden's characters do talk about the nature of war and liberty, the conflict of public and private good.

Arden's concept of the dramatist means that his drama's has been almost exclusively political, but his politics have changed and his involvement developed over time. In his plays he was merely concerned with how people live. Soon however, through his historical parables, Arden expanded his vision. He began to connect local issues to world issues and to historical processes, and he began to deal directly or indirectly with pacifist and socialist concerns: militarism, colonialism and economic and social injustice. Finally plays take a more militant partisan approach towards these issues condemning the imperialist, militarist, capitalist, exploitative mentality and viewing the Irish situation as a prime result of this mentality. For Arden the development of his thinking is summoned in the crises of liberal: the conflict between revolution and reform and the fear that reform is only refining and

strengthening an exploitative system. His thinking is influenced not only by world scene but also specially by Britain's past experience of empire. Arden's aspect of political mood evoked by the title of the first new wave play John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*(1956)

Arden was an intense, politically conscious and intellectual craftsman, a poet with a big vision, great command of language and ability to create history. He was an intuitive political who realized the cultural relationship between the oppressed and the oppressors and its effect on character. Had he been an American he would have written of the black experience.

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