



INTERNATIONAL POLITICS
IN DAVID HARE'S PLENTY

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Tantaunivel'sity
1992

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At the background of David Hare's plays twentieth century political third world events loom large: The Chinese revolution lies at the background of Fanshen, (1967) India's independence from British Colonial rule and the Suez Crises in Plenty, (Hare : 1978) and the Vietnam War in Saigon: Year of the Cat (1983). Hare (1986 : vii) justified his recurrent use of third world political events in his plays when he says "if you write at all about the East, you attract such gratitude from people who live there". Fanshen, a clear product of his interest in the East, possesses a political line showing how communism replaced feudalism in a small Chinese village during the 1940's. Unlike Fanshen which is accepted by critics as an overtly political drama dramatized by Chinese characters and about a

major political change undergone by the Chinese people, Plenty raised a lot of controversy among critics regarding its classification. According to Young (1978 : 13) it is a social play in which "the progress of this marriage [of Susan and her husband] is the backbone". Thus Young stresses, at the expense of attention that should be given to what characters articulate about their political milieu, the social aspect of the play. He also ignores the numerous flashbacks to political events that Hare uses in Plenty. Ignorance of English history led American theatre critic Gussow (1987 : 5) to claim that inadequate motivation of character is a weakness in Plenty, "audiences wondered in Plenty what led Susan Traherne into such acts of self - destruction (destroying her husband's diplomatic career in the process)". If the American critics knew of England's post war history maybe they could understand the causes of Susan's actions. In

an attempt to place the play within its political context Gale (1985 : 213-20) discerns the political events that lay at the background of Plenty and considers them as the cause of the social fragmentation and disintegration of English society. Gale thus limits the political perspective of the play to the national rather than international. This perspective was also adopted by Oliva (1990 : 74-86) when she defines the structure of the play as socio-political. Thus placing Hare in the larger context of socio-political writers such as Rattigan who wrote also about the psychological dislocation of individuals from post war British society, but his work does not evoke international implications found in Hare's Plenty. In Rattigan's Deep Blue Sea (1952) Freddie Page's despair remains a private affair motivated by marital difficulties, joblessness and drinking.

What is political drama? Bull (1984 : 8)

attempts to answer this question when he indicates the beginnings of political drama with the New Left May Day Manifesto. He then writes:

They (Political dramatists) share with the Manifesto an uncompromising rejection of the parliamentary system as one well able 'to absorb or deflect new kinds of demands', and the sense of a need for the formation of an extra-parliamentary movement.

According to Bull the 'political dramatists' concerns are national. Itzen (1980: 1)

opposes Bull when she maintains that:

rarely can one year be singled out as an isolated turning point, but in the case of 1968 so many events coincided on a global scale that it clearly marked the end of an era in an historically unprecedented fashion, and the beginning of a period of equally unprecedented consciousness and activism.

Itzen basically agrees with Bull on the issue of the date on which political drama began in England, but she disagrees with him on his implied definition. For Itzen political drama is concerned with global issues rather than national ones. Plenty encompasses, social, national and international concerns. Social and national concerns however received full attention from critics like Gale and Oliva. This paper is an attempt to explore the international political issues in Plenty.

At the background of Plenty lie three international political events: The Second World War, India's Independence and the Suez Crisis. These three political events mark an end of an era in the world, the era of colonialism, an attitude which marked the relationship between the East and West for a long period of time. However Imperialistic themes in English literature are not new. They were there ever since Shakespeare's The Tempest (1611) and Defoe's Robinson Crusoe

(1750) which provided the energizing myth for British imperialism up to Conrad's Heart of Darkness (1899) Forster's, A Passage to India (1924) that disturbed the already established myth. (Cheyfitz : 1991). Hare (Gussow : 1985 : 45) believed in Conrad's disturbing implication of colonialism when he maintains "Conrad described the world as it exists better than anyone else. He also pulled into it a tremendous longing for what men could be". Hare's Plenty provides the final sequel of the colonial encounter which Conrad's novel focused on: The fall of imperialism. How is this reflected in Plenty ? What does Hare foresee as far as the relationship between the East and West ? These are questions which this paper attempts to answer.

In the course of Plenty, Susan the protagonist says:

Nothing since. Nothing since then. I can't see the Egyptian girls somehow ... no. Not in Egypt now. I mean

there were broken hearts when we left. I mean, there are girls today who mourn Englishmen who died in Dachua, died naked in Dachua, men with whom they had spent a single night.

(57).

Contrary to her vivid recollections of the Second World War Susan cannot recall Egyptian girls. The juxtaposition of the two experiences aims to realize a perception of the difference between the two wars. In a flashback which calls attention to the significance of the Second World War Susan is shown as fighting with the French resistance (13). Although the success of the French Gestapo in ferretting out her compatriots brought her sometimes to the edge of despair, her role in the Second World War obviously provided Susan with a feeling of fulfillment. She recalls the astonishing kindness and bravery of the people whom she met during the war, "the most unlikely people. People I met only for an hour or two.

Astonishing kindness. Bravery. The fact you could meet someone for an hour or two and see the very best of them and then move on" (36). She herself professes "the people who stayed behind seem childish and a little silly And so driving through Europe with Tony I knew that at least I'd be able to act as I pleased for a while. That's all" (24-5). Her involvement in the fighting during the Second World War distinguished Susan from the silly people who stayed home and gave her an opportunity of playing a role she wished to play. In this, apparently, she was not the only one. All around her were people feeling the same way, that was why they were so brave. All these references point to the positive moral norm the war against Hitler exemplified, especially in so far as it is generally viewed in close relation to the saving of humanity.

Susan taunts Darwin by contrasting her role in France during the Second World War with his involvement in the Suez War: "By and

large we did make it our business to land in countries where we were wanted" (56). Susan realizes that contrary to the Second World War which the English fought with and for people, their war in Egypt was against people. The ugly picture of a colonial power comes into full view shattering the idea that the British were the saviours of humanity. (An idea which was propagated by the British in recent history expressed adequately by Kipling (Cohen : 1965 : 33) who writes "we're about the one power with a glimmering of civilization in us. As you say, we've always had it somewhere in our composition"). Everything about the English was considered noble, and superior to other nations. The myth of racial superiority was reinforced by the fact that England was already ruling half the world. British people not only believed in their superiority but also practiced it in the countries they occupied as shown in Mrs. Turton's words in Forster's A Passage to

India. Addressing Mrs. Moore a new arrival on the Indian Scene Mrs. Turton an imperialist zealot replies : "You're superior to them, anyway. Don't forget that you're superior to everyone in India one or two of the Ranis and they're on an equality" (41-42). Lord Cromer (Steele : 1983 : 15), the British Consul General of Egypt from September 1883 until May 1907 definitely believed himself superior to the natives whom he describes as "superstitious, rapacious, ignorant, corrupt". This view is central to the long-lived image of the Eastern in the Western consciousness.

The British ladies as it seems were no less conscious of their racial superiority than their manfolk, Susan is no exception. By forgetting Egypt Susan tries to forget the defeat of her English superiority. In what should have been a cheerful dinner party given by her for Darwin and a Burmese diplomat she explodes:

The words 'Suez Canal' will not be spoken Nobody will say blunder or folly or fiasco Nobody will say 'international laughing stock' Nobody will say 'death-rattle of the ruling class. We have stuck our lips together with marron glace' ... I'll tell you what it indicates to me. Bad conscience. They don't even have the guts to make a war any more.

(51-5)

Unlike Jimmy Porter's attacks on every one and everything around him in Osborne's Look Back in Anger (1956) which appears like the evil in Iago (Shakespeare : Othello : 372) unmotivated and mysterious in origin the causes of Susan Traherne's rage are revealed. She is outraged at England's military failure in Suez. Thus the realization on Susan's part of the difference between the Suez War and the Second World War is ineffectual as it failed to make her transcend her selfishness implicated in her sense of superiority. She is still imperialistically minded. The immoral implication inherent in the Suez War as far as it involves the subjugation of other peoples is of no concern to

her. It is her embarrassment, the downfall of her class and the prospect of men who are unable to fight in order to bring her past glory are what she cares about. Brock her husband points to her self love when he says:

Your life is selfish, self-interested gain. That's the most charitable interpretation to hand. You claim to be protecting some personal ideal, always at a cost of almost infinite pain to everyone around you. You are selfish, brutish, unkind. Jealous of other people's happiness as well, determined to destroy other ways of happiness they find.

(78)

This self centered attitude is profoundly treated by Hare in his play Licking Hitler (1978) which highlights the snobbish and racist attitudes of the English by suggesting that the English were not fighting Hitler for any progressive changes, for they saw themselves in the same way as Hitler did: leaders of a master race.

The correlation between England after the Suez War and Susan the protagonist of Plenty has been hinted at by several critics. In a review of the film version of Plenty Cook (1985 : 345) criticizes Hare for not only "obsessively repeating" a simplistic version of Britain but also for "a retrograde use of female characters as vehicles for [his] own hang-ups". It was neither a simplistic vision nor a personal hang up. Historical views, testify that the affinity between Susan and England goes beyond being just phenomena to perspective. Estimating English foreign policy at the time of the Suez War. Lloyd (1984 : 337) writes that in spite of the fact that decolonization in Asia began in 1947 with the independence of India:

In Britain the colonial office reckoned it would still be administering colonies at the end of the century, and it became more active than before in its efforts to guide colonies in the right direction. In retrospect this does not seem a very practicable policy.

Racial superiority still remained in British consciousness and did not allow the English to have a balanced and rational attitude in dealing with the new anti-colonial feelings that were prevailing all over their empire and therefore blundered into Suez. Considering the colonial military ambitions of The Suez Group Widgery (1976 : 48) writes:

An important wing of the Tory Party, the Suez Group, were reluctant to relinquish the zones the British Army occupied at the end of the desert war and wanted an armed colonial presence in the Near East. Their reasons were military. They still ludicrously wanted Britain to rule the waves".

The ludicrous situation was successfully dramatized by Osborne in West of Suez. In West of Suez (1971) Wyatt Gillham exemplifies forms of the misplaced idealism and imperialism which England still seems to impose on her

lost colonies. The play significantly takes place on an unnamed tropical island, a former British colony. Wyatt a successful English writer lives out a pose modelled on the old values which he justifies as making "life more tolerable" (72). His over confident, proud attitude which is displayed towards others proves fatal as the play ends with his sudden assassination by a group of Islanders.

Observations about the nature of British diplomacy in Suez are found in Plenty. Wishing to live in a fantasy of his superiority like Osborne's Gillham, Brock, Susan's husband says:

Something in the Foreign Office suited my style. Whatever horrible things people say. At least they were hypocrites, I do value that now. Hypocrisy does keep things pleasant for at least part of the time. Whereas down in the city they don't even try.

(75)

Brock's notion of the Foreign Office foregrounds that of Susan's when at the dinner

party she calls the British involvement in Suez a "fiasco". A view which is later confirmed by Sir Andrew Charleson Brock's boss at the Foreign Office when he says: "we had an empire to administer, there were six hundred of us in this place. Now it's to be dismantled and there are six thousand As our influence wanes, as our empire collapses, there is little to believe in" (72). The immoral connotations of imperial rule were revealed by the Suez War, and so Charleson can't hide behind the civilizing message or nobility of English purposes. Hypocrisy was the only solution that could sustain Brock to live up the immoral role he was playing at the foreign office but it could not be sustained. Brock therefore leaves the foreign office for a job at an insurance company. However his escape into public life is ineffectual as there he is also faced with the truth. Brock's inability to confront the truth gives shape to England's foreign policy

in the Suez crisis. Unable to confront the truth of losing her colonial power, England blunders into Suez just as Brock blunders into a job which he equally hates.

Ironically the Suez War encoded death and destruction not on the Egyptians whom the English were trying to subjugate but on themselves, an outcome which had been recorded by Braddon (1973 : 222). Braddon cites Christopher Searless of Cambridge, a nineteen year old national serviceman, who professes:

Suez taught us ... that we ... were capable of malice, of deceit on a grand scale, of killing to achieve doubtful ends. We --- my generation at least had not thought this possible We did not know we were in the wrong. We are not too sure of the facts even now. But we lost our faith then.

Loss of faith in the existing order presents Darwin's crisis. After Suez he realizes that "the entire war is a fraud cooked up by the British as an excuse for seizing the canal. And we, we who have to execute this policy,

even we were not told". Darwin could have defended the war "had it been honestly done But this time" he professes "we are cowboys" (54). Emotionally paralysed by what he considered a betrayal by his own political system Darwin fails to realize his 1947 dream of "Massive works of reconstruction" of "Jobs, Ideals" of "Roads to be built" of "Plenty to get on with" (27). He therefore fades away and dies Darwin's death gives dramatic form to England's after Suez as Braddon declares:

She [England] is not a superpower with a nuclear deterrent. She is no longer a pillar of the campaign for Nuclear Disarmement.... She is no longer an affluent society. She can no longer, faced with Ulster, wax virtuous about the shortcomings of other nations. She no longer swings Once the most adventurous of all peoples, the British have become the world's most querulous laggards. They were not so in 1956: they begun to be so in 1957: and in between come the Suez war.

(225)

It is a death resultant from the will to rule. In 1947 England could have changed her political perspective, instead of directing her policy to the subjugation of others which might have been to her best of interest. Besides getting rid of Nasser the main reason that alarmed the British and led to their involvement in Suez, according to Lloyd, that "people remembered the canal as the high road to India" (337). Unfortunately the English as it seems never accepted the fact that India had gone, but remained prisoners to their attitudes, beliefs and prejudices which determined their perspectives. In The Great Exhibition (1972) an earlier play by Hare, Maud the protagonist says "If we haven't the chance to change our lives, to change everything in our lives, regularly and at will, then there's no particular point is there?" (43). Change for Hare is the real saviour. In Plenty Susan expresses this will

to change when she says to Alice "I want to move on I do desperately want to feel I'm moving on" (30). Susan's mechanism of change is indicated in her affair with Mick, a twenty year old stranger whom she picks from the East End choosing him to father her child. She tells Mick that she cannot approach men she knows with such a request because "they are limited in their ideas" (41). This might be taken to symbolize revolt against the accepted values of English society but soon the hollowness of her posture is revealed when she marries Brock. In the course of the play we see her flitting from one pose to the other. She despises conventions but threatens suicide when Brock leaves the Foreign Office an epitome of convention (72). She hates her work yet because of it she refuses to go with her husband to Brussels (37). Ansofrage (1978 : 16) recognizes Hare's universe in Plenty as one of "behavior over beliefs, manners over feelings,

tact beyond integrity" Behavior rather than beliefs was the ultimate status which both England and Susan reach as far as change is concerned. Maud clarifies this point well when she says in The Great Exhibition "I've always said there are two kinds of people, human beings and actors"(19). Like Susan England was first an actor when she granted her colonies independence. This is well illustrated by her relations with third world peoples as Miles and Phizacklea (1979 : 5) observe when they point at the causes of racism in England:

New Commonwealth immigrants come from former British colonies, they were the natives who were conquered, and their arrival in Britain serves to symbolize the decline of the British Empire and current economic ills.

The notion of imperialism still haunts post-colonial England that is why she failed to deal with the people of her previous colonies

as different cultures with integral entities. As result like Susan she collapses, a state which is recalled in the words of Stephen, the young reporter in A Map of the World (Hare : 1986 : 168) when he says that England is "a country that died-- died in its heart -- over thirty, forty, fifty years ago". Thus Plenty presents Hare's awareness of the need for a change in his countries political perspective which might sustain a political ideology that denies the colonial outlook of demeaning other people's cultures. By extending his dramatic structure to the level of Britain Hare paradoxically encapsulates Britain's state and attitude after Suez. If Susan, Brock and Darwin are failures England is too as a result of her failure to change herself as part of the continuum of history. For although England's colonial legacy may have possibly began to decline, on the official level her attitudes closely resembled that of the mid - Victorian era. The change that England on the political level and the characters on the dramatic level is a change

of behavior rather than beliefs. By exposing Susan's superficial trials to change, Hare demonstrates the current state of disillusionment in Britain implying thus a need for genuine change. This call for change not only demonstrates Hare's concern with third world people\$ a term which generally applies to the people who suffered colonial rule, but his country's welfare which he sees in communication with the third world. Thus Hare in his praise of Conrad describes his own distinction as a playwright as he also pulls into his writing "a tremendous longing for what men could be".

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