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**Problematizing The Notion of Life : Edward Bond's "Lear" As A Study In
Biopolitics And Nihilism**

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Edward Bond's 'Lear' offers an alternative perspective on a celebrated Shakespearean play as an interaction between the complex mechanisms of social forces and power relations in a highly politicized and contemporary version of "King Lear". Lear in Bond's play is essentially a despot. The supreme authority over a people; controlling the forces of life, livelihood and labour. Unlike its Shakespearean counterpart, Bond's version of the original focuses greatly upon the various social roles that men in a society play and how their relationships with the sovereign and with each-other constitute a pattern in the existing power structures. The precepts of 'Biopower' or the power of subjugating bodies and controlling populations and 'Biopolitics' or the idea of a political body encompassing the moral and political existence of man into the scope of governance, proposed by Michel Foucault, are of paramount import here. While Foucault is of the opinion that 'Biopolitics' is essentially about good governance, Giorgio Agamben disagrees and shows how 'Biopolitics' can lead to 'Thanatopolitics' or the power of controlling man's death and hence, life. This article sets out to study "Lear" in the light of the of Biopolitics/Thanatopolitics in Bond's retelling of the tragedy of King Lear.

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It's not that all men are evil or creatures of instinct
We- even our subjective self- are products of history
Of political change
In history two things join
Our will and things beyond our will
We change what we are as a means of controlling these things
That is we create a new culture
We remain human only by changing
Each generation must create its own humanity. (Bond, Web)

The above stanza is from one of Edward Bond's poems called "*If*". It introduces us to his thoughts on humanity and the need to keep changing for the better so as to create a sound society. The idea of humanness or the notion of being a sensible human being is at the heart of his philosophy of life. We are living in a time and an age when these very notions of humanness and humanity have become problematic. Whether it is political, social, technological or nuclear warfare, men in our society are living under its shadow. Therefore, the boundaries separating altruism and animalism, good and evil, life and death have blurred. It is a life-in-death scenario. Thus, Bond in his preface to "*Lear*" opines,

As animals we react to threat in a natural, biological way; but we must also react in more complicated ways as human beings-mentally, emotionally and morally. It is because we cannot do this successfully that we no longer function as a species. Instead we have created all the things that threaten us : our military giantism, moral hysteria, industrial servitude, and all the aggressiveness of commercial culture. (Bond, xi)

In the modern nation-states, these threats have undoubtedly attained mammoth proportions. Advanced scientific and technical knowledge has rendered them all the more powerful. Every nation-state wants to be a ‘superpower’; control the most powerful weapon of mass destruction. All they are after is more territorial, political and military power. They are implementing elaborate strategies to obtain optimum services from its people, at the cost of their health and happiness, rendering their existence as living, breathing human beings perilous. These are some of the issues that are relevant to Bond’s play. He dexterously situates Lear into his modern narrative as a dictator-like figure and explores some very cursorily treated nuances of the Shakespearean masterpiece exhaustively. With the onset of the first act, Lear comes across as the man at the helm of all affairs. Therefore the military in “*Lear*” has been endowed with an all-pervasive presence, unlike the Shakespearean original. It must be borne in mind that Bond’s views on state, society, warfare and violence had its source in his own practical

experiences as a soldier in the Second World War. Power begets war and war begets violence, which in turn can eradicate entire societies and habitats. "*Lear*" provides us with an insight into the means through which jingoism becomes a state machinery to control the physical existence of its people as an excuse for greater good. Herein lies the pertinence of Foucault's concepts of Disciplinary power and Biopower, that is the power exercised over the body, in the study of Edward Bond's play. According to the theory, the 'body' is a machine and it must function as directed.; both seeking to optimize and maximize the efficiency of the body. Brent Pickett in 'On the Use and Abuse of Foucault For Politics' suggests that "the body, which in every society is in the grip of power relations, is constituted as an efficient mechanism,"(Pickett, 12) thus reducing the value of life to a mere assortment of productive organs.

Lear, as seen here, is the ruler of a territory and he is building a wall circumscribing his area of control to protect his dominion from the Duke of Cornwall and the Duke of North, his self-proclaimed enemies. In a society that demands an eye for an eye, Lear believes the Dukes are awaiting an opportunity to dethrone him so that they could avenge the death of their fathers who were killed by him in combat. Some people have been attempting to dig up the wall and Lear is afraid that it is the work of the Dukes' spies. He is keen on having the work finished as soon as possible and he finds any amount of delay a

criminal offence. His attitude towards the workmen is nothing but utilitarian. In a conversation with Warrington, Lear remarks,

Lear. It's a flogging crime to delay work. You must deal with this fever. They treat their men like cattle. When they finish work they must be kept in dry huts. All these huts are wet. You waste men.(Bond, Act1, Scene1)

Lear's interactions with his subordinates and with the army constitute a major section of the first four scenes of the first act. Lear, unlike King Lear in Shakespeare, is more of a military dictator, diplomat and a ruthless politician in the play. He is ready to use his men anyway he deems reasonable to hold on to his dominion. Therefore, he pronounces a mere accidental death of a workman as the work of a spy and guns down an innocent man implicating him for the same. He explains,

Lear. Of course, there was an accident. But the work's slow. I must do something to make the officers move. That's what I came for, otherwise my visit is wasted.(Bond, Act1, Scene1)

Throughout the play, the human body or the 'species body' is being controlled by the state and the army. The army mechanically follows the instructions of those in power. Whether it is the workmen or the soldiers, their identities as living beings become secondary to their identities as political beings. This attitude

becomes clear if we follow the conversation of two soldiers after the end of the war between the forces of Lear and that of his daughters’.

Soldier A. 'Ow long they goin' a keep us 'ere? The war's over.

They wan'a send us home.

Soldier B. They'll think a some reason.(Bond, Act1, Scene4)

As it is evident, therefore, Biopower becomes a state apparatus in suppressing personal and individual choices in the name of sound governance.

Initially, it is Lear who is in command. As his daughters form an entente with the Dukes of North and Cornwall against their father, call his extreme authoritarianism madness and render him helpless and powerless, they too assume control of the species body; maiming, pillaging and mutilating the bodies at will. Bond's depiction of physical violence and indiscriminate butchery of the human form can be seen as a metaphor for the implementation of state-directed Disciplinary power and Biopower. Warrington's torture in the fourth scene of the first act is significant. Warrington's tongue is knifed off, his head smashed, hands and feet trampled over, ears poked with knitting needles and finally thrown out into the wilderness to fend for himself. A little ahead in the seventh scene of the first act, the gravedigger's boy is brutally murdered for giving shelter to a state enemy and his pregnant wife is mercilessly violated. By the time we see the wife, Cordelia, transformed into the rebel leader; coming to power after the downfall of

Lear's daughters, her association with a rebel force too is seen expending the same mechanisms applied by its antecedents in the exertion of power.

Foucauldian notion of Biopolitics embraces Biopower and Disciplinary power as sound political foundations of any civil society. Biopolitics professes 'life' and 'living being' or *le vivant* at the core of new political battles and economic policies. Michel Foucault in 'Right of Death and Power Over Life' elucidates the crux of his philosophy,

Western man gradually learns what it means to be a living species in a living world, to have a body, conditions of existence, probabilities of life, an individual and collective welfare, forces that could be modified (Rabinow, 264)

As such he feels living conditions can be bettered and a stronger polity and competitive economy attained. But his primary aim is rather to determine what there is in life that resists and by resisting creates new forms of subjectification and life forms that escapes its domination. Maurizio Lazzarato in 'From Biopower To Biopolitics' writes,

Rather than starting from a theory of obedience and its legitimizing forms, its dispositifs¹ and practices, Foucault interrogates power

¹ Foucault in one of his interviews published in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, defines the term 'dispositif' or apparatus as a "heterogenous ensemble of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements."

beginning with the “freedom” and the “capacity of transformation” that every “exercise of power” implies.(Maurizio, 10)

Foucault goes on to define this “freedom” as a manifestation of the ‘resistances’ that regulate power relations in a society, re-establishing man’s needs to secure his moral and ethical existence within a political system. Thus, he states,

So resistance comes first, and resistance remains superior to the other forces of the process; power relations are obliged to change with the resistance. So I think that resistance is the keyword, in this dynamic. (Rabinow, 167)

As Bodice and Fontanelle discuss the sealing of their father’s death warrant and an impending war with the rebel forces under Cordelia, Bodice’s monologue on war and power firmly establishes the Foucauldian belief that neither Biopower nor sovereign power entirely determines the fate of a society but it is the action and reaction of a concatenation of forces and resistances that determine the course of Biopolitics. Bodice rues,

Bodice. War. Power. I’m forced to sit at this desk, work with my sister, walk beside my husband. They say decide this and that, but I don’t decide anything. My decisions are forced on me. I change people’s lives and things get done- it’s like a mountain moving forward, but not because I tell it to...I am trapped. Now I have all

the power and I am a slave...War is so full of chances! I only need a little luck.(Bond, Act2, Scene4)

When she says she is trapped, Foucault might have said she is really free. She is free to chart out her course of action. She is free to resist and create new forces of resistances which means she must go to war. According to Foucault if one is to consider power relations as strategic games between liberties, “in which some try to control the conduct of others, who in turn try to avoid allowing their conduct be controlled”(Foucault, 299), then power signifies the capacity to determine the field of action of another. It presumes that one is free to control and influence the actions of others. This line of thought is implicit in the model of war where one presupposes one’s freedom to coerce others into a relationship of dominance.

This once again brings us back to the point where war itself is an alternative to war, whether it is a form of dominance or resistance. Eventually, this power over life, the heterogeneous power of resistance and creation, has a “corresponding and formidable power of death”(Pickett, 20) opines Pickett. Foucault like Nietzsche believes that society is a war of everyone against everyone else. He further simplifies it and expounds a politics of the soul that says parts of individuals are always at war with other parts. As such this line of thought echoes Giorgio Agamben’s notion of Biopolitics as Thanatopolitics which reduces life to ‘bare life’ or *‘homo sacer’* (Agamben, 198) as compared to a particular mode of

life or 'qualified life'. His theory on the concentration camps of the Second World War as the point where life is reduced to 'bare life' and which he considers as the borderline signifying the materialization of death seems to find its parallel in Lear's wall, the borderline that defines who belongs where and who should live and who should not. From a supremo to a prisoner to a madman and finally a reformed militant hero and preacher, Lear's character comes full circle by the close of the final scene. Yet Lear must die and he must die at the wall itself. For the world he inhabits and the world that the wall circumvents is one "which is proved right by dying in it." (Bond, xiv) Thus Nietzsche would say,

Let us beware of saying that death is the opposite of life. The living being is only a species of the dead, and a very rare species. (Nietzsche, Web)

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