

### **Cultural Poverty and Frustration in the Plays of Edward Bond**

Dr. A. Baburajan  
Former Professor of English,  
S. M. K. Fomra Institute of Technology,  
Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

#### **Abstract**

*This article tries to explain culture as a rational creation of human beings. Man has been unjustly deprived of the economic and social conditions conducive to a healthy culture. The dehumanized values of man have driven him to a trance of thoughtlessness and cruelty. The cultural poverty and frustration and the resultant violence are therefore the fault as much of the society as of the individual. Man has become both an aggressor and a victim of situation.*

**Key words:** culture, cultural poverty, cultural poverty and frustration, aggression, violence.

#### **Introduction**

Man as a blank sheet is good by nature and that whatever ills and evils found in his affairs are due to the bad and vicious environmental arrangement, to the society and its institution, to what is called “neurotic culture”. As Fromm says, man’s hyper-aggression is not due to a greater aggressive potential but to the fact that aggression – producing conditions are much more for human than for animals, which live in their natural habitat. In a proper economic condition, the imbalance within him as well as outside could be relatively made stable with the support of culture, for it is said that culture creates people.

#### **Meaning of Culture**

The word “culture” has several meanings. In general terms it is the total way of life of the people of a society, which includes their customs, beliefs, values and institutions. It is a way of life of a group of people--the behaviours, beliefs, values, and symbols that they accept, generally without thinking about them, and that are passed along by communication and imitation from one generation to the next. Culture is, in the words of E.B. Tylor, "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society(1). Culture includes the subjects like art, science, religion, philosophy, economics, law, family and politics. Bond envisions culture as the natural creation of human nature, the implementation of rationality in all human activity, political, economic, social, private and public. Human nature to Bond is

human culture, and human nature is social. The degree of culture is measured by its rationality. It also enables us to recognize good and bad culture.

### **Scientific Barbarism**

Advanced technologies elaborate institutions and governments do not make culture; those are only organizations. They tell men how they can live. A culture also tells the same but, in addition to that, it tells them how they ought to live. It ensures that whatever is possible is done to make that ought practical. A culture must unite technology, science, political and economic organizations and relate them to an environment in such a way that as to enable us to continue our life and broaden them socially and humanly. It should help us recognize the world wherein both man's emotions and his rational mind work together. Bond uses a metaphor to drive home his point. The gap in our nature akin to stomach, the stomach walls to emotions and reason to digestive juice. This, "stomach works on what is put into it and creates sane culture – an emotionally evaluated, rational understanding of the world". (2)

Our technology and science have made us highly civilized. Our economy based on this has led us to exploitation and aggression. Technology is supposed to usher us into an era of plenty. It should build a wall of security wherein the need to compete with each other is absent and human-animal nature will remain dominant. But unfortunately, technology has failed to produce the expected result. On the contrary, it has goaded us almost to what Bond calls "a scientific barbarism". (3)

The gap between the initial success of technology and its utopian apotheosis has become wide, leaving the society considerably irrational. Technology and science are essential. But we have been giving wrong priority to technology in general, relating other moral aspects to secondary state. Morality can exist only in a culture or it must be forged in the quest of one.

### **Bond's Concept of Culture**

Bond's concept of culture is not of some privileged acquisition, reserved for a select few. Society is built on foundation. A society sans culture is a society sans reason. The society needs culture that can use science and technology wisely. Culture holds the society rationality is not measured by what society knows or has but by the use of science and technology. Depravity of culture causes social disintegration. As Sorokin points out, cultural degeneration is the cause of social disorganization. It divides the individual against individual as well as individual against himself and tears him apart inwardly. There is violation of man's inherent right to freedom, to dignity and the pursuit of happiness. Bond explains that it is

impossible to expect people to endure such violation without becoming de-humanized and full of despair. This cultural decadence is demonstrated in his play “Saved”.

The first scene of the play shows a significant symptom of the kind of society the playwright plans to expose to the audience. Pam has picked Len and brought him home. The barrenness of their conversation reflects the deprivation and emptiness of their culture. To give a sample of their dialogue:

Len: This ain’t the bedroom.

Pam: Bed ain’t made.

...

Pam: No.

Len: O. (4)

As the play progresses, we understand the correlation between the cramped condition of the home, along with domestic tension it breeds and the violence which is its inevitable expression both inside and outside the home.

‘Saved’ is about the life of a group of working class people in south London. The environment of the play is urban and cramped. Eleven of its thirteen scenes are set either in a small living room or in the manufactured space of a park. The living room relates to compression, physical nearness and oppression. The park is not one of free movement and fresh air but of frustration and boredom. There is always an uneasy quiet followed by loud sound. The television and radio keep blaring out or are switched on or off now and then. The child screams, and people quarrel, and a teapot fall shattering. Later in the open yard, the air is oppressive with voices heard shouting, off the stage, of stones thudding on the ground and pram, and on the drugged baby and later on the dead baby. All these establish the characters as victims of their situations.

Bond also shows the mental stage of the group of young men. The group range from twenty to twenty-five years of age except Collins who is teen ager. They vie with each other to assert their status in the group. They are totally deprived of feelings and there is a tendency in them to make light of everything around them. Scene three casts the polluted shade of their corrupt life. When Len and Mary go out of the scene leaving the rest of them in the park, the boys react in a sickening and disgusting way:

Len and Mary go out left.

Pete: Makes yer think.

...

Mike: Trust the unions!

Colin: Makes yer think, though. (5)

Barry, one of them is frequently the butt of ridicule. He tries to assert his status by his casual argument about killing while doing National Service. This could be called a self-assertive benign drive. But he fails to draw the expected attention from his friends and this drive becomes malignant at a later stage when Barry who instigates the terrible action of stoning the baby. This is the consequence of having no other outlet. Bond has presented more of physical movements on the stage in order to show the wasted energy involved in frustration and purposeless activity. Bond himself has described the world of 'Saved' as "the brick desert, and feeling of being in a desert of bricks seemed to be absolutely right for the play". (6)

### **Horrible Act of Stoning**

The horrible act of stoning the baby is a culmination of the excitement of the youngsters who are bored, with nothing to give purpose or fulfillment to their lives. They act as if they were all possessed. It is presented in a highly ritualized form. Scene six 'Saved', the longest in the play, opens with relative calmness and peace with Fred fishing and Len sitting on the bank. The quietness is disturbed by Len's queries. Len is anxious to know Pam's fondness for Fred. With the arrival of Mike, the air becomes lightened. But shortly Pam appears with the child in the pram and attempts to persuade Fred home. In her disgust, she leaves the baby to the responsibility of Fred and makes her exit. Fred decides to take the baby to Pam's house, but waits in case Pam returns. Just then, the gang drifts in high spirit and their attention falls on the pram.

### **Worry and Concern**

In the beginning, they, except Barry, express worry and concern for the child. When the balloon suddenly bursts, the exaltation begins with the pram being pushed. They start abusing the child by pulling its hair and smearing excreta on the child. Fred on whose back the whole action takes place does nothing about it. "Ain't my worry. Serves 'er right" (7) is his remark. After a pause, the frenzy continues with Fred hurling a stone. We feel that we are watching a kind of ritualized action on the stage. The ritualized effect is created by the length of time taken by the boys and drugged the baby who makes no sound at all. They become for that moment something other than naturalistic figures. We are reminded of a similar scene in Golding's "Lord of the Flies" where Jack and his followers indulge in a ritualized action resulting in the death of a boy. As the boys here leave the stage, they make a curious buzzing. Bond says that the behavior of the group is horrendous that it could be described in terms of the animal kingdom; their buzzing is that of a swarm of bees. David L. Hirst observes that the

psychological truth of the presentation gained through a telling observation of the attitudes of the boys makes the scene theatrically effective.

### **Vehement Protest**

This horrid enactment sparked off vehement protest when the play was first staged. Bond explains in his Author's Note, "Clearly the stoning to death of a baby in a London park is a typical English understatement. Compared 'strategic' bombing of German towns, it is negligible atrocity; compared to the cultural and emotional deprivation of most of our children its consequences are insignificant.(8) It is a representative embodiment of the worst features of modern society. He adds in the same note that the 'atavistic fury' (9) is released and the baby is killed.

### **Nauseating Horror**

The violence of stoning scene indeed renders an effect of nauseating horror; but it is a natural outcome of the emotionally, mentally and physically degraded life of the characters. The youngsters never had the slightest incentive in their world to develop any feelings. They have only shared listless spattered with sad obscenities of words and deeds. Their attitude to sex is vulgar. Smutty jokes and physical assaults on one another engage their gathering. There is a combination of boast and contempt for women when Mike announces the availability of casual sex in the local church and late night laundries. Theirs is a culture based on the contempt for life. It culminates ultimately in an act of communal self-expression. It is not a mere transcription of the brutality of the killing. The motive does not seem to be hate or sadism; but an unbearable sense of boredom and impotence and the need to experience that there is some deed that will make an end of the monotony of daily life. David L. Hirst comprehends the escalating violence entirely in terms of bravado and consideration of the child as a dirty sub-human creature with no feelings, whose punishment is therefore justified. The cold cruelty of the boys cannot be explained in terms of straightforward emotional psychology. We have to consider the deeper psychological motivation that relates their action to the social and economic situations. Tony Cult expresses that just as the baby young men are also drugged by a culture that values aggression to lurch at some foothold of status and self-regard for themselves. (10)

### **Real Source**

Bond has skillfully enacted the scene to compel us to consider its real source. Gamini Salgado admires the achievement of Bond in finding an idiom and his success in giving expressive force to the desolating way of life of this section of the society. According to

Malcom Hay and Philips Roberts, Bond contrives a means of presenting and showing without overt comment a series of situations that would force an audience to ask who is to be held responsible for the events shown on the stage. The picture of cultural impoverishment shown by Bond is so bleak that we wonder if British civilization as bad as that. He successfully raises the question against the backdrop of a society fuelled by degenerated culture. The play itself is a passionate and logical account of life, lived by the social stratum engineered to fit the needs of such a society. It exposes cruelty, violence and murder that are rendered credible as they are intimately connected to their recognizable, every setting. Every detail is registered in observation of both social and economic facts. The play is an expose, of an area of life that induces the audience to relate their own middle-class values to those observed in the drama. Sir Lawrence Oliver in a letter to the 'observer' observes that 'Saved' is not for children, but it is for grown-ups, and the; now, the grown-up of this country should have the courage to look at it. Bond precisely pinpoints that it is an empty and vicious culture but his condemnation spreads beyond individual psychology and social implications.

### **Structure of Pyramid of Aggression**

Bond in Author's preface to the play 'Lear' explains that our society has the structure of a pyramid of aggression and as the child is the weakest member, it is at the bottom. The weight of the aggression in our society is so heavy that the unthinkable happens to the children. Our obsession of discipline with children is so intense that we become warders and the children become prisoners. The elders are worn out by daily competitive struggle and they cannot tolerate the child's natural noise and mess. Certain biological expectations of the child go uncared. The fodder of emotional reassurance becomes a scarce commodity. The result is that the infant is slowly poisoned - the process carried on thinly over years. Bond endeavors to show this phenomenon and its final effect.

He himself admits that the stoning of a baby in the pram in the play 'Saved' is the dramatic metaphor he uses to convey the final effect. It should be stated that the child in the pram is dead long before the stoning. It is a dead thing culturally and emotionally. If it had survived, given its situation, it would have become someone like Fred, Mike Barry or Harry. The play's original epigraph from William Blake aptly says, "Better to kill an infant in its cradle than to nurse unwanted desires." In the same play 'Saved' Bond shows the insensitiveness of the society towards children. In Scene IV the grimness of the atmosphere is charged with frequent cry of the baby. There is a parallel increase in the volume of the cry of the baby, and the TV, which does not work properly. None of them, Mary, Harry, Pam or Len shows any concern for the crying baby. The baby is an inconvenient object to Pam. Her attitude is not due to, but apathy or viciousness.

Her deportment should be viewed in the light of the influence of home and also the economic situation, responsible for conditioning her mind. Though Len, the only redeeming person in the group, wants to take the baby in his arms, he too remains quiet, justifying that “it’ll cry itself t’ sleep” (11). The effect of the baby’s cries is so appalling that it highlights the neglect felt by everyone in the room. Ronald Bryden in the *New Statesman* has appropriately written in connection with ‘Saved’ that, “Mr. Bond is out to rub noses in the fact that the real new poor are the old poor plus television, sinking deeper in a form of poverty we do not yet recognize – the poverty of culture . . .”

Bond in another play entitled “Narrow Road to the Deep North” written in 1968 and which was revised and given a new title “The Bundle” in 1978, demonstrates the fate of the child who manages to survive the initial shocks. Basho, the poet who has set to deep north to seek enlightenment discovers a baby lying in rags by the riverbanks abandoned by its parents. He asks, “Why did its parents do that to it” (12) From the sequence that follows immediately between the peasant and his wife, Bond points out that the economic necessity has brutalized their natural feelings.

It is nothing uncommon for such people to leave their unwanted child by the riverbank with the hope that someone would take care of it. Basho is a charitable man indeed. He offers him food, adjusts the rags. He pities that the child has not done anything to earn this suffering. Yet he proceeds farther attributing the cause to the will of heaven to which the baby must cry for help. He decides to give priority to the religious virtues of ego denial and desire-denial. He prefers to wriggle out of the material world and leaves the baby to face the exposure and starvation. Bond presents before the audience the inevitable fact that peasants and their child represent the reality and Basho’s philosophic vocation speaks for ignoring that reality. He forgets that the protection of life is a fundamental instinct rooted in human identity. And the child becomes a tyrant later. Bond deploys another person, Kiro whose life had a similar beginning in the next scene of the play.

### **Two Conditional Routes**

The two figures Kiro and Shogo in this play demonstrate two conditional routes. One baby was rescued from death; the other abandoned but survived in a crippled state. Bond wants to show that initially happens to them makes them what they are. However, it has been pointed out by Peter Hollond in “Theatre Quarterly” that Bond denies any simple causality based upon psychological trauma as the reason for Shogo’s tyranny. He is emphatically not the way he is because he was abandoned. What Bond stylistically means is that the child died historically and that this is a play about a non-existent child. He further clarifies that these



sociological factors are responsible for the destruction of the normality of the child, the complete perverting of its natural assumption and expectation and the consequences.

### **Emotional Death**

Therefore Shogo, who has seen his emotional death as a child, later kills a dozen children. Shogo creates his own morality out of his own experience, which has been a replete with chaos and despair. From his dialogue with Kiro, we learn that Shogo misses his dead parents. He knows that he was an abandoned child deprived of the love when he most needed it. He is troubled by some worst and indefinable guilt. It is no wonder that his morality becomes maimed and distorted, and is ruled by atrocity as Georgina, the evangelist in the play puts it. Before killing the children he wishes to be released from the role of an aggressor. When Basho and Georgina refuse to help him, he relapses helplessly into an aggressor.

In an earlier occasion in Scene Two, set in the deep north, we find him brushing aside the charges of killing people, leveled by Kiro. At the end of the scene, Shogo checks a gun, hits a tribesman and kills him. He does not display any sign of perturbation. Bereft of any qualm of conscience, he responds, "There! See how it works! We'll take the city in a day!"(13)

### **Degree of Violence**

Bond shockingly unveils the degree of violence meted out to him as a child. The result of the deprivation is the clear relationship between victim and the aggressor, expressed in terms of cause and effect. As we see, all Bond's aggressors are victims of their situations.

In 'The bundle' Bond again focuses our attention on the operation of harsh economic and social forces on a young boy of fourteen who becomes a bonded labourer. In Scene Three of the play, a group of peasants, among them Ferryman, his wife and their adopted child Wang has taken refuge on the village burial hill because of floods. These stranded characters serve as a microcosm of the village, while cries of distrust off the stage remind us that we are watching the sufferings of a whole section of the community.

Voices (off, crying). Help, Help, Quick.

The woman's giving birth. The Hill's

Slipping into the mud. The gravestones are falling over.(14)

The landowner, we are informed, is safely settled within his compound on the hill. Then the two keepers of the landowner arrive in a boat as promised them to help in return of payment in kind or cash. When it comes to Ferryman who has nothing to give, the keeper asks for Wang as payment. "A proper indenture. Drawn up in a lawyer's office. A form of a loan, you get him back".(15)



The keeper does not compromise on the period of ten years with Ferryman. Ferryman resolves to accept the worst. When the floodwater arises and the boat is about to leave, Wang himself shouts, “Buy me! Buy me! Buy me!”(16) and thereby saves his parents. But the situation projects how much moral weight the young shoulders have to bear and at what price. Wang becomes later a rebel and a revolutionary.

### **State of Thoughtlessness and Cruelty**

Bond presents a culture that restricts the capacity of man for sympathy and deprives him of his altruistic quality ushering him to a state of thoughtlessness and cruelty. In a culture of this kind, waves of aggression are transmitted at every level – in the home, at school, at work, in art, in political debate. No wonder, a drugged culture produces characters like Peter and Barry saved are Basho and Shogo of “Narrow Road to the Deep North” are Scopey of “The Pope’s Wedding”.

### **Correction of Man’s Natural Innocence**

Like ‘Saved’, “The Pope’s Wedding” is also about the correction of man’s natural innocence by upbringing and environment. The play is set in a rural background. But the ugly head of industrialism on the horizon just begins to invade the community. On the one hand, the larger background is created by the cyclical sense of harvest, by the sixty years of the annual cricket match and by the death of Tanner Lob due to cancer and on the other hand, immediate time is a matter of day’s proximity to pay-day. The use of time within the rural community demonstrates both timelessness and economic pressure. Here too, an assorted group of young men ranging from seventeen to twenty-four years is seen affected by abstractions like society, Christian morality and the repressive rule of orders. A rudderless and restless group of which Scopey is the protagonist is totally devoid of any culture. They do not seem to work for any sustained goal nor do they appear to have been thwarted from any of their activities.

### **Timelessness and Economic Pressure**

These two are possible causes for frustrations. We could only find scuffles, irritability, moaning and joking in their group. They have nothing to do and have no money. With the arrival of girl, Pat and June, their latent energy, ignited already by gossip and drinks, is activated and finds an expression in the act of snatching the bag of Pat, the girl who eventually becomes Scopey’s wife. Flinging the bag among one another, or playing monkey with the bag is not a friendly harassment of Pat. It also paves way for another context of aggression at a later stage. There, the mob attacks the cottage of Alen not due to any hatred

towards the old man or Pat, but because they have to give vent to their energy of rebellion which knows no discretion. All these could be classified as benign aggression. But a classic psychoanalyst may discern in their action a motivation of hatred that is imbedded in their subconscious mind. It could be stated that both happen to be convenient objects to give vent to their aimless animosity.

### **Violence Accepted or Taken For Granted**

In 'Saved' and 'The Pope's Wedding', the background is a life of casual violence or at least lived in an atmosphere of violence accepted and taken for granted. In 'The Pope's Wedding' the day-to-day life of Scopey and Pat are filled with fighting or various rather tough and violent forms of chaffing interspersed with bouts of casual sex. Scopey finds that his initial triumph over his kind life by winning the cricket match and the hand of Pats as well is short lived. He is gnawed by financial pressures. Everything is predicted on scarcity and on very private property.

### **Life with No Aim**

Scopey and Pat argue about who has smoked whose cigarette. Into their life of no purpose, a recluse Alen impinges because Pat has an inherited responsibility of looking him. Alen's life of hermitage fascinates Scopey who wonders at the way Alen is able to exist with no such moments as his. He appears to be able to sustain more than moments, to offer connected significance rather than spasmodic intervals.

The congestion and randomness of the cluttered shack of Alen casts a spell on Scopey who is filled with discontent and distrust of even romantic alternatives. He misunderstands the world of Alen imagining that all these hold a secret to his existence. He offers to take food to Alen and sweep his hut, and thereby takes over the charge from Pat. He becomes so obsessed with Alen that his marriage with Pat is jeopardized. Even the entry of Pat to help Alen provokes in Scopey an Oedipal situation. Lack of communication by words or of feelings and inability to unravel the mystery of Alen isolate Scopey and an isolated man becomes violent.

### **Disillusionment**

The climax Scene Twelve shows how Scopey becomes disillusioned with Alen. There is no mystery. Alen's world and the world outside are seen as the same. Alen shows to Scopey a hitherto unknown side of himself; that of a fire and brimstone preacher. He cries, "Tobacco an' drink are Satan's whores"(17). Scopey kills Alen with a driving need to know the mystery and takes his place, wearing his coat only to realize that his imagined charisma of

Alen is based on nothing. It turns out to be a fruitless murder. It may also be said that his disillusionment and refusal to accept it force him to kill Alen and take his place.

### **Conclusion**

The killing of Alen has generated a wide interest in literary circle. John Peter in 'The Sunday Times' ponders over 'whether Alen is an emotional intruder, or is the marriage already dead of boredom?' Anthony Vivis debates in 'Flourish' the killing of Alen as, 'why Scopey suddenly kills Alen is not exactly clear. To him the only way Scopey can get any independence of the world is robbing another man of it. Scopey is indeed one of those who have set to struggle against the social structure. As Karl Marx would say that to be a slave or a citizen is a social determination. Man is not a slave as such but he is a slave within society and because of it. Paradoxically Scopey becomes both the aggressor and the victim with the redeeming quality, namely, the driving need and quest for the truth.

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