



**JOHN ARDEN'S AMBIVALENT NATURE AS PROJECTED IN HIS
PLAYS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO HIS SERJEANT
MUSGRAVE'S DANCE: A BRIEF NOTE**

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to project John Arden as one of the most vibrant dramatists who found a new place for verse in the theatre and his dramatic output as covering a wide panorama of themes ranging from pacifism, discipline repression and anarchy. This article focuses on how the playwright John Arden has broadened his canvas by delving deep into the contemporary socio-political issues of this era and given voice to them without any hesitation but with his ambivalent attitude and authenticity in all respects.

John Arden is a notable writer among the outstanding dramatists who were held responsible for the revolution in the mid 1950s. The dramatists of this period became popular in and around with the audience just because of offering many new insights through their dramatic pieces. Arden, with his ambivalent attitude, achieved success and got recognized as a dramatist of considerable repute. In the words of Simon Trussler, "Arden's approach-his impartiality.....attracted the intellectuals.....It (Arden's plays) defined not dogmas but dilemmas" (P 90). Unquestionably, Arden is a skillful craftsman even though the audience find it difficult to understand him at the first instance. Contemporary critics have identified John Arden as one of the 'Royal Court Dramatists', each one of whom shows an individuality in presenting his plays. Arden's individuality is seen in attracting the attention of the audience by his even-handed exposition of things. He is one among the champions of this post-war theatre which includes John Osborne, Ann Jellicoe, Norman Frederick Simpson and Harold Pinter. The first play produced at the Royal Theatre was Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* in 1956. Following his success, John Arden achieved great popularity through the publication of his play *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* in 1959. Both Osborne and Arden won the "Evening Standard awards for the most promising playwrights of the year" (Gray 1)

Following Brecht who is noted for the use of the technique called 'Alienation effect' and for various other devices like use of masks, music, dance and mixture of different kinds of language ranging from slang to highly worked poetry, Arden has used these techniques in his plays. Though some of Arden's contemporary writers like Osborne, Alun Owen, Harold Pinter, Clive Exton, Henry Livings, Ann Jellicoe, N.F. Simpson, Arnold Wesker and Brecht are noted for their kinds of approach to their plays in treatment of themes and devices, John Arden is quite different from all these dramatists because of his ambivalent attitude towards what he writes. There is a frequent use of songs in most of his plays. Morris says: "He uses songs and dances as decorative coating to palliate the bitter pill" (Morris 30). In the words of Anderson, "Arden found a new place for verse in the theatre, using it in a way that owes something to Brecht, something to the English Ballad tradition and great deal to his own sense of the poet's role within society....Whatever techniques Arden may have in common with Brecht, the world-picture that emerges from his plays is distinctly his own" (PP 54-55).

Not only Brecht and Harold Pinter, there are many other dramatists like Sean O'Casey, Samuel Beckett, Synge, Malory and Henry Livings who are said to have influenced Arden. Gray rightly holds: "Arden admired them and has also learned from them" (P 56). It is not surprising to find that Ben Johnson has been a major influence on the works of Arden. For him, life itself is a play or dream and so the theatre is its mirror. That means, the theatre has to present the real life without any change. Gray points out Jonson's contract between him and his audience, at the beginning of his *Bartholomeu Fair*. Here, he promises to think for themselves. This relates very much to the unspoken contract between Arden and his audience" (P 53).

According to Glenda Leeming, "though Arden is one of the major playwrights of his generation, he is one of the most difficult to comprehend because of his ambivalent attitude towards anything" (P 30). First of all, one must know the meaning of 'ambivalence'. The Right Word at the Right time defines the term as "the word ambivalence.....coined from Latin words meaning roughly 'double values'. It refers to the simultaneous presence in a person's mind of conflicting feelings towards someone or something" (Kahn 47). According to the Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought, the term is used originally as ambivalence in Abnormal. Psychology and Psychiatry, later annexed by literary Criticism denote the situation in someone entertains simultaneously or in alteration, opposed attitudes or feelings or, sets of values; the familiar 'love-hate relationship may be said to

exemplify reciprocal ambivalence, Whereas, in general, ambivalence is a potential source of undesirable stress.....in a writer it is widely regarded as a source of strength and desirable tension, and in a fictional character as evidence of subtlety in his or her creator” (Bullock 19). In the light of these meanings, Arden’s plays are examined. Arden is found to be rather uncertain about what he is depicting on the stage, because he presents the conflicting ideas of a social or political problem rather impartially.

John Arden is, no doubt, a playwright with terribly mixed feelings, for he does not stand for a particular view or idea. He neither supports nor opposes. There are neither heroes nor villains nor irredeemably bad ones. Moreover, there is a progress from speech to song, from casual prose to highly formal verse. According to Taylor, “the main characters of Arden’s plays are either simply good or bad; the actions and situations are never clear to be understood, to be approved of or disapproved of. Consequently the audience is given no simple guidance to what its reactions should be”(P 84). Here the ambivalent nature of Arden is taken up for an examination with reference to his select plays.

Serjeant Musgrave’s Dance is one of John Arden’s best known and most frequently performed plays. One finds it difficult to understand the play because of its ambivalent nature. Caryl Brahms remarks:

“Not until the last fifteen minutes of this mystifying
but enthralling play did I begin to get the
message-or what, for the purposes of the critique,
I intend to settle for as being the message” (P 106)

Yet, this play has been successfully interpreted in many ways Serjeant Musgrave’s Dance is both an expression of contemporary life and a depiction of historical facts. According to Raje Morris, it is nothing but a slight modification of real incident in Cyprus. Arden himself said:

“A soldier’s wife was shot in the street by
terrorists –and according to newspapers reports-
which was all I had to work on at the time-some
soldiers ran wild at night and people were
killed in the rounding-up. The atrocity which
sparks off Musgrave’s revolt and which happens
before the play begins is roughly similar”

(Mooris 29)

Morris says that Arden does not present the massacre in all its goriness. But he has altered certain facts such as reducing the number of persons killed or injured. (P 29). At the same time, the background to the collier’s dispute is also historically accurate. The five years between 1875 and 1880 saw a slump during which wages fell and men were dismissed. The play is set in the 1880’s, a period in which the British investments in other parts of the world were at a very high level. Strikes were not illegal and unions are officially recognized, but the army was used in the past to control strikers. Whether it is historical or non-historical, one can not exactly say what Arden conveys in this play. Anyhow, critics have examined many themes. The theme of pacifism, discipline, repression and anarchy fill out the plot out line to a finished structure.

Critics like John Russell Taylor and Rekha Raje Morris say that this play deals with the theme of pacifism. Through the central character of the play, Musgrave, Arden projects the theme of pacifism. He and his fellowmen come to a coal-mining town. His purpose is to teach pacifism to the townsmen. The teaching fails very much in that he teaches pacifism at gun-point. Sitting on the barrels of a gun, he talks of peace. Instead of bringing in peace, Musgrave brings in commotion. From the beginning, he poses before the community as if he were there for poses before the community as if he were there for recruiting men for the army. Only in course of time, he reveals himself as an avenging fury even to his fellowmen. The problem arises when people cannot accept his way of teaching pacifism. He wants to make out the ‘Logic’ by killing twenty-five men for those five slaughtered abroad. He who has come to talk of pacifism says: “But nobody moves out of the market place. You saw the gun loaded” (P 171). Before anything happens seriously, the dangerous moment of this scene is relieved by the arrival of the dragoons. Both Attercliffe and Musgrave are arrested. Actually what the audience grasp from this play is that pacifism should be sought, but not by violence.

According to Michal Anderson, Serjeant Musgrave’s Dance is a play about discipline, repression and anarchy. He says: “This theme of discipline lies at the heart of Serjeant Musgrave’s Dance. Musgrave is a victim of the disciplined system to which he has given his life. Eighteen years of working to bugle and drum have been defeated by one night’s reprisal. The reassertion of discipline-represented by the arrival of the Dragoons at the end of the play-means the defeat of his attempt as an individual to respond to his awareness of the fact that discipline, enforced by institutions is harmful. Because of his madness, he does not see that the means he has chosen are themselves an atrocity. The theme of repression is a form of control of feelings and actions. The soldiers being in the army is itself a symbol of repression. To carry out their duties perfectly, the soldiers have to suppress their natural human feelings. If killing is a soldier-without the natural human feeling that it is horrifying. And in the soldier’s relationship with Annie, only Sparky is able to respond as a human being with sympathy and understanding. Sparky sees her loneliness similar to his: her human feelings-of love-

have been repressed by bitter experience-the betrayal of her soldier-lover-and his, have been repressed by his service in the army.

However, Arden's use of the theme of the anarchy is more subtle than it appears at first. Anarchy is created by its opposites-repression and discipline. It is the possible result of the confrontation between the mines and the owners. It is a conflict between the miners and the owners. It is a conflict between the upper class and the lower class. The colliers are on strike to wages. They are stubborn in not breaking the strike. The miner's strike is anarchy in the eyes of the authorities. Neither side is ready to abandon its fixed attitudes and to make the necessary concessions towards a reasonable settlement. Musgrave's 'logic' is itself anarchic, for it demands the killing of innocent townfolk in peace-time. At the same time, the townfolk want to live their lives in peace, surviving difficult times as best they can. This is anarchy according to Musgrave. Neither the authorities nor Musgrave realize that they hold mistaken ideas of what anarchy means. Order is re-established only at the end of Act Three. The townsmen dance in relief at the establishment of law and order:

The Winter's broken up
Let normal life begin again (188)

The dance does represent the return of the order and as such, it is non-anarchic. But it is ironical that the exploited-the mines-join hands with their exploiters in a dance. They dance in celebration of the return of the order and discipline that represses them. As regards characterization in Serjeant Musgrave's Dance, one cannot say whether the characters are good or bad. Arden portrays both good and bad qualities of a character. One has to judge the characters from the very nature of their behavior. There are three types of characters in the play-the soldiers, the colliers and the authorities. Two women characters-Annie and Mrs.Hitchcock in the bar-are seen as being related to these three characters. Musgrave is the bleak centre around whom the other characters are grouped and Arden portrays both sides of Musgrave. He is a pious man who believes that everything happens according to the will of God. He rightly says: "Our message without God is a bad belch and a hiccup" (P 123). He also believes that soldier ship makes one proud. He says, "A Soldier's life is to lay it down, against the enemies of his queen-against the invaders of his home....against slavery, cruelty, tyrants" (P 169). He is clever and cunning in tackling the townsmen to carry out his 'logic'. He glamorizes them with flags, drums, shillings, sovereigns, drinks and jolly speeches. He attracts them by showing the rifles and Gatling gun. Throughout the play, it is Musgrave who dominates and his domination becomes stronger under his downfall. Other soldiers who have deserted and accompanied him to this town are Attercliffe, Hurst and Sparkly. Though they are in a single group, each one of them differs from the other in his attitude towards life. "They are sharply and effectively differentiated," (P 62) says Michael Anderson.

Of the women characters, Annie is a pathetic character. When Annie blames a soldier, Attercliffe defends the soldier who is always in the danger of being cuckolded. By presenting the contrasting experiences faced by Annie and Attercliffe, Arden shows that not only do women undergo suffering as the soldiers go far away, but also the soldiers suffer much leaving their wives and children far behind.

One finds also the dual nature in Annie. When the play opens, she is very much worried over her desertion by Billy Hicks. She lives in dejection and sings melancholy:

"Because we know he'll soon be dead
We strap our arms round the scarlet red
Then send him weeping over the sea"

(Act, Sc-i)

Very soon, she tells Hurst:

"I'll come to you to night" (P 130)

In Serjeant Musgrave's Dance, Arden does not let the audience understand clearly what he is presenting on the stage. Nothing happens in the play as the audience expect. The ambivalence in situation is made effectively by the colour imagery. The colours in this play are "vivid and primary" (Gray 33). Arden himself has commented on the significance of the colours he has used:

Black is for death and coalmines. Red is for
murder and for the soldier's coat the
Colliers put on to escape from his black.
Blue is for the sky and the sea that
parts true love. Green fields are speckled
with bright flowers. The seasons are clearly
defined.: white winter , Green spring, Golden
Summer, Red Autumn" (Gray 109).

The ambivalence in style is seen in the blending of songs and prose. The soliloquy of Musgrave is in poetic prose:

"My prayer is: Keep my mind clear so I can
weigh judgment against the Mercy and judgement
against the Blood and make this Dance as terrible

as you have put it into my brain. The word
alone is terrible; the Deed must be worse. But
I know it is your logic and you will provide” (123)

And the Parson, the mayor and the Constable speak solid prose peppered with clichés (P 111). So even the mixture of verse and prose is also considered as his ambivalent attitude. Like Sirjeant Musgrave’s Dance, all other plays project his ambivalent attitude to moral, tragedy, social and later political problems.

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