
Greeting the Apocalypse: Anarchic Dystopia in Bond's *The Balancing Act*

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a neorealist approach to the consequent greeting of the apocalypse because of the anarchic structure of society and the world community, as depicted in Edward Bond's play *The Balancing Act*. This paper discusses the play through the lens of the theories of International Relations, namely, structural realism and neo realism as propounded by Kenneth Waltz (1979), John Mearsheimer (2014), and Joseph Grieco (1988) in relation to the anarchic structure of international politics and society. Presence of a supreme sovereign authority can ensure order in the affairs of society and the world at large. However, absence of such an authority leads to an anarchic system where coercive power holds the sway. There are no moral principles, and there are bleak chances of cooperation. One feature of a dystopic society is that it exudes disorder. In the paradigm of structural realism, the prevailing anarchy may lead to a dystopic world where it is necessary to find a balance; otherwise, apocalypse might be inevitable. Edward Bond, in his play *The Balancing Act*, displays a deep sense of the prevailing anarchy in the existing world order. The 'city' in *The Balancing Act* is reflective of the dystopic existence in an apparently crumbling world order. The 'city' is an incapacitated conglomeration of a traumatized community because of its struggle for a balancing act in an already imbalanced world. The metropolitan appears gloomy and silent. Moreover, the inhabitants give a materialistic response to the inner callings of the soul as well. The madness, melancholy and frenzy are mere symptoms of an underlying anarchy in individual, communal, and international life. Neither the protagonist forces nor the antagonist forces in the play could perform the balancing act to avert the apocalypse due to the anarchic structure of life, and consequently greet the approaching apocalypse.

INTRODUCTION

Andre Bazin, a French film critic, argues that "neorealism portrays truth, naturalness, authenticity" (Bondanella, 1987, pp.3-4). It may prove true for a neorealist analysis of a literary genre – drama – which comes closest to cinema. Drama like cinema is an art; in fact, it is a mimetic art, that relies on symbols and images for a just representation of the society and world at large. A playwright sees the activities in life as performances on stage; hence, a playwright may use performances on stage as a comment on both the action and inaction in life. Furthermore, a playwright through the medium of drama could trace the transformation of human instincts such as the instincts of life and death. Edward Bond's *The Balancing Act* (2013) represents these instincts under the effect of the prevailing anarchy in a dystopic existence. There is a multi-layered anarchy at work in *The Balancing Act* and identifying these layers would help in comprehending the arrival and greeting of the apocalypse in the play. As Kenneth Waltz remarks, "Distinguishing between anarchic structures of different type permits somewhat narrower and more precise definitions of expected outcomes" (Waltz, 1979, p. 70). In *The Balancing Act*, the

apparently virtuous forces display an indifference to the callings of Viv for striking a balance. The inability to find order, amidst the social and global anarchic structure, renders the inhabitants of the 'city' both choiceless, and helpless. The only option is to find a balance through the rather violent and destructive forces such as the Foreman, or steadily move towards an inevitable apocalypse. Hence, the violent forces overpower the virtuous forces in an anarchic world and greet the apocalypse in unison with a dystopic reality of life. It is a manifestation of the paradigm of structural realism and neo realism with a perpetual power competition and "according to Waltz, power is a means to the end of security" (Bayliss, 2020, p. 203). In such circumstances, there are attempts for security maximization through power maximization, and, as Grieco mentions, the distribution or accumulation of "absolute and relative gains" (Grieco, 1988, p. 487). The reading of Edward Bond's *The Balancing Act* provokes a study of the anarchy in society brought face to face with spiritual decadence of the inhabitants in a dystopic world. The portrayal of the 'city' and life in the 'city' represents the anarchical existence in our world. In such a world, humankind apprehends the apocalypse; it is in fact ready to embrace it.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Edward Bond's works manifest his political world view along with his philosophical ideas. His works present the work of an artist who is a humanist as well. The transformation of Edward Bond's works since the writing of *The Pope's Wedding* (1962) represent how art can be brought to the purpose of truth. The story in Bond plays is not told for its facts but for its truth, which may be social, individual, philosophical, or political. The presentation of the truth through a fictional dramatization is a tool to find ways of betterment in life, or at least a representation of it. Edward Bond says, "My plays since then have been an exploration of the problems of being a human being in the twentieth century and to try to find out why things go wrong and how we could correct them" (Trussler, 1985, p. 65).

Bond's plays in the twenty first century take a step further to demonstrate the chaos that precludes human consciousness to find out ways to ensure a balance in life. As "Edward Bond's contribution to the post-war theatre lies in exploring and expanding the margins of theatre by imbuing his plays with the most challenging and debatable topical issues" (Mander, 2018, p. 1203); similarly, post 9/11 Bond's plays explore the challenges of disillusionment in a highly advanced yet doomed world. These plays present a gloomy vision of the society in future, which is fast approaching its end. Bond's later plays also trace the responsibility of mankind for their actions as active agents in shaping the apparently inevitable. Khatoon (2018) argues that

"Bond's later plays *Olly's Prison* (1993), *Coffee* (1996), *The Crime of the Twenty-first Century* (2001), *The Balancing Act* (2003), and *Innocence* (2011) return to the image of a dark, devastated, and sealed-in claustrophobic space haunted by violence and insane spectral figures all of whom are victims of aggression and irrational conflicts and wars. (Khatoon, 2018, p. 286-87)"

Violence is a characteristic feature of Bond's Plays. He implies that gradual industrialization has brought to fore the otherwise hidden violence, just as Mander (2018) opines, "The violence is detached, impersonal and perverted" (Mander, 2018, p. 1204). Bond's plays present multiple "forms of violence and insanity presented through themes and images that hark back to the Gothic world" (Khatoon, 2018, p. 287). In his political plays such as *The Bundle*, *Stone*, *The Worlds*, there is explicit declaration in support of political violence. Furthermore, these plays present a society marred by antisocial behaviors.

Simultaneously, politics is a major concern of Bond plays. Bond presents the political theme to raise questions over the political crisis at multiple layers of the society and political spectrum. As he sees his plays as Rational Theatre, so he raises

questions as a political thinker. His plays do not propagate any ideology rather unmask "the existing hegemony" (Mander, 2018, p. 1202). Apparently, his images of violence and concept of rational theatre are opposed to each other. However, "when explored they are aligned on the same side attempting to articulate the consciousness of 'transindividual subject'" (p. 1202). Bond's plays are also a remark on how irrationality damages a society. "Bond considers such a society more dangerous than insanity of people like Hatch, Greta, Old Woman in Coffee, mad Hoxton in *The Crime*, and above all, Viv's madness in *The Balancing Act*" (Khatoon, 2018, p. 286). Furthermore, his plays are a reminder of the need for change in the political sphere. Bond also attempts "to identify what we need to change" (Mander, 2018, p. 1203). In his plays, Bond raises issues about the defining limits of civilization and of the human potential to combat them. "His plays exemplify Barrett's definition of art" (Khatoon, 2018, p. 287). There is an 'aboutness' in his plays, and his artwork demands interpretation along with an attempt to profile the contemporary era.

Research Questions

The present study attempts to find answers to certain key questions.

1. How does the prevalent anarchy in Edward Bond's play *The Balancing Act* portend the impending apocalypse?
2. How does the absence of choices in the play shut the doors to any possible solutions to avert the apocalypse?
3. How does the dystopic society in the play suffer from a similar crisis of the conflict-ridden society in the 21st century?
4. How does the play define 'power' as a determining principle in an anarchic system?

Theoretical Framework

Neo-realism has developed as an important variation of Realism. Neorealists stress that power determines the chances of survival in the international community. Furthermore, the structure of the global system of politics determines how states and actors in the international community behave. The structure of relations among the actors in the international society could be characterized in multiple ways. One way to characterize it is to consider it the manner of state interactions in a global interstate system. Another way is to consider it a set of the three Cs of international relations, namely, 'conflict', 'competition', and 'cooperation.' Marxists take a social approach by rejecting the view of state cooperation and conflict; they focus on the material aspects. Liberals and Neo-Liberals look at these interactions through a lens of institutional act of balancing. Whereas the Realists and Neo-Realists emphasize on the principle of self-interest in a world of competition. Kenneth Waltz and Headley

Bull assert that there is “a condition of international anarchy” (Bayliss, 2020, p. 96). This also refers to an implicit absence of a governmental structure, which provides a basis to Waltz for emphasizing “the inevitability of power struggles that can only be constrained by a balance of power” (Bayliss, 2020, p. 96).

Waltz's neo-realism is also termed as structural realism. Waltz believes that there is a prevailing anarchy in the structure of the international community, that is an ‘anarchic system’. In an anarchic system, power is the defining element. For structural realists, order depends on the ‘balance of power.’ Imbalance would result in disorder that would disrupt the affairs of life. Hence, power is the only force that could ensure security. Powerlessness would compromise the security of both the individual actors and the community. Waltz explicitly states, “the ultimate concern of states is not for power but for security” (Waltz, 1979, p. 40).

John Mearsheimer (2014) observes the power dynamics operating in the anarchic system under his theory of “offensive realism, which is another variant of structural realism” (Bayliss, 2020, p. 203). Whereas Waltz's ‘structural realism’ is termed as ‘defensive realism.’ Mearsheimer argues that uncertainty prevails in an anarchic system; power accumulation is the best possible option for actors in the international community because none are satisfied with the status quo. Mearsheimer (2014) states that “there are no status quo powers” (Mearsheimer, 2014, p.1). Further creating a perpetual imbalance of power, and global hegemony is an unlikely ideal because “liberal hegemony is an ambitious strategy”. (Mearsheimer, 2018, p.1).

Joseph Grieco is a neorealist scholar “who focuses on the concepts of relative and absolute gains” (Bayliss, 2020, p. 256). Grieco (1988) asserts that the actors in the international community aspire to maximize power, which he terms as “absolute gains” (Grieco, 1988, p. 499). He also claims that the actors in the international community may also consider how much power they might achieve in any endeavour of cooperation with other actors. He terms it as “relative gains” (p. 499). However, anarchy is a major obstacle to any cooperative arrangement. Grieco (1988) thinks that in a neorealist view of the world “imbalanced achievements of gains” and a danger of losing security impedes cooperation (p. 502), and “international anarchy fosters competition and conflict among states and inhibits their willingness to cooperate even when they share common interests” (p. 1). Hence, the balanced or imbalanced distribution of gains affects international cooperation.

The prevailing anarchy is the reason for the constructivist notion of “self-help” as the way of

living. The constructivists believe that the world system is capable of change. Such change may provide a balance or result in creating an imbalance. For neorealists three major ethical concerns are survival, status, and self-help. The anarchic system also influences the choices that actors within the anarchy make. In an anarchic structure, the weaker actors “suffer from a lack of choice” (Bayliss, 2020, p. 482). Women suffer the most from an absence of choices. This culminates into paid and unpaid activities, which is termed as “double burden” (p. 518). Neo-realists suggest the neo-liberals misconstrue the neorealist analysis of the anarchy; hence, neoliberal institutionalism fails to comprehend the impact of anarchy, as interpreted by the neo-realists. Neorealists focus on the issues of security whereas, neo-liberals are more focused on institutions and issues of economy to find a balance. Parent (2015) states, “Neorealism argues that great powers seek security in a self-help world. The best means for protection are internal balancing and external balancing” (p.54).

DISCUSSION

The Balancing Act opens in a hushed setting shrouded in fear and despondence. Something is ill at ease, and Viv is awe struck with that hidden chaos, which she tries to calm down with a “calming gesture.” The play introduces the spectator with a lull. There is a ‘silence’ in the opening scene which is broken by “a knock on the door”. However, Viv “does not react” (*The Balancing Act*, I). There are multiple intervals of ‘silence’ in scene 1, 2 and 3 that contribute to the gloom and fear that hint at both helplessness and hopelessness. Scene 2 also opens with a predominant fear and loneliness which is accompanied by a silence. The intervals of silence are often a bridge between dialogues that hint both implicitly and explicitly towards the anarchy, and the attempts to find a balance.

Viv Even a grain a' sand could do it
Silence

Nelson Everything moves – people – cars – trains
– planes – accidents –
wars: yeh. So the balance changes all the time.

Viv Chaos (*The Balancing Act*, 2003, sc. 1. P.112).

Hence, the action takes place in a ‘city’ where the denizens are in midst of a chaos and experience the changes in balance. Viv feels that there is a spot that “keeps the world in balance” (sc. 1. P. 112). She also apprehends that “if it was trod on the balance 'd go” (sc.1 p. 112). Silence is also a metaphor for the people who might be moving towards the end “dead 'n silent like the crisps” (sc. 1. P. 112). Silence represents the responsibility of humankind of perpetuating the anarchy to disastrous extremes. The DSS officers criticize Nelson for his criminal silence. “You sit in silence.

It doesn't matter now. You were silent then. – and a girl is dead. Why were you silent" (sc. 3. P.121)?

The neorealist vision of a global anarchy is the main concern of all the major characters. Viv tells Nelson about the dystopic existence.

The world's unbalanced. All the changes. Everything's too fast. Buildin's too tall. Too much traffic. Accidents. Crowds too big. Messages flyin through the air. It's never quiet. Even at night. Wars. Bombs. Rockets. It's all unbalanced (sc. 1. P. 111).

The One-legged Thief also implies that there is anarchy and "the world is spinning around" (sc. 4. P. 126). When Nelson tells him that he has two legs, the One-legged Thief calls it "the Dark side" as if it was an anomaly to have two legs for maintaining balance. In the next scene, Nelson tells the old woman, "The world is in a bad way" (sc. 5. P. 131). The old woman responds in an apocalyptic tone "Its worse 'n bad: it ain exist" (sc. 5. P. 131). Nelson also draws a picture of global anarchy with a reference to news in the age of information. Nelson says,

These newspapers 're a map 'a the world. Look. Wars in every continent. Air polluted. Soil ruined. Sea contaminated. Read it. Fires. Floods. Crime. Cities vandalised. People sick 'cause they 're too fat. The poor starving 'cause they cant buy food. We sell guns t' child soldiers t' kill each other (sc. 6. P. 143).

Nelson's speech is his final comment on the global anarchy and the dystopia which he finds himself in. There is no controlling authority. The world is out of control. Environment, society, agriculture, urban planning, food crisis, poverty, and crime rate present a gloomy picture. This is an echo of what A J Vinci (2014) mentions about the existence of war lords in the anarchic politics of the world that the "political community is made up of those who are members of the warlord organization and look to the warlord as the sole source of authority" (Vinci, 2014, p. 234). Such warlords are like the Foreman who while having access to the balancing spot ensue further anarchy and invite the apocalypse.

The anarchic dystopia in the play is the foreground of the approaching apocalypse. The DSS officer acknowledges the prevailing anarchy in conversation with Nelson. "The world spins out of control. The chaos. Confusion" (The Balancing Act, 2003, sc. 3. P. 121). The DSS Officer further says, "the world will end any day" (sc.3. p. 121). In scene V, the old woman suggest that the apocalypse has taken effect, "it don't exist" (V 156). In scene VI, the Foreman speaks about the anarchy and the approaching apocalypse.

Foreman Clears his throat The world's in a bad state. It has become unbalanced. Armies. Deforestation. New diseases. Pollution. Youth. Gangs. Crime. Knives with blood on them– and

dried egg. Anarchy creeps in everywhere (sc. 6. P. 137).

The speech correlates with the novel diseases, environmental concerns, criminal strife, and social problems of the contemporary times. Interestingly, the wife of the Foreman "wears an anti-germ mask" (VI. 66). It has remarkable relevance to the contemporary times when COVID 19 has changed the lifestyle and anti-germ masks have become a norm. The play has a prophetic truth and predicts a world of self-help and an impending apocalypse out of the global anarchy that exists in every sphere of life. The Foreman reiterates, "You see! – anarchy everywhere" (sc. 6. P. 139). Basrur and Kliem (2020) refer to a similar anarchy and non-cooperation in the contemporary world grappling with the challenge of a plague.

Even in the world's most integrated supranational organization, the European Union (EU), states readily violate otherwise sacrosanct principles of cooperation, and realists would not be surprised by how quickly lofty European ideals and norms made way for national self-help once the Covid-19 crisis hit the continent. (p. 3)

Similarly, the DSS Officer speaks of the misery that prevails in an anarchic world. He refers to "broken marriages. Beaten wives. Abused children. Damaged teenagers. Delinquent vandals. Deranged pensioners. Silly women in debt for frivolities they don't even unpack" (sc. 3. p. 119).

A constructivist choice conundrum in the play is indicative of the dystopic existence in a global anarchic structure. There is a reference to food crisis as there is only one flavour of crisps available. Furthermore, it is a Hobson's choice. Twice in the play, Nelson fails to find the desired flavour of crisps. Nelson tells Viv, "Got yer crisps. Not ye favourites. They was out" (sc.1. p. 107). Later in the play Nelson tells One-legged Thief that he had bought "Liver 'n bacon" flavour of crisps for Viv despite the fact that Viv "didn't like bacon" (sc. 4. p. 124). It was a Hobson's choice for Nelson because it was "all they 'ad" (IV 71). He says the same when he returns with Liver and bacon flavour for One-legged Thief. This is also a criticism of neoliberal economic institutions, which has led to a corporate culture ensuing anarchy in the market. The Foreman expresses his frustration on the multiplicity of choices. When he stabs his wife "with the butter knife", he looks at the bread knife and meat knife. "Weights a knife in each hand" and exclaims, "choices, choices" (sc. 6. p.141).

Bond presents the neo realist concept of anarchy as a dystopia in a symbolic and veiled criticism of liberal institutions. As Rythoven (2014) opines, "Dystopianism is a form of political idealism but instead of exaggerating the prospect of liberal progressiveness it exaggerates illiberal regression" (Rythoven, 2014, p. 3). In the play, Viv uses a blanket to cover up the imaginary children whom

she thinks will be devastated by the prevailing anarchy.

Viv stands – throws open the blanket Come t' me! Quick!

Come! Come! Children! Children! Holds the blanket out. (sc. 1. p.114)

Viv's attempt to cover the children under the blanket is like UNICEF's attempts to protect the children suffering across the planet. However, these attempts under the prevailing anarchy are not entirely successful. UNICEF report *Every Child is protected from Violence and Exploitation* mentions "The failure to realize the right of the child to birth registration significantly compromises their right to be protected from harm" (UNICEF, 2018, p. 3). It also mentions that in countries like Pakistan "only one-third (34 per cent) of children under age five are registered" (UNICEF, 2018, p. 5). It is an indicator of the challenges liberal institutions face in an anarchic world. As neorealist have been critical of the failure of neoliberal institutions in a global anarchic structure. Neorealists "claim that neo-liberals are too optimistic about the possibilities for cooperation" (Bayliss, 2020, p. 246). Similar failure of liberal institutions is evident in the failure of the police officer to arrest the One-legged Thief. While Nelson is sitting with the handbag and crutch which the One-legged Thief has thrown to him, the police officer arrives but fails to guess that the thief might be around as all the props of the thief are with Nelson. "Police off. Shouting from police car. Evenin sir. The one-legged thief with the crutch and top hat hasn't run back this way by any chance" (*The Balancing Act*, 2003, sc.4 p. 123). The play hints that the liberal institutions are robotic and blind to the neo realist realities. The DSS Officer tells the Foreman, "They are civil servants. They notice nothing" (sc.6. 147). Similarly, there is a characteristic neorealist criticism of neoliberal institutionalism when the DSS officers quotes Dante to compare the hopelessness at the DSS office to that in hell.

DSS Officer Over the gate of hell is written: 'All hope abandon you who enter here.' The literary reference is to Dante. He might have been quoting from the entrance to his local DSS office. (sc. 3. P. 119)

The play portrays an anarchic dystopia where humankind is helpless and has no other option but to greet the apocalypse. The Foreman has repeatedly claimed that he is a "demolition expert" claims to be the only person who has access to the spot, which could keep the world balanced. It is an irony of fate that the destroyer has taken the role of the preserver. The Foreman tells his wife, You saw how near I went to the spot. Repeatedly! Within a fraction of the dust! Not one grain rose in the air. That is the control of a man whose life is devoted to the niceties of destroying things.

Anyone else could have sent the world to perdition with their first. (sc. 6. p. 141)

Furthermore, the Foreman represents the humankind's willingness to greet the apocalypse. The Foreman says, "destiny always expects the worst"; However, he criticizes the complaining attitude of the populace, "the Pringle's of this world add it to their complaints" (sc.6. p. 141). The dead body of the wife and Nelson's neutralized body at the Foreman's house also represent that there are skeletons in the cupboard of several self-proclaimed saviours. In fact, this is also indicative of human aspiration to deconstruct or destroy to protect this world. The neorealist power paradigm has taken effect in the play. The battle for survival ends with the death of Nelson and Foreman's wife because the Foreman and the DSS Officer had overpowered them. This is a manifestation of the "objective" power assumption as outlined by Stefano Guzzini in his master thesis. The objective power assumption "means that whenever there appears to be a 'power vacuum', it inevitably asks to be filled by the strongest actor, often in fact called 'power' as a shorthand" (Guzzini, 1994, p. 130). The forces of chaos take over the world, who have nothing else to offer but to risk the existence of this world on a toss. In fact, these forces of chaos have no concrete solution to offer for ending the anarchy without enforcing the apocalypse. The Foreman says to Nelson, "Burnt. Ruined. The world's falling apart. I can offer you chocolate biscuits" (sc. 6. p. 143). The Foreman confesses, "Sometimes the meaning of the universe is beyond the grasp even of a demolition expert" (sc. 6. P.145). The failure of the powerful forces to understand the anarchic dystopia threatens a disastrous future. The neo realist paradigm strives to ensure security by self-help. Self-help is not possible without an understanding of the global anarchic structure. The Foreman and the DSS Officer had no idea to maintain stasis for maintaining an order by self-help to ensure security. They dance to greet the apocalypse because they had no other option left except for forging an unnatural alliance to greet "the end of the world" (sc. 6. p. 149).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the gloomy society of the 'city', Viv only could have found the balance. However, under the influence of the collective unconscious of the dystopic 'city', the denizens remain senseless to the approaching apocalypse. Hence, Viv is left alone and bewildered because in an anarchic world the voices raised for stability would appear shocking and repulsive. The Foreman and the DSS Officer cannot differentiate between the constructive powers of knowledge and responsibility; hence, they resort to violence as a means of maximization of power. The 'city' in *The Balancing Act*, in fact, like any dystopic society is too engrossed with the

disorder, and all attempts at restoring order appear flawed due to the prevailing anarchy. In global anarchy, societies suffer from social, political, economic, and cultural miseries. The play has a prophetic truth, and is relevant to the conflicts, challenges, and destructive forces at work in contemporary times. It serves as a prophesy for the tragedies of war, environmental degradation, materialistic corporatism, and health hazards. Moreover, it serves as a critique of liberal and neo liberal institutions through the security maximizing lens of structural and neo realism.

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- The conflicts and the crisis emerging from a self-centred world view could be averted by utilizing the harmonious powers of humanity. A rule-based world order and an effort to sharpen the technological edge for the welfare of mankind could be the panacea for the dystopic existence. In a neo realist paradigm, it would be necessary to strengthen deterrence and defence, and enhance resilience. Moreover, this essay might elicit further inquiry, as along with a neorealist analysis, this aspect of the play can be observed through the lens of Feminism, Marxism, Neo-colonial studies, and Postcolonial studies.
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