Chapter 4

The Aesthetics of Commitment

It can be justifiably asserted that modern British political theatre finds its most ardent articulation in the plays of Edward Bond. They have been thoroughly scanned for the ethics and the aesthetics of commitment and have evoked mixed responses. Some critics have derided his theatrical practice as mere didactic propaganda. But, amidst carping criticism and downright condemnation, commendation has been equally forthright. However, to arrive at a balanced view, a few questions have to be asked though the answers to them may not help settle the dust and storm of controversy raging about the plays. What are the premises of Bond’s political philosophy from which his dramatic practice issues forth? Does Bond, at the cost of aesthetic value, over-simplify the complex nature of social reality in order to dispense easy propagandistic solutions? These are the specific questions which we should ask in order to ascertain his achievement as a political dramatist.

Bond’s plays form part of his cultural struggle for the furtherance of human moral evolution. The immensity of the problems he deals with in his plays—the economics and politics of religion and revolution, the morality and sanity of capitalism, the pity and fear of war and violence—bears witness to the seriousness he attaches to them. Not moralistic or didactic in any facile manner, he surveys the road to socialism quite guardedly and learns that the perils and pitfalls are many. History holds innumerable instances where radical political experiments have gone amiss and have rendered their champions callous and
cruel in the face of human suffering. But perhaps, like Bond’s Lear, despite failures, the future proponents of socialism might learn their lessons and march forward to the destruction of the walls which banish those outside and imprison those inside.

Bond’s political theatre belongs to the period of industrial imperialism, the latest phase of capitalism, which, through overt and covert ideological manipulation, globally infiltrates the virus of market economy into every avenue of life. Using conventional social morality, it conceals the cruelty and violence which sustain its socio-economic and political edifices. The exploited are consumerized and tamed and they meekly accept the cultural values of capitalism. Striving for socialism, Bond confronts the situation frontally and struggles against the dehumanizing capitalistic greed and competition with the verve of a new commitment. What he says and how he says are qualitatively different from that of other political playwrights. With a distinct intensity of political conviction and dexterity of artistic expression, Bond spells out a new definition to the ideological commitment of artists.

In play after play Bond has tried, not naively, to communicate with his audience. At the Cheltenham Festival of Literature Bond spoke about theatrical commitment thus: “I believe that the theatre has become the most involved and committed of all arts at the moment...”¹. Theatre is the most realistic of all art forms to him. Emphatically denying the argument that theatre is essentially ritualistic, he stresses that all theatre, including the ancient Greek and the medieval church theatres, is realistic. To Bond drama is a form of poetry which is wedded to reality. He has clarified this point in his interview with Howard Davies:

For me, poetry is reality, it’s what is left when the lies, the excuses, the pretenses and the profits are removed. Poetry is a form of truth.... I think
poetry is a description of what reality is really like, so poetry has to be hard and precise. Poetry is a description of one’s life and therefore is not a passive thing.... Certain things have to follow from poetry... You don’t sit down and read poetry just to be consoled. Poetry has to clarify the mind and clarify consequences and the nature of the action so that you know what to do?

It is, indeed, this multi-level clarification that Bond’s theatre performs, reinforcing human values with the intimations of true morality and rebuilding life with the bonds of inter-individual responsibility. He chose drama as the medium of effective communication because he could use other devices also in addition to verbal images: “The point in writing for the theatre is that you can use other things apart from words to make the image more powerful, to make the influence stronger” (Theatre Papers 6). Indeed, he has used diverse techniques in order to present his convictions as powerfully as possible.

In play after play Bond has tried, not naively, to communicate with his audience the need for a rational alternative to the present complex and unjust social structure. With untiring enthusiasm, he repeats that capitalism is not congenial to the evolution of a rational society as it breeds war and violence through greed and competition. In Pope’s Wedding Bond examines the individual’s relation with society and the influence of social situations on him. The team action of playing cricket had earned Scopey a lot of personal glory and won him the love of Pat. But, beset with financial strain, he begins a relentless search for another man’s, Alan’s, vision. A recluse with weak ligaments to the society, Alan, in fact, has no special gift. But Scopey’s search for what he imagines to be there in the old man, alienates him from his friends and makes him a murderer. Similarly, Saved
is, as Hay and Roberts state “a passionate and logical account of the life lived by
the social stratum engineered to fit the needs of a consumer-based and
technologically-fuelled society”. The dehumanized working-class living
conditions are infanticidal. It is metaphorically suggested by the stoning of Pam’s
child in the park. Examining the aspects of mutual responsibility in social life,
Bond projects, through the centre character of Len, the ability of human beings to
learn from experience.

The world of Early Morning is a fantastic retrospect of the early morning
of modern capitalism in which the individual had to struggle hard “to preserve
his humanity in a society alien to human condition”. The traces of Victorian
capitalism are easily discernible in the economic imperialism of modern times.
The over-industrialized western nations insist on the liberalization of the third
world economies, promising, in effect, capitalistic heavens of painless cannibalism.
Plays like Narrow Road to Deep North, The Sea, Bingo, The Fool and The Bundle
deal with the problem of the artist’s commitment to the social
processes and formations. But plays like Lear, Stone, The Bundle and The Woman
track the genesis of social consciousness through experience, critical analysis and
education. The plays depict the evolution of initiative for social transformation
as the logical consequence of the shaping power of situations. The War Plays
allegorically project the future possibility of a nuclear disaster in the event of the
progressive erosion of human values owing to aggressive capitalism. With an
optimism born of historical knowledge, Bond suggests that resurrection is possible.
Human beings have the ability to put together the broken shreds and to breathe a
new life into the dead ashes of disaster. Through critical analysis he influences
the necessary and possible social revolution.
Though all forms of writing are "socially determined", as Raymond Williams maintains, commitment becomes problematic only to the few writers who make deliberate choice as to the socio-political orientation of their work.\(^5\) There are times, as he says, when "what emerges, in some writers, is an energetic new commitment: to a new kind of writing; to new selections and emphasis or subject, or by its actual or foreseen change in the relations between writers and readers, which can make the new kind practicable" (Williams 259). Because of its social and performative nature, the dramatic art is bound to have political and social consequences—a fact recognized by Francis Fergusson when he said, "The theatre artist cannot practise his art without real people assembled before a real stage; a theatre without an audience is a contradiction in terms. That is why politics and the theatre are necessarily so close to the public mood and the public mind of their times".\(^6\) Bond is the new writer in whom political commitment receives the most "energetic" theatrical utterance as he makes "new selections and emphasis".

Critics like Jenny S. Spencer have tied the label of "theatre of ideas", originally used by Eric Bentley, to Bond.\(^7\) Like Shaw, Bond has prefaced his plays with philosophical treatises. But in Bond there is no trace of bourgeois idealism. And, in moral earnestness, he is not below the great Fabian. Whereas Shaw was concerned with specific social problems, Bond's interests target a more radical reorganization of society so that human moral consciousness may evolve into a socialist consciousness. He writes,

"I am concerned with important issues. That's part of my basic response. The subjects I deal with are minute. They are full scale. They are about the future of our society. Whether I deal with them well others must judge."

(*Theatre Papers*, second series 25)
The element of deliberation in his dramatic practice links Bond with dramatists like Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht who used the theatre for political and cultural activism and whose concept of epic theatre he adopted innovatively. As Katherine J. Worth says, “Bond is also a very conscious moralist and has much in common with the writers of the epic mode...”. She further notes, “Moral passion is certainly a great driving force behind his writing” (171). But it is doubtful whether Bond’s moral affinity to playwrights like Shaw and Osborne should be so much emphasized as she does. Though they recognize the root cause of evil in the unjust social structure, in the incisiveness of analysis and the stringency of criticism Bond proves himself to be made of sterner stuff. Like Shaw, he has clearly postulated his ideological convictions but has not made his plays the paraphrases of his philosophical propositions.

But the political nature of Bond’s concept of morality is neither Shavian or Fabian, but Marxian. Bond states,

My theatre is based on trying to define ideas, critical ideas about society and about human activity; trying to define those as precisely as possible, not necessarily in verbal terms but in pictures. (Theatre Papers 4-5)

His thesis and praxis recognize the dialectical and historical processes in Nature and Man. David L. Hurst has appropriately noted the Marxian character of Bond’s social and political ideas:

Just as the discoveries of Darwin and Marx served to mould Shaw’s evolutionary socialism, so Bond’s Marxism is the basis for his critique of
society and for his reconstruction of a new one. Like Shaw Bond is a rational thinker, not a romantic. But, unlike vulgar Marxists, Bond does not simplify the complex social processes and problems and present easy solutions. Instead, he creates convincing social situations where human moral consciousness evolves along with the deep structures of real life. True art, according to him, is not in the sincerity of purpose, but in the process of analysis. Though Mrs. Worth considers Osborne’s phrase “lessons in feeling” appropriate to Bond’s plays, it will be more so if it is reworded as “lessons in social and moral feeling” (172). True, Bond’s preoccupation with ideas justifies calling his theatre a “theatre of ideas”. But it is more. It is critical, but not in the Arnoldian sense of application of ideas to life or in the Leavisite sense of moral seriousness and self-knowledge. It is dialectical, historical and, therefore, essentially Marxian.

A Darwinian, Bond recognizes, as suggested in the play The Sea, the possibility of biological evolution even in the remote regions of space. Using Marxian tools of historical analysis, he grapples with the problems of future. Thus, as Hurst notes, he is a true Marxian writer in the Gramscian sense of the term for he tries to understand the past in order to come to terms with the future. Though his approval of Marxism is explicit in the prefaces and implicit in the plays, Bond is not a communist party member. As Philip Roberts notes, “Edward Bond is a political writer, but a writer without party or dogma; a militant thinker but without specific alignment; a propagandist in no one’s party”. But his sympathies and systems of thought clearly evince an allegiance to the cause of the proletariat, exploited directly and deviously by the political and ideological apparatus of capitalism. Bond feels himself responsible to the working class; if
there is no creed already formulated for them, he is confident enough to enunciate one. Bond has not pitched his political affiliation to the communist party, as he believes even the communist parties may commit errors:

I think that there is no viable political system in existence in the world at the moment....Far from ensuring prosperity and happiness, most systems are actually vicious, I mean very bad systems in one form or another and I don’t think there is any ambivalence in my plays about this.\textsuperscript{11}

The principles of communism, if reduced to a dogma, may produce a Stalin or a Lear as Bond has demonstrated in \textit{Lear}. In implementing a programme, however dedicated a leader may be, his very sincerity may turn obsessive and tyrannical. But Bond points out that correction is possible. Lear learns his lessons from a series of bitter experiences and, finally, dies a heroic death, demolishing the wall which had been his political dream. This attitude clearly distinguishes Bond from many other pronounced detractors of communism who turned their faces away from socialism when they detected cracks and crevices in the East European socialist block and the erstwhile U.S.S.R. But Bond never forsakes his sense of commitment to socialism. Rather, he will try to repair the mistakes through analytical criticism. His practice seems to echo the words of Sartre who said, “To have the right to criticize a movement as important as the Communist movement one has to work with it”.\textsuperscript{12} Bond, rightfully, adopts an organically critical attitude to communism, fortifying socialist consciousness through the medium of drama. As Raymond Williams has pointed out, the term commitment is historically linked with the values of Resistance and the political left in France.\textsuperscript{13}

It was in the years after World War II that the new French connotation of the word
received a "coherent expression". Since then it has gained wide currency among Anglo-American artists and intellectuals who, taking sides, have vociferously argued "the Pro and Con of Political Theatre" without resolving the issue in any way. Generally, commitment has been treated as a 'leftist' term and as synonymous with political propaganda disguised as art. But it is a matter of common experience that it is not the "lefty" alone who are concerned about the usefulness of art, but the rightists are, equally or more, utilitarian. Thus the positive and pejorative meanings of "commitment" is a matter of subjectivity — each person upholds his choice as rational and denigrates that of others as propagandistic.

Bond's idea of commitment is existential in the Sartrean sense of the term. A member of the atheistic school of existentialism, Sartre has stoutly refuted the criticism that the existentialist view of man as an isolated being ignores human solidarity. In his book What is Literature? Sartre has tried to answer questions like 'What is writing?', 'Why does one write?' and 'For whom does one write?'. His coinage of litere 'nature engage' e, translated into English as 'literature of commitment,' connotes, as Williams points out, 'involvement' also (Williams 257) in the "total enterprise of living" (Sartre, 1950, 23). The idea of a writer's independence is, according to Sartre, a myth. The writer's neutrality to social events is a form of commitment to the status quo as it indirectly resists social change. Writing, according to Sartre, is closely aligned to the idea of freedom.

And freedom is not an abstract concept; "there is no given freedom" and each writer has to work it out in his own historical context (49). In a historical situation, the writer animates and penetrates the world with his freedom. As freedom is a matter of inter-individual relationship, it is essentially political. Sartre's
commitment is not to any abstract idea of spirituality: “We assert against certain critics and against certain authors that salvation is achieved on this earth, that it is of the whole man and by the whole man and that art is a meditation on life and not on death” (232). A creative writing is an act, a fight against evil which is inherently didactic: “...we want it [the work] to be explicitly conceived as a weapon in the struggle that men wage against evil” (233). A product of its time, “a book has its absolute truth within the age” (235). If the works of a writer are really great, they will carry messages to posterity even after their historical time like the Marathon courier who had died an hour before he had reached Athens. So Sartre concludes, “We stand for an ethics and art of the finite” (238).

Bond, like Sartre, is aware not only of his personal commitment as a writer, but also of the inherent commitment in the very act of writing. Never a politically neutral activity, writing is confronted by the problems of freedom at every turn which compel the writer to make choice. Through his plays Bond has consistently tried to commit the reader, to make him choose his freedom and future:

Bond’s great ability is to find ways of saying in a theatre which lead, push, bully, persuade, invite his audience to contemplate a series of metaphors enacted so that the same audience may tease out for themselves both the poetic force and the considerable passion and urgency of the political imagination behind. (Philip Roberts, New Edinburgh Review 35)

Like the writer, the reader has to work out his own destiny. Analytically probing social reality, the committed writer never leaves any escape-route to the reader, but persistently prods him to dare the problems of freedom. Existentially speaking,
the reader has to choose. Bond’s position fully supports what Max Adereth writes:

The value of committed concept is that it rejects [this] facile and escapist explanation and reminds writers that they cannot help belonging to the world of men. Commitment thus implies the debunking of a hypocritical as well as the acceptance of an obvious truth, deliberately blurred or hidden away by certain social forces. (Max Adereth 467)

Bond has tried repeatedly to rhetorize this existential point of view in his plays. He has created a number of characters who, living through bitter experiences, take crucial decisions. In Saved Len, a witness of the loveless life in Harry’s family, gets involved in their pains and decides to live with them. This is communicated through the visual metaphor of Len’s mending a chair. Lear, the tyrannical visionary of the play Lear struggles through failures and, finally, learns that the root causes of evil are present in the social system that he has passionately tried to safeguard. Therefore, though weak and old, the blinded king, gropes the way up the Wall with a shovel and begins its demolition. The action becomes significant because it implies the decision to undo one’s own past for a new beginning. Even a suicide may be a form of revolt, viewed existentially like Albert Camus. In Bingo, Shakespeare is depicted as poisoning himself. His investment for financial security is contrary to the moral values he has prized in the plays. Though he is unable to reconcile between the two, he refuses to succumb to the perpetrators of class oppression by choosing to die.

The supreme instance of an existential choice by a Bondian character is to be found in The Bundle. Brought up by the generous Ferryman, the abandoned child Wang, understands the processes of social relations as he grows up. In order
to save his foster-parents from drowning in the flood, Wang sold himself to the landlord for nine years. When he got his freedom, he was confronted with the problem of an abandoned child on the river bank. In one gush of the sweet sense of charity, he could have decided to bring it up. But such an act of luxurious generosity would have cost him all his plans for social revolution. What should he do with the babe? It was a critical moment and Wang, after much vacillation, finally, picked up the bundle containing the child and threw it into the river. By the standards of conventional charity and morality, Wang’s action would appear to be cruel and inhuman. But judged from the existential context and the logic of situations, as Bond presents them, Wang’s action is the high water-mark of revolutionary morality.

Bond’s theatre-practice is a moral intervention in the social processes. A cultural activist, he searches for rational alternatives as the prevalent social morality is irrational and hinders human moral evolution. In line with his ethics Bond has evolved an aesthetics also, a fact which necessitates the examination of the relationship between the two.

In the nineteenth century the ethical purpose of art was hotly debated between the champions of the two schools of ‘Art for Art’s Sake’ and ‘Art for Life’s Sake’. That art has moral value and content is beyond question. As Anne Sheppard says, “Any art which portrays human beings interacting with one another is bound to represent those human beings with character traits which are subject to moral assessment”. Though before the advent of Aestheticism nobody doubted the ethical significance of art, Plato had his misgivings about the desirability of poetic effect. That he declared his Republic out of bounds to poets underlines the political consideration he brought to bear upon ‘the communicated’ of art. Though
there is no doubt about the ‘effect’ of art, the question still remains whether it is desirable or not. Whatever be the answer to this, it is bound to reflect the concerned individual’s political predilection or predisposition.

Bond’s plays highlight his moral and political concerns. Artistically compelling, they embody a clear and comprehensive vision. But as Bond never imitates himself, it is difficult to reduce the plays denotatively to a few messages they encode; he addresses the complex social reality through daring dramatic experiments. “The moral centre of Bond’s work remains the same; but he is able to change his dramatic style to match the different occasions and theatrical spaces for which he writes” (David L. Hurst 34). Bond’s consistent experimentation with the dramatic medium has always buoyed him up at the centre of critical attention.

Bond considers an artist to be the true voice of the moral consciousness of his age. The artist should strive to re-write it, resolving the contradictions between social reality and social morality. Every artist is an iconoclast who demolishes the idols of reactionary ideology and substitutes them with new rational alternatives. He replaces old and ossified values with new ethical concepts, more humane and more organic. “In our age”, David L. Hurst quotes Bond, “the artist must help to create the image and consciousness of the working class. There is nothing else art can do now, that is the definition of art in our time” (Hurst 12).

Bond does not indulge in vulgar formalism for personal gratification or egoistic self-glorification. Nor does he support propagandistic simplification as it tends to distort the complex nature of reality. Bond gives an all-pervasive importance to art as a rational and realistic human pursuit. Despite his moral stake, he will not let art degenerate into propaganda:
But propaganda ceases to be art when it becomes the mechanical duplication of images. Then it trivializes the information it conveys and can produce bewilderment. *(The Fool* xiii)

Though Bond values socialist writers, he insists that they should not make the working-class view of life appear silly and vulgar through patronizing simplification. They should put three-dimensional figures on the stage, in stead of stereotypes and “schematized class functions” (Hurst 155). As part of his sense of responsibility, Bond has unswervingly searched for new dramatic forms of communication. Ronald Bryden has quoted Bond in this regard:

> I write because I want to change the structure of the society. I think that society as it exists is primitive, dangerous and corrupt—that it destroys people. It’s not that society is inefficient, that it works badly. You can’t improve society as we have it.”

Acutely sensitive to social injustice, always Bond employs his imaginative competence to scan the social spectrum. His plays constitute a cultural struggle against the evils of the capitalist system. All walks of our life — religion, morality, science, technology, education, art and culture — are corrupted by it. Bond repeatedly reminds his spectators that only through eternal vigilance and conscious resistance the snares and temptations of the capitalistic way of life can be overcome. Thus he lets us see the historical figures like Shakespeare and Clare in a new light. When he reviews classic characters like King Lear or Hecuba, the formative role of modern economic processes gets prominence. Whether it is ancient Greece or Elizabethan or Victorian England or seventeenth-century Japan, Bond’s concerns are the same. Charles Marowitz quotes Bond: “A play is an attempt to solve the
problems which are posed to me by society and my life". Though the present belligerency, which is the product of an unjust social order, darkens the future with total nuclear annihilation, Bond's scientific knowledge of history commissions him to visualize, as he does in *The War Plays*, a future with solutions to these problems. As Marowitz notes again:

Bond insists that the writer today must face up to contemporary responsibilities; that circumstances are more pressing than they were for writers of earlier times. (6)

An artist should analyze and explain the social consequences of human actions with self-awareness, Bond maintains. Not a passive surveyor of the social processes, he actively intervenes in order to rationally transform the social structure. The artist should join in putting out the fire when the house is on fire. Quoting from Charles Marowitz's essay "If a House is on Fire and I Cry Fire", Richard Scharine has drawn attention to Bond's opinion that he does not want people to commend his shouting ability but they should join the fire-fighting (Scharine 28).

Recognizing the crucial role of the proletariat in social formation and transformation, Bond thinks it immoral not to fraternize himself with them. Early in his career he had noticed the relationship between theatre and working class: "When I started to write, after being at school, it was very natural I wrote for the theatre because the theatre was actually part of working class life in London at the time" (*Theatre Papers*, second series 2). For him the workers produce the society's wealth and health and culture; they are the source of human moral strength and spiritual sustenance. Therefore, at every turn, Bond subscribes to their struggle for a just and equitable society where self-flattering tokens of compassion and charity will give way to freedom and fraternity.
Behind the apparent didacticism of Bond’s plays there is a revolutionary committed to a dialogue with the contemporary society. As the western society, with its coercive social morality, is badly in need of a moral re-education, art should target radical change. Persistently, therefore, Bond’s plays demand the spectators to analyze and evaluate the whole gamut of social relations. The political question that Bond raises is a moral one and the moral issue that he champions is essentially proletarian. The prevalent social morality, which hinges on codes of conduct and concepts of virtue and vice, is vague, abstract and, therefore, unreal.

A hand-maid to class exploitation, it throttles individual freedom. Bond’s idea of morality is scientific as he historicizes it. It is never absolute or final or something preordained as it does not issue forth itself from prophetic revelations. It is not metaphysical, but dialectical. It is no abstract sense of pity or piety, but a historically evolving and liberating response to social reality. Along with the progress of history, the human moral consciousness of what is good and evil has also steadily evolved.

The transition from the pre-Christian code of “an eye for an eye” and “a tooth for a tooth” to the Christian virtues of Love, Mercy and Forgiveness was very much historical. While the feudal people were conscious of their class positions, in modern democracy the idea of human equality reigns supreme. Along with the historical changes in social relations, the concepts of ethical values and moral bonds have also changed. The socialist values have also evolved along the same historical lines. From its utopian stages socialism has evolved in accordance with the laws of economic production relations in society. From the proto-communist days, through slavery, feudalism and capitalism, it has moved to scientific socialism. Armed with the knowledge of its own historical destiny, the working class challenges the social inequity of capitalism. The proletariat has revolutionized the whole concept of morality. As A. Alexandrov says, “Proletarians, in mastering
the scientific conclusions concerning the development of society, recognized
themselves not only as fighters for their individual interests or the interests of
their collective alone, but as fighters for their class interests, for socialism and for
a better future for all mankind. Morality is now not an impartial or abstract
assortment of virtue-concepts. It is class morality. Its sine qua non is that as the
worker is the producer of society’s wealth, he has the first right to it. Every artist
has to contribute to the growth of this socialist moral consciousness as it is the
natural and logical culmination of its own long history.

Though Bond’s plays, generally, deal with the modern political
experience, a few of them dramatically turn light upon the problem of the artist’s
commitment to society. The Narrow Road to Deep North was the first of a
series of plays where he problematizes the poet-society dialectic. Matsuo Basho,
the seventeenth-century Japanese haiku-master, is a typical poet-figure, who,
hypocritically, indulges in the glorification of his craftmanship. Bond explicitly
condemns the selfish poet who, searching for illusory enlightenment, criminally
went past a child abandoned on the river bank. That kind of attitude does not
become a human being, least of all to a poet who should be the voice of the moral
consciousness of humanity. Marowitz quotes Bond in this regard:

What I objected to was that that attitude was depicted as the attitude of a
poet, and I wanted to say that that was the attitude of a criminal.(5)

Through the egoistic, cruel and irresponsible Basho, Bond ironically
satirizes all irrational self-locking idealism. Basho claims to receive enlightenment,
the meaning of his journey into the deep north. “I have found the little stone that
holds the laws of the world in your hand (The Bundle 9). The self-castigating
irony of the words questions the idealistic belief that enlightenment is a divine benediction sanctioned to a select few. In Bondian materialistic vision of life, knowledge or enlightenment is the result of practical action, the result of the individual’s dialectical relation with society and Universe.22 Basho thinks his poetic talent to be an inborn ability, privileging him in the community. He lavishes images recklessly. During Basho’s journey to the north, a city has come up in the place of his village and Shogo, the boy whom he had abandoned, has become a merciless tyrant, a usurper and a regicide. Basho’s argument that a peasant’s son is unfit to rule is an extension of his idealistic notion that poetic talent is a divine gift bestowed upon select individuals like himself. He knows the ideological value of social symbols in preserving traditional social institutions. When Shogo breaks the holy pot around Kiro’s head nonchalantly, Basho understands that along with the venerated religious symbols the social system which supports them will have to go. Therefore, without any qualms he betrays his city to the foreigners. Beneath Basho’s poetry is a great cruelty. In the last scene of the play as the new Prime Minister, he presides over the public trial and lynching of Shogo while the sheets of his poems fly about. Though a master of haiku, he is an imperfect human being, shallow, hypocritical and with a fascist devotion to craftsmanship.

Bond’s preoccupation with the poet-politics theme is evident in The Bundle where once again he arraigns Basho’s hankering after self-delusive enlightenment. Bond is sarcastic towards all those who use idealistic jargon to swindle pennies out of the poor. On his way north, the learned man speaks in metaphoric riddles and evasive abstractions to deprive the poor Ferry man of his fare: “I go to be reborn. Does the midwife charge the child ?...” (scene 1, 1). Basho refuses to pick up the abandoned child because he has to pursue knowledge
Bond seems to believe that craftsmanship is a matter of clever manipulation, but to be a great artist one should be committed to society. Evasive to pursue either science or arts for its own sake is to behave irresponsibly like apes. Basho is proud of his craftsmanship: "...Child, I am Basho the great seventeenth-century poet. I brought the haiku to perfection..." (The Bundle, scene 1, 2). All his talk about self and soul are meant to deceive the gullible. He has no moral compunctions in colluding with the ruling class. To overpower the Keepers, Basho allies himself with the landlord. Announcing that he has been made a judge by the landlord, he reduces the Keepers into immediate and silent obedience. Though he waxes eloquent about turning away from the world, he is very much of it and enjoys the power his position gives him. He uses poetic devices not to mean, but to mask intentions. Bond has given Basho a language full of metaphorical expressions which resound with their internal hollowness. He stands for the status quo. His sudden switch over from the poet's craft to statecraft is very significant.

Bond's idea of a poet and Basho's practice are pole's apart. Choosing to be the landowner's judge, Basho becomes an arm of the repressive state apparatus and persecutes the revolutionaries. But when the revolution turns everything upside down, Basho is reduced to a Humpty Dumpty. All his enlightenment will not hold his world together for him. The old and doddering Basho, resumes fumbling for the road to the deep north for new enlightenment: "...Where is the narrow road to the deep north?... Tell me...Please... Who will show me the way?" (Scene 10).

A poet who has no realistic world view and has no dialectical grasp of the life around him is self-lost in his idealism.
Bond seems to believe that craftsmanship is a matter of clever manipulation, but to be a great artist one should be committed to society. Evasive hiding in the ivory tower of artistic aloofness is a moral tragedy at the personal and social levels. It is not the creative writers alone, but all practitioners of art are morally at fault if they do not attune their sensibilities to social reality. In the play The Sea Mrs. Rafi exercises social dominance by virtue of her wealth and cultural superiority. As Hay and Roberts say, “What is missing from her words is any sense of human feeling. With the blithe, unquestioning self-assurance that derives from her social position, she queens it over the other characters, sweeping all before her on an imperious torrent of words; the casual viciousness with which she treats her social inferiors goes hand in hand with her haughty, grande-dame manner” (147-48). Her interest in theatrical performance is a shallow and shameful affectation because she lacks the essential moral attribute of human compassion.

As she callously proceeds to rehearse the Orpheus play, with only superficial expressions of sorrow over the tragic death of her niece’s lover, Bond’s condemnation of her becomes highly pronounced.

The case of John Clare, one of the pre-romantic poets of early nineteenth-century, is another dramatic case-study. The Fool demonstrates that a poet, prone to romantic idealizations and dreamy visions, is bound to suffer in a world which does not understand him. Away from the centre of social action like the mummers’ performance before Lord Milton or the peasants’ riot, Clare is with Mary, trying to make love. Later he pursues her in his fantasies as his “other real wife”. The unrealistic streak in his character becomes evident when he tries to build a romantic privacy while riot rages all about him in full fury.
Clare, the rustic romantic, could not withstand the tidal progress of nineteenth-century industrialization which, with accelerated urbanization, was dealing death-blow to the feudal social order. Though unable to establish a viable relationship with society, Clare, by virtue of his poetic talent, moves on to the lime-light of London’s cultural life. He has an admirer in Mrs. Emmerson and he converses with Charles and Mary Lamb. Despite his best efforts, his books are unaccepted by the publishers who have no interest in poetry that criticizes the landowners. A political economy that takes care of the polite society can not encourage poetry that goes against its interests. Admiral Radstock tells Clare as much as that:

I shan’t lecture you. Political science isn’t parish pump philosophy. But answer this. Who controls the brute in man? Polite society. Well, your verse undermines its authority. There’d be chaos. The poor would be the first to suffer. I understand some hangings have already been necessary in your part of the world. Makes my point for me.” (The Fool, scene5)

Clare is engaged in a fight against the society, symbolized by the prize-fight in the play. Unable to earn a living and to provide for his family, Clare gets enervated mentally and physically. Finally, he ends up in a lunatic asylum like many other precursors of the Romantic Revival in English poetry. If a poet, however imaginative, does not rationalize his relationship with society, he is bound to feel depressed. Out of tune with his time, he might feel himself to be among aliens who might blight his natural poetic sensibility. By refusing to surrender himself to the demands of the dominant sections of the society, he can, like Clare, uphold his integrity as a poet. With Clare, madness itself becomes a form of resistance. His relapse into poetic silence is a refusal to yield to the temptations of the opposite
class and culture, though it may land him in the confines of a lunatic asylum, where he may still emit flashes of undying hope.

Bond's concept of a writer's creative imagination and commitment to society is based on his sense of morality. Art is an expression of moral sanity, as he writes in the introduction to Bingo:

Art is always sane. It always insists on the truth, and tries to express the justice and order that are necessary to sanity. All imagination is political (viii).

Bond's concept of imagination considers it a material force. He deprives it of the romantic spirituality attributed to it by the self-glorifying writers who, "shut up in private fantasies, experiment in style", and "unrewarding obscurities" and turn to be "trivial and reactionary" (ix). Scientific in temper and thought, Bond understands the historical progress of human consciousness and shatters the intellectual humbug that the power of imagination or the talent for creative writing is an exclusively personal or private gift.

Ideologically deconstructing Shakespeare's life in Bingo, Bond daringly reviews this aspect in the light of the great poet's relationship with society. Bond is not interested in the biography of Shakespeare as other historical playwrights are. He depicts Shakespeare as caught up in the irreconcilable moral tangle of his society though he has withdrawn from the hustle and bustle of London to the rural world of Stratford-upon-Avon. Bond argues logically that, as a conscientious artist, Shakespeare was unequal to the practical demands of the fledgling Elizabethan capitalism. Unlike those who think Shakespeare was all divine inspiration, he does not consider Shakespeare immune to temporal pressures and
perils. The creator of social critics like King Lear, Shakespeare could hardly be unconcerned about the cruel and tortuous ways of economic life. He had financial interests which, as shown in the play, were suicidal as they failed in resolving the contradiction between his moral sensibility and economic expediency. Effectively employing the art of subversion, Bond demystifies the poet and makes him great in a human way. The romantic halo, adored and admired by his votaries, is mercilessly shattered to focus the social light on Shakespeare. As Jenny S. Spencer states, Bond refuses to exempt "the bard from personal responsibility for the historical developments of his time" (126).

Bond's suggestion is that a writer's relation with the society should be based on true moral values and he should be genuinely concerned about the welfare of others. At the peak of his creativity, a writer is always intensely moral as Shakespeare himself was when he wrote King Lear, the poignant dramatic expression of the suffering of defenceless innocence in the face of greed and aggressive authority. But in the world of Stratford's economic life the creative writer and the practical man are at odds. The social conflict at the level of ideology creates tensions in the mind of the poet acutely sensitive to every intellectual and emotional stirring in the society. As he has monetary interests, Shakespeare is tempted to abide by its conventions which have nothing to do with moral values and general social welfare. Thus giving his assent to the enclosing, Shakespeare becomes a party to the expropriation and expulsion of the poor from their home and hearth. And when the homeless and the hungry go abegging, looting and prostituting, they are prosecuted and hanged by the custodians of law and social morality. The politics of the privileged have transformed their own economic interests as the laws and codes of social conduct. Shakespeare can do nothing.
against this Goneril-Regan society coveting property and wealth. He has to suffer silently as he has turned himself inadvertently into a “hangman’s assistant” (Bingo, vii). Thus the moral dilemma can be resolved for Shakespeare only with his suicide:

If he didn’t end in the way shown in the play, then he was a reactionary blimp or some other fool. (vii)

An artist, who fails in resolving the contradiction between the personal and the social on ethical matters, is a moral failure. Did Shakespeare unethically ignore the social impacts of his economic actions? Or, did he, unable to reconcile them with his moral sensibility, suffer their inevitable consequences, personal as well as social? Bond’s vindication of the artist Shakespeare in Bingo exemplifies that every artist should deliberately cultivate to balance his personal interests and social needs on his moral consciousness. In the play Shakespeare, the retired artist, spends the evening of his life, basking in the rural air of Stratford. A recluse in his own garden, he has left behind the busy London world of characters, actors and spectators. Bond allows himself abundant artistic freedom with historical facts and, with a sure grasp on the principles of historical processes, recreates the Stratford world. He works his way to Shakespeare struggling against the ensnaring social psyche and unearths a subtext of history.

In the first part of the play Shakespeare is comparatively silent and his involvement in enclosing the common land is only hinted at. The contrapuntal appearance of William Combe and the Young Woman, the exploiter and his victim, while Shakespeare is reading a sheet of paper in the garden, is very significant. With Combe, he discusses the social implications and political consequences of
the projected enclosing. Shakespeare knows the consequences of driving out the small tenants for the big farmers:

SHAKESPEARE. The town will oppose you. A lot of the small holders don’t have written leases. They just followed their fathers onto the land—and their fathers had followed their fathers. If you get rid of them and the short lease tenants—there’ll be more than seven hundred poor to feed.

and if you grow less wheat the price of bread will go up—. (5-6)

Bond uses the conversation between Shakespeare and Jonson at the Golden Cross Inn to emphasize the “humaness” of writers. They talk about property relations which govern their lives. Like Jonson, who once killed a fellow writer to settle a “quarrel.”

SHAKESPEARE. (gives Combe his sheet of paper). I want security. I can’t provide for the future again. My father went bankrupt when he was old.

Too easy going. (Scene 1, 7)

But he has to pay a very heavy price. The violent revolts of farmers against enclosing make relentless inroads into his world of seclusion and reticence. As the houses are being burned, the sky is like day and Shakespeare has to spend sleepless nights. The young girl has been driven from parish to parish and from barn to barn where she had been physically assaulted and sexually exploited. He wants to be compassionate to her:

Let her eat. Give her a shawl or a dress. Both. Give her your mother’s things. They’re only gathering dust. (Scene 2, 14).

But when Judith points out the young girl’s immoral act with the gardener, Combe legally gibbets her — the vested economic interest asserts its authority through social morality. The situation convinces Shakespeare of his personal responsibility
in the girl’s murder, a sign of the social tragedy. Shakespeare’s acute sense of moral failure leaves him spiritually famished. He is anguished by the socially engulfing hunger, deprivation and death. He asks, “Where shall I go? London? Stay here?” Looking at the girl, he finds her “still perfect” and “still beautiful”.

When the Old Woman points out that she is dirty and that “her face is all a-twist”, Shakespeare says, “The marks on her face are men’s hands” (Scene 3, 28).

Bond uses the conversation between Shakespeare and Jonson at the Golden Cross Inn to emphasize the “humaness” of writers. They talk about property relations which govern their lives. Like Jonson, who once killed a fellow writer to end a literary dispute, writers often take resort to very human means to settle their differences. Jonson says:

…I killed one once. Fellow writer. Only way to end a literary quarrel. Put my sword in him. Like a new pen. The blood flowed as if inspired. Then the old Bailey, I was going to hang. That’s carrying research too far. I could read so they let me off. Proper respect for learning....(Scene 4, 31)

Jonson had been to prison four times. Bond suggests that writers are earthy and human enough to act criminally. Whereas the law of the land punished Jonson for his legal crime, the moral crime of Shakespeare goes undetected and unpunished. But Bond strikes the distinctiveness of Shakespeare, depicting him as spiritually afflicted by a deep sense of moral guilt.

In the society as well as in the family, Shakespeare experiences the constrictions caused by property relations. The farm workers violently revolt
Shakespeare plays with the Old Man throwing ice-balls at each other, uninhibited like two little children. Bond suggests that to feel free in the present society one has to be either an imbecile or an inebriate. Shakespeare's words when Judith comes to fetch him have the sharpness of a merciless introspection. He realizes that without the moral consciousness of mutual responsibility, wealth and property will breed only mortifying hatred in family and society. He learns that he has been leading a loveless life because, in stead of love, he gave money to his wife and daughter. Towards the fag-end of his life Shakespeare honestly looks life in the face:

SHAKESPEARE. Listen. You'll get my property between you when I'm dead.... I loved you with money. The only thing I can afford to give you now is money. But money always turns to hate. If I tried to be nice to you now it would be sentimental. You'd have to understand why I hate you, respect me for it. How can you? I hated you so badly. I made you vulgar and ugly and cheap. I corrupted you. (Scene 5, 41)

Ordinarily, Shakespeare need not feel any remorse over the death of the Old Man. But in the moral logic of the play, the responsibility of the Old Man's murder by his own son settles down on all those who were collaborators to the enclosing. The patricide was precipitated by the enclosing manoeuvres of people like Combe and Shakespeare. Living in such a society, Shakespeare, the artist, can not escape from the sin of shedding innocent blood. A morally conscientious artist will feel the weight of every blood-stained copper on his conscience. Besides, the Old Woman squarely indicts him for the death of her Old Man. Nursing Shakespeare, she says:
OLD WOMAN. Yo' ought- a sleep. Why yont yo' try?... That all come out a closin they fields. I told yo' long in the garden: that'll cause trouble. Yo' yony listen. Sign a piece of piper an' that's all yo' thought on. Call that 'elp? Our house's quiet now he's gone. No one come or go, do they knock first an' ask if I'm in. A Stranger's house. All they years. (Scene 6, 44)

Her Old Man was never "greedy for money loike some men" (44). This is a severe dressing down to Shakespeare. Illiterate though, she gives him a lesson or two in owning moral responsibility for his actions. As an artist, he should have known, and known better. Social tragedy and suffering are the cumulative result of the unethical economic principles and practice of a few with might and money.

Shakespeare's last moments are, as Bond depicts them, full of moral introspection and self-recognition. While he is inside his room, Judith and his wife come hysterically knocking on the door. Refusing to open, he pushes the sheets of his will under the door: "It's all there. Your legal share. And the bed" (Scene 6, 46). Shakespeare learns that his whole life's energy was spent for earning a house and property:

SHAKESPEARE. I spent so much of my youth, my best energy... for this: New Place.... I howled when they suffered, but they were whipped and hanged so that I could be free. That is the right question: not why did I sign one piece of paper?—no, no, even when I sat at my table, when I put the question on my clothes, I was a hangman's assistant, a gaoler's errand boy. If children go in rags we make the wind. If the table's empty we blight the harvest. If the roof leaks we send the storm. God made the elements and we inflict them on each other. (Scene 6, 48)
The moment of self-recognition is the moment of self-condemnation too. Shakespeare does not consider himself a disinterested artist any more. While Combe and the Son talk, he swallows the poison tablets. As the funeral bell rings for the Old Man and as Judith searches for his missing papers, Shakespeare dies. Through Shakespeare’s suicide, which is not in consonance with his biographies, quite logically, Bond argues that it is not enough that a writer voices his criticism against a malevolent society, but he should exemplify the moral values he upholds in his personal life. It is obligatory to the artist, Shakespeare learns, to mount obdurate resistance against the restrictions that the society imposes upon an individual. A writer must be very human and very responsible for one writes in other men’s blood. But Shakespeare’s belated knowledge of this is ineffective against the “hangers and breakers and killers” (Scene 5, 42). Suicide, when committed by an artist accepting the moral responsibility for his social actions, is valorized as it vindicates his commitment as an artist and as a human being.

“What are you writing?” is a question repeated many times in scene four of the play set at the Golden Cross Inn where the two fellow writers from London, Shakespeare and Jonson, join for their last bingo. They crack jokes about a play of Shakespeare’s which set the theatre on fire. But searchingly or self-searchingly, Jonson repeats the question. Shakespeare’s answer that he is confined to his household and garden does not satisfy him. Frustrated in his effort, Jonson turns to himself with the question: “What am I writing?” The significance of the questions is that they relentlessly centre on the content of writing. Jonson hates writing: “I hate writing. Fat old fingers excreting dirty black ink. Smudges. Shit. Silence” (Scene 4, 31). Despite his aversion to it, he does write. The reason is stated in the long speech where he recounts his bitter experiences of life, its crimes
and punishments. He confesses that he had killed a fellow writer: "Put my sword in him. Like a new pen. The blood flowed as if inspired...." (Scene 6, 31) The whole intensity of the experience of writing is brought out by the violent visuality of the verbal image. With the metaphoric juxtaposition of creative writing with killing, Bond brings out the social dimensions of writing. Writing, he maintains, is not metaphysical, but very much material and dialectical. No writer, let alone Shakespeare, can escape from the conflict-ridden world of passion and compassion into the blissful quietude of an idyllic garden. Shakespeare's days and nights are disturbed by the visions of gibbered young women. How can he be serene when in his world "the mad clown still nurses the child." The conclusion is as much Shakespeare's as it is Bond's:

"Every writer writes in other man's blood. The trivial, and the real. There's nothing else to write in. But only a god or a devil can write in other men's blood and not ask why they spilt it and what it cost. Not this hand, that's always melted snow...." (Scene 5, 42)

But this would have seemed quite a didactic declamation, if Bond had not taken care to provide the proper objective correlative to it. Against the background of what has happened in Shakespeare's life as presented in the play, his words have the force of a personal conviction. Gods may bless from the heights of heaven and devils may torment from the depths of hell, but to be human, man has to live among men and be responsible to one another.

Bond seems to think that an artist who does not recognize the laws of social change is burdened by an ideology that has ceased to be productive. In the last scene of The Bundle Basho is seen still groping in the darkness for the narrow
road to deep north. Wang's parable of the dead king helps us understand Basho's position better. Basho has been carrying the dead king on his head for years. Bond's message is clear: all the roads will be narrow and Enlightenment will be far north to an artist burdened by a dead ideology.

An over-simplistic attitude to Bond's plays is that they are didactic as if he had only a few ready-made moral doctrines to expound in dramatic terms. This is too wide the mark. He views life comprehensively, spirituality itself emanating from the evolution of matter. Human consciousness always evolves and changes in consonance with the living conditions of history. Therefore, Bond considers all contemporary human institutions like art, literature and culture in the light of capitalism, the dominant form of economic production. He examines our current moral convictions and finds them very much wanting as they do not mete out justice and order to the vast masses who are actively involved in socially useful production. This inadequacy can be met only if humanity develops to a newer and higher stage in moral evolution, the evolution of a socialist consciousness. As Marx and Engels have envisaged, through the critical examination of capitalism, Bond puts forward the idea of the evolution of a socialistic order and materialistic morality in place of the capitalistic and the religious. If at all he can be branded didactic, it should be qualified as dialectical for it is greatly saturated with the Marxian tradition of dialectical and historical materialism.

Commitment is a matter of the writer's choice on the basis of his analysis and assessment of social reality. Done with a free will, it will not be restrictive, but will act as an informing artistic principle. This is especially true of Bond, who, as a prolific writer, has carried out numerous dramatic experiments, though
always dealing with only a few themes. Therefore, avoiding evasive truisms, with a rational moral consciousness Bond addresses the problems of existence and experience. He confronts capitalism, tearing down its facade of prosperity which hides cruelty and violence. Adopting new rhetorical strategies, he insistently drives home his central concerns. In fact, as Anne Sheppard says, "...there is much more to a work of art than its moral content or an attempt to produce moral effects. The common distinction between art and propaganda is made because successful art has a richness and complexity which often belies any simple moral or political message" (141). This observation is the heart of the art of Bond for his plays have a "richness and complexity" unrivalled by any political play of modern times. It is not a simple thing that consistently he has provoked the theatre-going public in England and abroad to re-examine their positions through his powerful political intonations.
NOTES


13 Raymond Williams, _What I Came to Say_ (London: Hutchinson, 1989) 256: “...the original argument for ‘commitment’, in Sartre, was profoundly linked, historically, with the values of the resistance and with his democratic and socialist conclusions from them”.


