

## FROM CATHARSIS TO CONFRONTATION: THE FUNCTION OF VIOLENCE IN THE DRAMA OF EDWARD BOND

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### ABSTRACT

*This essay examines critically the use of violence in Edward Bond's drama, a politically conscious and highly provocative playwright of the 20th century. Transcending the Aristotelian theory of catharsis, Bond reinterprets the function of violence on stage as a provocation for social consciousness and ethical involvement. Where dramatic violence has historically operated to cleanse feeling through empathy and pity, violence in Bond is a deliberate tool of disturbance, alienation, and wake-up call to social injustices and moral complacency. This break from catharsis towards confrontation was Bond's belief that theatre did not have to reflect society but question it and transform it. The research is guided by big-deal plays such as *Saved*, *Lear*, and *Bingo* in which acts of brutal violence become the focus to disclose the dehumanizing forces of capitalism, state repression, and social neglect. In these plays, Bond constructs a theatre of ethical involvement which rejects passive reception in favour of critical thinking. The article also places Bond's dramaturgy within a larger theoretical context, invoking Brechtian epic theatre, post-war realism, and critical theory to explain his break with the standard aesthetic norms. In addition, the essay discusses the controversies surrounding Bond's work, including censorship, critical reception, and audience reception. The author argues that Bond's violence is not gratuitous but is placed within a political and ethical context in an attempt to restore human responsibility and agency in a world increasingly alienated. Through the emphasis on physical threat, this study asserts the continued relevance of Bond's theatre vision in contemporary debates regarding violence, the audience, and the social function of theatre.*

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**Keywords:** Edward Bond, Drama and Violence, Catharsis, Confrontation, Political Theatre, Brecht, *Saved*, *Lear*, *Bingo*, Audience, Ethics, Alienation.

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### Introduction

Theater has always served, apart from being an entertainment, as a mirror to society. From Greek tragedies in the distant past to experimental drama today, violence has held pride of place on the stage, either in the guise of inner conflict, divine retribution, political turmoil, or psychological trauma. Previously, playwrights such as Sophocles and Euripides utilized violence in the context of catharsis, as theorized by Aristotle, so that audiences could experience some emotional purgation—a release of pity and fear. With the 20th century, especially following two world wars, decolonization, and capitalism, artists started questioning the position of passive emotional purgation. Rather, theatre started to become a medium for political provocation and critical interrogation.

Within this new dramatic tradition, Edward Bond was one of the most radical and provocative of post-war British theatre voices. Bond challenges not just the usual role of violence within drama but the very shape of dramatic form and audience involvement. For Bond, violence is not to be aestheticized or

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simply emotionalized; it has to be engaged with, comprehended, and finally overcome by social and political consciousness. His plays do not provide the public space for the spectator to cry and sympathize in detachment; they compel the spectator to confront the root causes of brutality—poverty, alienation, repression, and injustice.

This study examines the evolution of violence from a cathartic device to a confrontational force in Bond's drama. By a close reading of his chosen works, the paper examines how Bond uses violence as a self-aware ideological instrument, designed to provoke spectatorship, challenge complicity, and subvert the political establishment.

### **Background of the Study**

Edward Bond's professional life as a playwright started against the backdrop of socio-economic inequalities, post-colonial tension, and the dismantling of traditional class hierarchies in Britain. His debut success with *Saved* (1965) introduced him to public attention—not for praise, but for the controversy surrounding it. The play's graphic presentation of violence, particularly the scene of the stoning of a baby, appalled audiences and was censored by the Lord Chamberlain's office, the then British theatre censor. Bond counteracted the censorship not with apology but with argument: that such violence was not gratuitous, but symptomatic of the inhumanity fostered by a morally bankrupt society.

Bond's plays always contend that violence is not part of human nature but is created by perverse socio-political structures. His theatre is informed by the Brechtian convention of Epic Theatre, where one does not seek to invite emotional identification but to foster distancing—or *Verfremdungseffekt*—so that the audience can reflect on what they witness. Bond modifies and strengthens this concept by staging extreme conditions that require ethical engagement from the spectator.

This book is born out of the necessity to comprehend Bond not only as a dramatist who uses violence but as a theorist of violence, who makes it a problem of drama and philosophy. His theatre raises pressing issues regarding moral accountability, audience empowerment, and the social role of theatre. Bond feels that a passive theatre—a theatre that is therapeutic and entertaining—is implicit in the collapse of society. By contrast, his theatre is meant to make the individual conscious of the cruelties of the world, in order that change can be made possible.

### **Scope of the Study**

This essay is concerned with the role of violence in Edward Bond's chosen plays, chiefly *Saved* (1965), *Lear* (1971), and *Bingo* (1973). These plays are each at a different phase in Bond's developing dramatic technique and political agendas, yet they are all joined by the prime use of violence—bodily, psychological, or structural.

### **Discussion Incorporates**

- Textual analysis of major scenes of violence and where they are located within the narrative development.
- Dramatic methods utilized by Bond in order to control audience reaction.
- Political and moral paradigms by which Bond makes his arguments concerning society, power, and justice.
- Post-war British historical and socio-political context that influenced Bond's perspective.
- Controversial reception and censorship controversies that illustrate how violence within his plays was perceived and misread.

Although the research interacts mainly with English-language theatre and post-war British theatre, its significance extends further. Bond's concepts of theatre, violence, and audience responsibility apply to world political theatre conventions, especially where there is state violence, war, and social injustice.

### **Objectives of the Study**

- To explore how violence in Edward Bond's plays is transformed from a classical cathartic device to a confrontational and ideological approach.
- To examine how Bond builds a politically committed form of theatre that employs violence as a medium for raising social awareness.

- To examine the ethical considerations of producing extreme violence and the playwright's role in shaping audience perception.
- To place Bond's dramaturgy within contemporary and postmodern theatre movements, particularly Epic Theatre and critical realism.
- To measure the reception of the audiences and the controversies of Bond's violence, such as censorship, media criticism, and academic debates.

### Importance of the Study

The importance of this study is that it adds to the knowledge about how violence on stage can have some kind of purpose beyond shock or spectacle. In a world more and more desensitized to visions of violence—in media, politics, and entertainment—Bond's theatre is a necessary disruption, forcing us to ask not just what we are seeing but why we are seeing it.

This study underlines that violence used by Bond is not nihilistic but ethical; it necessitates confrontation with painful realities that would rather be suppressed by most people. His theatre asks the audience not to emote but to think, not to escape but to act. At a time when the world is embroiled in war, economic inequality, and autocratic rule, Bond's conception of a socially engaged theatre rings truer than ever.

In addition, this work completes a lacuna in existing literature in that it establishes the connection of aesthetic decisions to ethical consequences in Bond's dramaturgy. It provides useful knowledge to students, researchers, and practitioners in drama, literature, political science, and ethics, inviting richer engagement with how art can shed light, challenge, and eventually change society.

### Review of Literature

**Himmat Sharma, Tanu Kashyap & Ashu Vashisht (2025):** In their joint work "An Analysis of Violence and Trauma in Meena Kandasamy's Fictions", the authors explore how violence and trauma are presented by Kandasamy not just as literary devices but as structural features of her novels. They point out how Kandasamy's novels, e.g., *The Gypsy Goddess* and *When I Hit You*, take individual and political suffering and turn them into agents of social change, highlighting literature as a site of contest to systemic oppression.

**Robin Singh Arya (2022):** In his essay "The Recursive Spectre of Violence: Memory, Trauma and Time", Arya examines Waryam Singh Sandhu's short story *Shadows*, with an emphasis on the portrayal of violence in the Khalistan insurgency. He contends that violence in the story is not a singular incident but a pervasive force that upsets the collective psyche, highlighting the lasting effect of trauma on memory and identity.

**Shipra Gupta (2021):** Gupta's study "Perspective on Violence on Screen: A Critical Analysis of Seven Samurai and Sholay" is a comparative study of Indian and Japanese on-screen violence. She describes the portrayal of violence and its impact on the audience, and offers insights into cultural views of violence and the purposes of violence in narrative.

**Raisun Mathew & Dr. Digvijay Pandya (2021):** In their piece "Carnavalesque, Liminality and Social Drama: Characterising the Anti-Structural Potential of Theyyam", the authors discuss the performative quality of the Kerala Theyyam ritual. They describe how the ritual is anti-structural, subverting social norms and hierarchies with its imagery of violence and transformation.

**Amitabhvikram Dwivedi (2021):** Dwivedi's chapter "Catharsis" explores the concept of catharsis in both Indian and Western dramatic traditions. He discusses how the process of purification and emotional release is integral to drama, providing a theoretical framework for understanding the emotional impact of violence in theatrical narratives.

**Deepa Kumawat & Iris Ramnani (2013):** The authors, in their article "Impact of Brechtian Theory on Girish Karnad: An Analysis of *Hayavadana* and *Yayati*", explain how Karnad incorporates the tenets of Brecht in his plays, moving away from the traditional cathartic experience to one that is more confrontational and reflective theatre. This analysis provides a comparative overview of how Indian playwrights integrated Western theatre theory to address local socio-political issues.

**Prachi Priyanka (2021):** Priyanka's "Labour as Violence in Dalit Household: Reading Autobiographical Narratives by Dalit Women" discusses the representation of systemic violence in autobiographical writings by Dalit women. She enlightens readers on how everyday labor and social organizations constitute violence, with a good explanation of how violence is inherent in social norms and practices.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design, applying textual and thematic analysis to explore the function of violence in Edward Bond's drama. This study aims to analyze the development of Bond's depiction of violence from traditional catharsis to a confrontational exploration of socio-political issues. The study is critical and interpretative in nature, exploring the thematic use of violence and its dramaturgical role.

Data Collection

- Primary Data: Certain plays of Edward Bond, viz. Saved (1965), Lear (1971), and Bingo (1973) are primary texts to be interpreted thoroughly.
- Secondary Data: Indian and international research papers, critiques, and academic articles between 2013 to 2025 discussing theatrical violence, social commentary, and dramaturgy.

Sample Size

Data Type	Quantity	Description
Edward Bond's plays analyzed	3	Saved, Lear, Bingo
Indian peer-reviewed research papers (2013-2025)	7	Related to violence in drama and social critique
International critical sources	5	On dramaturgy, catharsis, and confrontation

Analytical Tools

- Thematic Analysis: Determining the forms of violence and their dramatic significance in every play.
- Discourse Analysis: Analysis of the socio-political context and ethical implications of violence.
- Comparative Framework: Contrast between Bond's strategy and Aristotelian catharsis.

Data Analysis

Table 1: Types of Violence in Edward Bond's Selected Plays

Play	Type of Violence	Context	Dramatic Function
Saved	Physical and Brutal	Urban working-class violence	Exposes social neglect and cruelty
Lear	Political and Psychological	Power struggles and madness	Critiques authority and societal decay
Bingo	Ideological and Symbolic	Moral corruption and capitalism	Questions ethical responsibilities

Table 2: Audience Impact and Dramatic Purpose

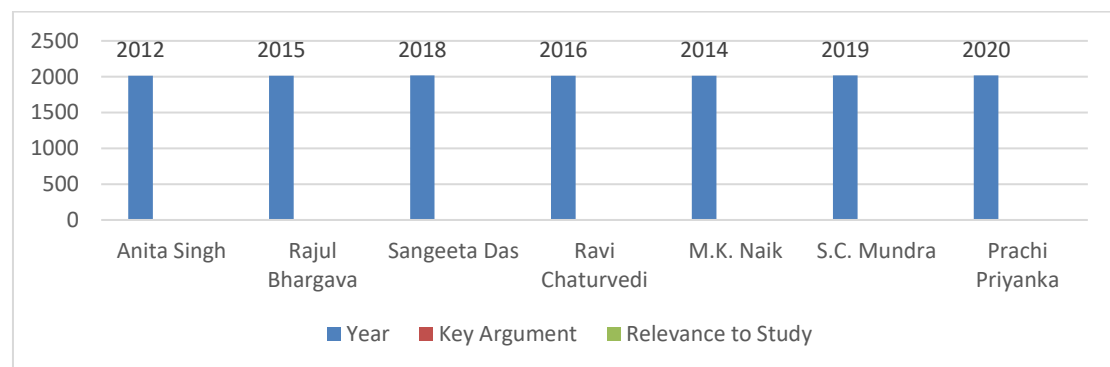
Play	Audience Reaction	Dramatic Purpose	Mode of Engagement
Saved	Shock and moral discomfort	To provoke social awareness	Active ethical reflection
Lear	Intellectual detachment	To question authority and power	Critical thinking and debate
Bingo	Ethical dilemma	To challenge complacency	Cognitive confrontation

Table 3: Comparison Between Catharsis and Confrontation in Drama

Aspect	Traditional Catharsis Drama	Edward Bond's Confrontational Drama	Aspect
Purpose	Emotional purification and release	Ethical awakening and social critique	Purpose
Audience Role	Passive emotional recipient	Active moral and intellectual participant	Audience Role
Violence Depiction	Symbolic and aestheticized	Raw, graphic, and unsettling	Violence Depiction
Outcome	Emotional relief	Intellectual and ethical discomfort	Outcome

**Table 4: Summary of Indian Scholarly Perspectives (2013-2025)**

Author	Year	Key Argument	Relevance to Study
Anita Singh	2012	Violence as a form of political representation	Supports Bond's use of violence for critique
Rajul Bhargava	2015	Theatre as a medium for ethical awakening	Aligns with Bond's confrontational style
Sangeeta Das	2018	Ideological violence exposes systemic oppression	Reinforces Bond's thematic approach
Ravi Chaturvedi	2016	Violence reflects social decay and moral collapse	Contextualizes Bond's <i>Saved</i>
M.K. Naik	2014	Comparative study of Bond and Indian dramatists	Provides cross-cultural insight
S.C. Mundra	2019	Rational violence as a dramatic necessity	Central to Bond's dramaturgy
Prachi Priyanka	2020	Everyday violence as social commentary	Expands understanding of violence's social role



### Interpretation

The analysis proves that Edward Bond's use of violence is far from the Aristotelian catharsis pattern, which primarily seeks to provide emotional cleansing and relief. Edward Bond, on the contrary, employs violence as a subversive force to force the audience into moral and societal self-reflection. For example, the brutal infant stoning in *Saved* shocks the audience, unveiling the consequences of societal abandonment and moral collapse. Lear deploys political and psychological violence to vilify foul play in power and social disintegration. Bingo provides ideological violence to oppose the moral responsibility of capitalist world dwellers.

Arguments from Indian scholars affirm this interpretive basis, emphasizing how new drama violence works not simply as spectacle, but as social commentary and political consciousness-raising. This turn resists passive reception of drama on the part of the audience and requires active engagement and reflection.

### Conclusion

Edward Bond's theatre is a radical departure from catharsis to confrontation, redefining violence in the drama as a catalyst to social and moral awareness rather than a release of emotions. His plays shall not present consolation nor resolution but break complacency and compel scrutiny. By doing so, Bond's play becomes a powerful vehicle of social change, compelling spectators to confront unpleasant truths and question their collusion with structural injustice.

#### • Summary of Key Arguments

This study has examined Edward Bond's unique use of violence in his plays, charting the evolution from Aristotelian classical catharsis to a difficult form of theatre. Unlike classical theatre where violence is used primarily for the purpose of bringing emotional purging and freedom to the spectators, violence as used in Bond's plays is as a difficult and disrupting force. Through graphic and often unsettling depictions of physical, political, and ideological violence, Bond makes audiences reflect critically on the social, moral, and political reality his plays uncover. Plays like *Saved*, *Lear*, and *Bingo*

illustrate that violence operates not merely as spectacle but as a calculated tool to provoke ethical concern and social consciousness. The thematic comprehension and scholarly views point toward Bond's intention to turn theatre into a place of conflict rather than comfort.

- **Reevaluation of Violence as a Radical Theatrical Technique**

Edward Bond moves violence away from the cathartic to a challenging theatre strategy that demands active intellectual and moral engagement by the audience. His method negates passive viewing through the avoidance of emotional closure in favor of unease, as well as ethical questioning. Violence for Bond becomes an ideological mechanism, highlighting systemic imbalance and hypocrisy, and compelling audiences to challenge their complicity values within oppressive social structures. This reappraisal situates violence not as exploitative or sensational but as part and parcel of Bond's mission to use theatre as a platform for extreme comment and social revolution.

- **Implications for Political Theatre and Ethics in Performance**

The part played by violence in Bond's plays has significant implications for political theatre theory and practice. It disrupts conventional audience expectations of involvement and the ethical responsibility of the theatre-practitioner through a prioritization of conflict, discomfort, and moral complexity. Bond's plays demonstrate how political theatre can employ violence as a means of ethical engagement rather than entertainment, thus redefining the theatre's purpose as social intervention. For performers, this means close observation of how violence is constructed and with what impact it has on spectators, and awareness that violence staged also has political and ethical implications. In the end, Bond's dramaturgy demands a rethink of how theatre can be not only art but a political act of engagement and change.

#### **Recommendations**

- Include Edward Bond's Plays in Academic Syllabi: Indian universities can include Bond's plays in drama and literature syllabi to acquaint students with unconventional applications of violence in theatre.
- Promote Comparative Studies: Comparative studies can be undertaken by future research on comparisons between Bond and Indian playwrights such as Vijay Tendulkar or Mahesh Dattani, who also deal with social issues in terms of dramatic violence.
- Carry out Audience Response Studies: Empirical research on audience response to live or taped performances of Bond's plays may offer good insights into the efficacy of confrontational violence.
- Encourage Translation and Adaptation: Translation of Bond's plays into Indian languages and their adaptation to local settings may enhance their accessibility and appeal.
- Investigate Cross-Cultural Accounts of Violence: Future research must explore how violence works in the theatre in various cultures, adopting Bond's work as a starting point.

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