

**Mere solidarity is not enough:
Exploring dystopian reality
in Edward Bond's *The Tin Can People***

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Abstract

Solidarity is an indispensable part of the utopian and dystopian world since people gather around a common cause either to create an ideal community or to get rid of a difficult situation. Unlike utopia, in which solidarity mostly comes out voluntarily, in dystopia, it grows up compulsorily triggered by emotions such as anxiety, distrust, paranoia, and fear primarily due to a totalitarian regime or the effects of a nuclear war. However, in *The Tin Can People* (1984), British playwright Edward Bond propounds a new perspective to post-apocalyptic dystopia by portraying a group of people who create a utopian community, a heaven in the aftermath of a nuclear holocaust, as a result of living in solidarity. This article aims to trace how dystopian world reveals the bitter 'reality' against this illusionary heaven with the arrival of a stranger and dissolves the community despite the solidarity that the survivors have been preserving for years to show that mere solidarity is not enough to save a community.

Keywords

post-apocalyptic dystopia, utopia, solidarity, enhanced sociability, compulsory solidarity, dystopian reality, Edward Bond

**Zwykła solidarność nie wystarcza:
Analiza dystopijnej rzeczywistości
w *The Tin Can People* Edwarda Bonda**

Abstrakt

Solidarność stanowi niezbędną część utopijnego i dystopijnego świata, ponieważ ludzie gromadzą się wokół wspólnego celu stworzenia idealnej społeczności, lub znalezienia wyjścia z trudnej sytuacji. W przeciwieństwie do utopii, w ramach której solidarność opiera się na zasadzie dobrowolności, w dystopii solidarność wynika z konieczności, będąc pobudzana przez takie emocje jak strach, nieufność, paranoja i niepewność wywołane przez reżim totalitarny, lub też spowodowane przez wojnę z użyciem broni nuklearnej. W sztuce *The Tin Can People* (1984) brytyjski dramaturg Edward Bond proponuje nowe spojrzenie na post-apokaliptyczną dystopię przedstawiając grupę ludzi, którzy żyjąc w solidarności tworzą utopijną społeczność pośród ruin świata zniszczonego przez wojnę. Poniższy artykuł ma na celu zbadanie, jak pojawienie się w niej człowieka ze świata zewnętrznego ujawnia iluzoryczność idealnej społeczności poprzez wprowadzenie elementu śmierci należącej do realnego dystopijnego świata. Pomimo solidarności, którą ocaleni budowali przez lata ich społeczność ulega rozpadowi, dowodząc, że zwykła solidarność nie wystarcza, by ocalić społeczność.

Słowa kluczowe

post-apokaliptyczna dystopia, utopia, solidarność, Edward Bond

The 20th century witnessed so many bloody wars¹ affecting numerous artists, authors and playwrights. With the improvement in technology and the subsequent changes in military tactics, wars turned into mass murders, whose victims were mostly civilians. Each massacre manifested the ever-increasing intensity of human violence. During such a chaotic period theatre could not ignore the increasing fears and tensions, and anti-war themes overtook the stage with the challenging plays of leading playwrights such as Howard Brenton, John Arden, or David Hare. Edward Bond, who directly experienced the horrors of war in his youth, distinguished himself with his uncompromising approach to the causes of contemporary violence and its psychological impact on the people. In his works, he primarily showed the cruel nature of human beings and the need for a social revolution by confronting people with the act of violence to which they have become inured. In *The War Plays* (1984), which, for him, sum up all his previous works, Bond introduces a dystopian world representing the agony, anxiety, horror, and destruction caused by a nuclear holocaust.

The War Plays was premiered by Bread and Circus Theatre Company on 4th of May, 1984, at the time marked by Margaret Thatcher's pro-nuclear discourse as well as the nuclear arms race in Europe. Furthermore, the tensions that arose between the US and the Soviet Union in 1983 brought the world to the brink of a nuclear war. In this respect, with *The War Plays*, Edward Bond lays bare "the consequences of a nuclear exchange" as well as "the ideological effects of 'The Bomb' and points out that nuclear politics is itself destructive whether the bomb falls or not" (Cawood 1986: 21). In other words, by pre-

¹ Along with the two World Wars, the 20th century was marked by many civil wars, international conflicts and invasions which aroused panic and fear of a possible third world war. Especially in 1982 (two years before the composition of Bond's *The War Plays*), there occurred "the re-opening of the Iran-Iraq war, the Malvinas war, the preparations for the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, and the growing foreign intervention in the civil war in El Salvador" (Mandel 1983: 23). These strained international relations triggered the debates on the probability of a 'nuclear' third world war.

senting a dystopian vision of the future, Bond not only warns the society of a possible nuclear disaster, but also criticises the current nuclear politics. As a prominent socialist, Bond makes explicit his purpose of writing the dystopian trilogy in one of his letters: “in past revolutionary situations, the future was seen optimistically, even utopianly. [...] I think we have to point out a real danger in the future. A collapsing future has always been an argument in fascism, or all reaction: it now has to be an argument in socialism” (1995: 100). With such an incentive, the dystopian world of *The War Plays* set the stage for a discussion of a variety of topics including humanity, class difference, consumerism and capitalism besides the destructive consequences of a nuclear war.

Each play of the trilogy shows the brutality and destructive consequences of a nuclear apocalypse through different plot lines. The first play, *Red Black and Ignorant* (1984), touches upon issues such as love, work, and death by depicting the possible life of a character named Monster killed in her mother’s womb because of a nuclear bomb. In a similar vein, the final play, *Great Peace* (1984-85), focuses on suffering, despair, and insanity, portraying an unnamed woman’s losing her mind, when her baby was killed by her own son ordered to do so by military authorities. On the other hand, *The Tin Can People* (1984) differs from these two plays, as it brings a new perspective to the nuclear apocalypse by elaborating on its revolutionary power more than its destructive consequences. Here, violence brings about a social revolution and a utopian community based on solidarity is built in a dystopian post-apocalyptic world. The play shows how, despite the long-lasting bonds of solidarity, the survivors living in this utopian community vanished when forced to confront the surrounding dystopian reality. The demise of solidarity suggests that Bond refutes utopias in which the satisfaction of human needs and solidarity are deemed sufficient to create a perfect community. Unlike the approach adopted in this paper, the play has generally been discussed in connection with such topics as “the

relationship between the individual and normalized violence in society” (Yungduk 2002) or “the relationship between the family politics currently destroying human society and the possibilities for radical change” (Reneilt 1991).² In this sense, the present paper offers a new insight into the play by asserting that mere solidarity, which is regarded as an “umbrella term” for unity, fraternity, and equality, is not enough to save a community.

The Tin Can People revolves around unnamed³ survivors of a nuclear holocaust who established an ideal community amongst the ruins and lived in solidarity for seventeen years until the arrival of a newcomer. The tin cans that the survivors found in an army store-house after the war provided the opportunity to establish a new, just community which turned hell into a miniaturised heaven where they did not have to work to earn their living, be divided into classes or fight for their freedom against some enemy. Bond, in a way, portrays a perfect community from a socialist viewpoint. However, for the survivors, living in affluence without labour is living in a ‘dream’,⁴ an escapist ‘fantasy’ protecting them against dystopian reality. Their utopia built on solidarity and prosperity

² It is worth noting that there is scarcely any study that discusses in detail *The War Plays*, particularly *The Tin Can People*, since the plays in the trilogy tend to be analysed as a single whole. In this respect, this paper also aims to contribute to the existing studies of the play by proposing a new perspective.

³ Bond believes that names are the indicators of “humanity” (1998: 361). The survivors are devoid of names because they have lost not only themselves but also their humanity in the traumatic experience of the nuclear war.

⁴ In his commentary on *The War Plays*, Bond alludes to the dream world of the Tin Can community by explaining the dream and reality dichotomy. He asserts that “in dreams objects are unreal but reasoning and emotion are real. But objects, not emotions, present reality to us” (1998:345). In this sense, when the survivors found the tin cans, they stopped fighting for their survival thereby, lost touch with the equipment and machines which would establish a connection between them and reality. On the other hand, the newcomer has always been a part of reality since he has to struggle to survive. As a result, he is the one who brings reality to the dream place of the Tin Can community.

falls apart in the face of bitter “reality” of death, horror, anxiety, and irrationality that the newcomer brings along with him.

The play is composed of three sections which depict the devastation in the aftermath of the nuclear war. However, portraying the lives of a group of survivors who created a utopia within the dystopian post-apocalyptic world, the play juxtaposes “utopia/dystopia”, “heaven/hell” and “dream/reality” contradictions. In particular, the first section entitled “Paradise in Hell” evidently reveals that there is a blurred line between the conflicting worlds of the Tin Can people. As the title suggests, the section dwells upon the question of whether it is possible to establish a peaceful, perfect community in a chaotic world. On the face of it, the survivors manage to accomplish this goal, living in happiness and unity irrespective of the surrounding destruction. However, Bond frequently reminds the audience of the nuclear apocalypse which the survivors seem to forget by living in their ideal community. In this sense, the surrounding dystopian reality never ceases to exist, but the survivors just prefer to ignore it constructing a dream world which will collapse once they become aware of it.

The chorus, which “broadens the plays’ political and psychological scope” (Bond 1998: 345), plays a significant part in the depiction of the dystopian reality of the post-apocalyptic world. At the beginning of each section, it not only evokes probable consequences of the nuclear armaments in Europe, but also describes the potential psychological effects of a nuclear war on people. And so, the first section starts with the chorus which comments on how the world turned into hell after the nuclear holocaust:

Years later a dust as white as old people’s hair settled on everything
The world looked like a drawing in lead on white paper
Hours after the explosions I walked over a bridge
The thirst caused by the fires was so severe that even the
drowning called for water
(Bond 1998: 51)

The destitution and despair mentioned in the opening remark of the chorus create the expectation that the play would display the survivors' struggle for their lives against hunger and thirst in a hostile environment. In a similar vein, the Second Man's portrayal of the devastated world they lived in after the bombs, not only reinforces this expectation but also reveals the magnitude of the disaster:

In the first years after the bombs, we came together. Perhaps there are other survivors but there've been no planes or search parties. The burning core set fire to its seed- the trees burned their own fruit. Nothing grows: the dust of so many dead has stifled the earth. The animals are dead: their bones traps. If a few live they keep of our way. Yet we're in paradise. (Bond 1998: 55)

Contrary to the first expectation, however, the final statement of the Second Man implies that hard times become history for the survivors who have managed to create a new order, an ideal community. In this sense, living within a dystopian reality becomes a distant traumatic and painful memory for the survivors. Even if the bombs destroyed every living thing turning the world into a wasteland, it brought the survivors together. The physical and psychological devastation, the nuclear war caused, enabled them to live in 'solidarity' and harmony which the begetters of the nuclear war had failed to do.

Solidarity,⁵ in its basic terms, refers to "collective liability", "the cohesion of a particular community" (Scholz 2015: 725) and mainly represents a variety of concepts such as empathy, mutual trust, equality, fraternity and unity among the com-

⁵ As a term, solidarity dates back to the Roman law of obligations and has been used in different ways since then. In his article "Four Uses of Solidarity", Kurt Bayertz notes that "solidarity" was first mentioned as *obligatio in solidum* in Roman law to refer to the assurance that the members of family or community would pay the common debt. In the nineteenth century, however, the term gained a political meaning and was used together with concepts such as unity, liberty, fraternity, and equality in the aftermath of the French Revolution (1999: 3).

munity members.⁶ The term also signifies commitment to a common cause which mostly serves the common good and may or may not result from compulsion. In the light of these, the solidarity fostered among the survivors seventeen years ago was compulsory, since they were dependent on each other. In other words, when they were just children, they were unified around one common purpose: to survive in this hell on earth. Furthermore, as Laitinen, Arto, and Anne B. Pessi argue in “Solidarity: Theory and Practice: An Introduction”, solidarity is mostly built on “similarity”, “uniformity with members” and “shared values and beliefs” which come out of “common history or living in the same area” (2015: 3-4). They share the same traumatic past, the same “common wound”, which is ‘helplessness’ they felt watching dying people or when “babies suckled their dead mothers and mothers tried to give milk to their dead babies” (Bond 1998: 58).

On the other hand, the tin cans that the survivors found in the army store-house, turned their hell into heaven not only by supplying their basic needs but also preventing them from fighting for the maintenance of their lives. Bond, thereby, underlines the significance of the tin cans, which convert destitution to prosperity and dystopia to utopia, by reminding the audience of the post-apocalyptic reality through the chorus and painful recollections of the survivors. The tins which they called “the fruits of paradise”, thus, rendered their unity possible and laid the groundwork for a desire for sociability. In this nascent utopian world of the Tin Can community, a high level of social solidarity, friendship, and fraternity held the community together. According to Gregory Claeys, people exhibit a collectivist ethos with a sense of communal belonging or identity in utopias, which he terms as “the enhanced socia-

⁶ There are many types, forms, and levels of ‘solidarity’ such as moral, philosophical, political or civil, etc., used in numerous contexts as the term connotes various things. Moreover, it has become an issue discussed in different fields such as sociology, epistemology or philosophy. However, instead of delving deeply into the use of the concept of “solidarity” in a wide range of fields this paper primarily focuses on the depiction of solidarity in utopian and dystopian communities.

bility” (2013: 151). They devote themselves to the common good and “social solidarity trumps selfish individualism” (Claeys 2017: 8). It is through such enhanced sociability that the survivors welcome the newcomer into their utopian world when they encounter him desperately searching for food. They believe that he is sent to replace the newly deceased member of their community and make them a whole again:

Second Woman: He’s one of us!

First Woman and Third Woman: He’s one of us!

Second Man goes to the Women and embraces them.

Second Man: One of us! (Bond 1998: 63)

The survivors accept the newcomer as one of “them” not as the “other” because they are similar with respect to the horror and pain they have experienced. In this sense, the frequent use of “us” here “emphasize[s] the collective identity of the utopians” (Levitas 1995: 91), which represents the strength of solidaristic relations of the communal whole. Moreover, they believe that no one has any reason harm them, because they have millions of tin cans that are enough to live on for a thousand years and they do not have to work or struggle to earn their living. Anyone joining this small, peaceful, and classless community in which no one is superior to the other, cannot be an enemy since he can share their prosperity. They live in luxury as they possess houses, towns, lands, in brief, everything around them that is left, but they are alone in the post-war world. What they need is anyone ‘alive’ who can not only share their loneliness but also sustain the continuation of the human race. There are only fourteen survivors left, and they are on the edge of extinction since they are unable to reproduce. In this respect, the appearance of a young survivor out of nowhere gives meaning to their purposeless lives by raising hopes not only for the existence of other survivors but also the possibility of giving birth to a new generation.

However, the newcomer brings ‘death’ instead of ‘life’ to the Tin Can community. With the first death after his arrival, the

voluntary solidarity of the survivors which comes out as a part of the utopian enhanced sociability changes gradually into “compulsory solidarity” of dystopia. According to Leszek Kolakowski, fraternity could most easily emerge when it was forced on people by a common danger, wars or disasters (1983: 246). In this regard, anxiety and fear reinforce solidarity and fraternity among the survivors who face a real threat for the first time in seventeen years. Their heaven has verged into hell again with the newcomer whom they blame for having a contagious disease. Henceforth, the survivors begin to use the words “us” and “we” to “establish outsider status of the visitor” (Levitas 1995: 91). As an outsider, he now poses a threat to the Tin Can people and they unite against the common enemy to save their community. To this end, they come up with the idea to kill him, and as the Second Man demands, all of them should take responsibility for the killing and hunt him together. However, as this may endanger the whole community, the Second man is willing to sacrifice himself for the common good. Being the embodiment of solidarity among the survivors, he voluntarily risks his life to kill the newcomer for the sake of saving the community.

Either compulsory or voluntary, solidarity is not enough to save the Tin Can community since sudden deaths continue. Especially, with the unexpected death of the Second man, while making a spear to kill the newcomer, the survivors grow frantic. Fear, anxiety, and panic prevail in the community, and they begin to display irrational behaviour. For instance, the Second Woman constantly moves, walks, jumps and eats believing that if she stops she will die, while the Fourth pretends to be dead to deceive death. Their nonsensical deductions and absurd methods to escape death end in a riot. As a result, the survivors destroy their living source and burn all of the tin cans. Within this frame, the Second Section, entitled “The Tin Can Riots”, shows how the survivors lose their control and exhibit inherently destructive behaviour in the face of dystopian reality. Burning the tin cans implies that the survivors have

repeated the mistakes of those who brought their end upon themselves by destroying everything with nuclear bombs.

The survivors were living in a dream world, a utopia where they were exempt from any responsibilities or obligations. Death has restored 'reality' by shattering the dream world of the Tin Can people in which no one has died since the nuclear war. In this respect, behind this utopia there lies a reality of extreme consumerism, capitalism, violence, and destruction. The survivors have not struggled to produce their means of survival since they have been living in other people's properties and ate their food for which they had killed each other and died. Bond likens the survivors to the ruling class who exploit the working class and thereby become irrational and destructive when "faced with the non-economic problems of life" (Bond and Tuallion 2015: 80). Like the ruling class, the Tin Can people consume without labour and the lack of any threat to their way of life or their community results in their losing touch with the real. In this respect, their first confrontation with reality culminates in panic, insanity and further destruction.

Bond named the final section "The Young Sages", in a way, to refer to the awakening of the survivors about the bitter 'realities' of dystopia. After the tin cans had been destroyed in the riot, the survivors realized that they were possessed by the tin cans and the properties they had. They could not manage to kill the newcomer, and ironically, it was he who became not only the precursor of a new community, but also the one who revealed the truth about their condition with his final remarks:

A tree grows but it doesn't own field. The owner can come along anytime and cut it down and burn it. It is the same with us. When the things we need to live are owned by someone else we're owned – we can be cut down and burned at any time. Now no tins – so we can only own what we make and wear and use ourselves. That's the only difference – but it means that at last we own ourselves. (Bond 1998: 96)

In a way, the survivors lived the life being provided for by other people, thus, they made the same mistakes as them. Now, to maintain their existence they have to start from scratch which gives them a chance to change the future. In this sense, Bond ends the play with a utopian hope that the survivors would build a better future and a new just order by working and creating.

To conclude, in an epoch of wars and the threat of nuclear holocaust, Edward Bond was not the only playwright to deal with the issues of increasing violence and destructive power of nuclear weapons. However, what differentiates Bond from the other post-war playwrights is, the fact that, as Benedict Nightingale puts forward, “In his time Bond has looked where other people don’t, faced what they won’t, felt what they can’t, that’s what has made him an authentically challenging playwright” (qtd. in Witham 1988: 300). The extremely challenging scenes in his plays such as the murder of babies in *Saved* (1965) and *Great Peace*, cannibalism in *Early Morning* (1967), and bloody mutilation in *Lear* (1971) are just a few examples that reveal the unorthodoxy of his dramatic style. Likewise, with *The Tin Can People*, Bond again proves Nightingale right with his unconventional approach to utopia and dystopia by building an ideal community within a dystopic world. In this sense, he uses nuclear holocaust as a means of social revolution that wipes away injustice and inequalities in the society offering hopes for a better future and true solidarity.

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