

# The Status of Language in Howard Barker's Theatrical World

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## ABSTRACT

Howard Barker as postmodern British dramatist pays great attention to the freedom of expression and writing; he defies political and ideological censorship on British theater. Freedom of expression is well reflected in all his plays since the 1980s. He is well-known for his point of view that theater should not be used to deliver any moral, political, or ideological message, it should be left for the audience for interpretation. The composition and style of language are features of Barker's plays that overflow with richness and diversity. This paper discusses the theatrical language of Howard Barker and that his language of theater is poetic. Barker considers and explores language to be at the center of his theatrical profession and makes it better suit the new dramatic form in the British theater. In doing so, he makes language to express the complexity of modern man in a better way. He pays much attention to the style of his theatrical language and the words that come out of his character's mouth. The ultimate goal of this paper is to show that Barker is deliberate and conscious in his use of the poetic language; he adopts a figurative language and other poetic devices. His language includes diversity of challenging ideas and provides no clarification and simplicity or deceptive of any message. His characters speak freely to the extent that social classes are not distinguished within the scope of his language of theater.

Keywords: language, poetic, style, characters, theater.

## INTRODUCTION

Howard Barker is a British writer who wrote more than 100 plays (including Radio plays) and a number of poems combined in three books of poetry. He is the director of his own written plays. Most of his plays produced by his own company The Wrestling School which is a theatre company located and found in England, the company researches the connection between performer, language, and spectator via plays written by Barker. Moreover, he invented a style of dramatic writing labeled as The Theater of Catastrophe. (Sumbul, 2019). In his 'Arguments for a Theater' (1989) Barker states that his theater challenges the traditional belief of European people and goes against their perspectives and views regarding the norms and those events that took place in the past and defies the doctrines that have struck deep roots in English society (Arif and Abdulsalam, 2022).

Furthermore, his theater depends on language, sound, and gesture to produce theatrical performances which are against the old conventions of play writing in England. Barker has produced plays with high values that could draw attention from readers and spectators in England and Worldwide. In this regard, David Ian Rabey states that Barker is known as the great living dramatist in England and that he is labeled as the Shakespeare of our time. This is mostly due to authenticity of style, prolificacy in writing, and his language of theater which is in a poetic form. Barker's plays are concerned with subjects like history, desire, death, and language as well. In this regard, most of his plays have been interpreted to show their connection and response to the mainstream drama of the period, which is political and experimental, especially the drama of the playwrights like Bertolt Brecht and Sara Kane (Sumbul, 2019).

Barker's plays own the characteristic of being difficult to stage, and at the same time not easy to watch. This is due to certain levels such as form, style, content, language, characterization, expense and duration. In most of Barker's plays, characters come across forms of war, catastrophe, cruelty, grief and extremes. Barker's plays are known for their exploration of the psychological complexities of power, expressed via unconventional dialogue that opposes outward appearances with inner desires in creatively theatrical and odd scenarios.

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Barker writes his plays in a way that is far away from the conventional drama of his period; his style refuses any conventional approach. In this regard, the function of drama and theater is not to deliver any political, social and moral message. For this reason, his works drew noticeable critical attention from critics, writers and researchers, and his approach has become a focal point in the theatrical world of England. For example, Charles Lamb writes about Barker's approach in his famous book *Howard Barker's Theatre of Seduction* (1997). Similarly, *Howard Barker: Ecstasy and Death* (2009) by David Ian Rabey investigates Barker's approach and theatre. Both critics examine and interpret Barker's carrier and his approach regarding the status and the aim of theater in England. Moreover, researchers have shown that Barker's drama stands against the classical tradition of Aristotle's catharsis and Brechtian epic theatre. Thematically his plays are rich as they focus on important matters as well as his technical and stylistic use of language (Ibid).

In the 1980s, there were a variety of political and economic pressures on theatrical culture in England that caused a great sense of dissatisfaction among playwrights. Theater was subject to censorship and funding cuts by the authority. There was government interference in theatrical performances and writing as well. This led to a noticeable sense of insecurity. For example, performances which were not economically beneficial would be canceled or permanently banned, the duty of artists meant to devote to build political ideals. In case, playwrights did not produce plays in accordance to the conditions and criteria put by the authority, they would be banned from performance or face undesirable consequences. This matter required an urgent change within British theatre which was somehow complicated, when it comes to democracy, sponsorship and ideology. And most importantly, the way that writers responded to it as their dream was to enjoy a degree of freedom away from being censored.

As far as the necessity of making changes was concerned, Barker, as a well-known dramatist in the British theater, decided to make necessary steps towards forming a new method of writing to be free from any political commitment as he previously expressed his distrust about a theater which is politically committed. He believed in the freedom of writing and expression. During his carrier, especially after the 1980s, Barker openly defied and refused to include any conservative values in his plays, he believed that these values would strict or ruin theatre. He openly showed his aim to apply a new method of writing in his plays. As a result, no political ideology or perspective could be found in his plays. In other words, he did not express any political or ideological message through his plays (Kershaw, 1999). During the 1980s, British theatre declined in addressing a

large sector of audience due to many political and economic factors. In addition to the above- mentioned crisis, the language of theater went through a number of crises as well (Milling, 2012). D. Keith Peacock states that the theater's language became more accommodative rather than combative. The materialistic side of the age had a great effect on the quality of language and the performances on stage. Michael Billington, in his article "The state of reviewing today" in 1999, deplored the dominance of celebrity and consumerism in the culture of the mainstream theater as the only criteria to measure success.

In contrast, Barker believes that an individual should construct himself/herself from experience. According to him, the worst crisis of the British theater was the decline of theatre language which led to the damage of the training actors (Rabey and Gritzner, 2006). Hanna Berrigan in her words about directing *Slowly* in (2010) states "The simplest way to express what it takes to act Barker perhaps, is that with Barker, as with Shakespeare, the thought is in the word. It is the word, in fact" (Brown, 2013). Barker understood the language of theater to be important and well-formed and upon this perception he has paid much attention to the use of a poetic language on stage. Moreover, Barker continued making changes within the British theater as he broke the strategies of naturalism by his linguistic skills and poetic language. In Barker's plays, naturalism is not there as they include the poetic language of his own in addition to his own style of scenes which is not limited (Salman, 2018).

## HOWARD BARKER'S LANGUAGE OF THEATER

Howard Barker's plays overflow with rich language and diversity of challenging ideas within human experience to have a powerful theatrical experience. He pays much attention to the beauty of language and creates his texts on the premise that theatre is necessary for any society and it is a place for imagination and moral speculation, not constrained by the demands of any ideology. Barker makes no attempt for clarification and simplicity or deceptive of any message, the audience are inspired to acquire meaning within the language and each performance and resonance from a multiplicity of interpretations.

For Howard Barker, language is the setting and the reference. The subjection of his theatre is language, an endeavor to sketch out, or battle through, a scaffolding of tropes that may allude to a structure of Being, or to read experience. In his plays especially tragedy the actors are promoted to a developed level by the beauty of language and tragedy itself which is a conduit for the beauty of language. Barker believes in the power of language to impact the individuals and social events as well (Freeland, 2011). In one of his statements about the

aesthetic aspects of his playwriting, Barker mentions the language as an important aspect that is superior to political ends of his plays, as he states:

My first instinct is not to write a political play in the sense that its didactic purpose is paramount, but to write a play in which politics happen to be the arena of action. Classical aesthetic values- style, language, character- are primary over political ends of the play. (Imran, 1989)

He clearly states the importance of the method and style of using language. He does not use language for a didactic or any ideological purpose, he leaves it for the audience, without any clarification, to interpret and understand though he establishes a strong connection between language and the physical body.

Barker composes his play texts as a relationship with actors. The language of his plays heavily relies on his actors for its realization. The connection and relationship between the language given by him and actors are one of the most important aspects of his writing style. In the following statement, Barker states the importance of actors and their position within his theater:

**It has been often remarked that my theatre is predominantly an actors' theatre, and it is certainly true that actors have been my greatest allies and collaborators. This reflects the supreme responsibility that is placed in them, in their powers of articulation to conduct what is in effect a symphony of speech. It is this displacement of attention from meaning to texture that characterizes the first moments of the play. (Barker, 1993).**

In describing the nature of the actor's linguistic duty, Barker states that the author loses his text to a second system of signification as an inherent part of the theatrical process. Barker views his work as a gift given to the actors rather than the director. As a result, the dramatist rejects the author's ability to control the form of his literary work as a necessary requirement of his chosen field of expression. According to Barker's theatrical perspective, the language of theatre has to go via living bodies so as to grant its stage life. Furthermore, the living bodies are not in full control of meaning and context they transmit, but have a partial control over it. So, the art of the playwright is based and built on a promiscuous connection to meaning and language, because its whole structure depends on the actor's body's ability to interpret as a medium for fleeting emotion. Therefore, theater is a place for the embodiment of language, and language achieves its action through the actor's body.

From the very beginning of his career, Barker could return rhetoric to theater therefore allowing language to restore its verbal richness by which the speaker might

express a perspective on the world that claims its entitlement to exist, not as an absolute truth, but as an expression of a determination that can assert its reality over others (Price, 1995). Similarly, Barker has characterized his writing as the courage to envision life as it could be experienced, an intensely personal endeavor that becomes public through the actors' interpretation of a language born from his efforts:

**The dramatist explores the terrain, half-knowing, half-ignorant. His**

**journey is mapped by the actors. The audience participate in the**

**struggle to make sense of the journey, which becomes their journey**

**also. Consequently, what is achieved by them is achieved**

**individually and not collectively. There is no official interpretation. (Ibid).**

Language is one of the major components that makes Barker to have a respective position in the world of theater and to be a well-known dramatist among writers and critics who disagree with his ideas but still appreciate his language and stylistic innovation. A major example would be Michael Billington who reiterates that Barker has proved the fact that he provides his characters with a better dialogue (which is sharp, tangy, and poetic) than almost all the others in his generation. On the other hand, Nicholas de Jongh states that Barker's instinct for dialogue has served him from the beginning. Barker's language is poetic as he himself states that because its contrived. It is not the language used by the public, but at the same time, it endeavors to engage the spectator's emotion (Imran, 1989).

In Barker's texts language is concentrated and contrived and there is an association between emotionally charged language and the spectator's involvement which is connected with rhetoric. The use of figurative language and other poetic devices (like rhyme and alliteration) are clearly apparent; therefore, these prove his claim about the poetic style of his language. His style is rhetorical due to the use of repetition, alternation, accumulation and parallelism. In an interview, Majeed Mohammed Midhin asks Barker whether he is a poet or dramatist. In his reply, Barker confirms the poetic style of his language when he states that he is a poet and dramatist. Moreover, he announces that theater is a place for poets like him and that it is required to speak its own language because it is not about speaking the common language of the street. He insists to leave such a language for social use, connections and interactions.

For Barker, originality of language is important and such an originality comes from a mixture of the coarse and refined. He is interested in the crafting of language. He is deliberate and conscious in his language. The power



of language is well-reflected in all of his plays, for him the power of language includes interlinkage between style, rhetoric and poetic language. Most importantly, between rhetoric and poetic language. As the matter of fact, there are many examples to clarify the above claim; here is an example from *The Power of the Dog* that shows Barker's interest and believe in the power of language:

**To anyone who thinks it is a mystery,  
How we cope with so much history,  
I say the answer lies in pain,  
What my mother went through I can again,  
Swallow the monster and don't strain,  
Murders from the Bosphorus to the Heberdes Render  
all compliants absurdities.  
Don't ask what makes the system, if it is a system,  
Work, cover your indignation with your foot,  
Don't think that black stuff is burned bodies, really it is  
only soot. (Barker, 1985)**

Here, the power of language lies in its repetitive elements which makes the passage a poem about themes like suffering and pain. This proves that his language is poetic and especially when the subject is desire and sexuality. In fact, Barker is careful in his use of language when it is related sexuality. That's why he talks about sexuality and desire in a complex and unconventional way (Imran, 1989).

Most of Barker's plays witness the intention to produce a new language on stage, the extension of vowels and creation of irrational emotions are well-apparent. In Barker's theatrical texts, the role and purpose of language in connection to body movements is to reveal things which are hidden and denied in the real world. He explores theater and his plays to show extreme emotions which are unsettled. His theatrical language is not a realistic one, the aim of his language is to provide the actor with the character. In this regard, David Ian Rabey states:

**Barker goes on to write that "the actor is not required to 'build a character'; Barker creates the character through language. The character effectively leaps off the page shouting 'this is what I am,' proclaiming understandable, if disturbing wants. The actor's problem is locating those wants in him/herself and coping with them; as in vocal and physical exercise, this may involve some painful stretching, but recognition unleashes energy. The compulsive process of self-discovery extends from dramatist to performer who offers it to audience. (Rabey, 1989)**

Barker constructs a theater involving new forms of human language and expression to challenge the accordance imposed on individuals in the West, which in terms of theater, comes from both the Social Justice theater community and moralists. Most of Barker's plays,

employ a rich and poetic language that reflects the style of Western tragedy as seen in the works of Marlowe, Shakespeare, Lessing, and Schiller, as well as the colloquial language found in modernist literature, such as that of Louis-Ferdinand Celine, resulting in a blended language that exhibits Expressionistic rhythms and styles.

In all his plays, Barker pays attention to the social content; as far as he is concerned, the English language is stratified in class. In this regard, he certainly rejects such a stratification, therefore, he makes a prince character to talk in the same language as another character does. Barker's audiences clearly grasp that when it comes to language there is not much difference between the ruling class and the working class. He refuses to show class distinction through language. For example, the ruling class, in all his plays, are able and allowed to speak in the way that the working class does. Such a rejection of language stratification is a statement by Barker that demands to protect society from any division. He removes class division among his characters. In other words, characters are within the same class as far as their language is concerned although they have different roles. He is doing so by giving them the same language. For example, characters from the working class use the same language of characters from high class. In Barker's theatrical world, characters from the working class are sometimes permitted to speak more eloquently than characters from the high class (Imran, 1989). So, the social content is important as well as the form and the style. In this regard, Barker states that the form and the style are everything. When it comes to the social content, he says that the social content arrives when you have done the form, the form dictates the content and the style dictates the content. When people come to a play of mine they don't know my work. They come, they go. The language, the sound, the musicality in the speech, it is not what I speak, it is not what I hear in the street. They know they're in a different place. All social realism you can be in the street, or in the theatre sounds exactly the same (Midhin, 2015).

In Barker's theatre, the audience is always surprised by the characters; this is an important part of a technique that he uses to create a successful theater. One of the means that they use to surprise the audience is the language they use. Here, the language is treated as an object by Barker, he confirms that in an interview with É. Angel-Perez:

É. Angel-Perez: One of the objects you chose was a rattle which becomes a substitute for language in *The Talk of a Toy*, and since you're also a poet, I wanted to ask you to what extent language could be compared to an object, or words be compared to objects as well.

Howard Barker: That's a good question and a good example of how an object has a percussive, a sort of

musical action which, in some way serves my language. I expect language to be performed in a way that respects the internal rhythms and the rhymes, which are inside those lines. I'm not sure whether this works in translation but in the English original, there's a strong rhythm in that speech and in the way the shaking of the rattle commands attention—so speech delivered by actors in my work is a continued challenge to be heard. I'm not a naturalistic writer, so the actual speech is a deliberate act of the characters in order to provoke a response. Everything is a challenge, and I suppose the rattle is a challenge, to attract attention. So I'd say that it has a linguistic value. (Perez, 2007).

An important and main element in Barker's drama is his unique use of language. In all of his works a calculated poetic syntax can be seen, with particular cadences of its own. Furthermore, he is an actor's writer and establishes a special language in which each word is an action by itself. He is quite aware about the language he uses; he writes with performance energy. Moreover, as a contemporary playwright, Barker invites actors to indulge in and relish language in a manner which is unique and unfamiliar to other contemporary writers. Barker's language is well precise in its rhythmic composition, meaning and structure are noticeably obscured by sloppy elisions. Moreover, every syllable and punctuation point counts. As a result, actors find performing his works enjoyable as it provides them with opportunity to show their skills and abilities in the process of performances. Meanwhile, the verbal discourse is an important element in this as it is a focus of attention by itself. It is language which self-reflexively draws attention to itself as language (Shaughnessy, 1989).

Barker is a bit of a walking contradiction. For a writer so focused on ambiguity in his playwriting, his lecture prose is lucid and to point. He writes in a direct blunt aphoristic style. It has moments of profound beauty as well, such as this passage from Barker himself about *The Last Super*:

The status of comedians has never been higher. In my latest play, *The Last Supper*, laughter has become so artificial, so mechanical, that it has ceased to be attached to human beings at all, and drifts over the landscape like a storm cloud, discharging itself over battlefields and banquets alike. (Akdoğan, 2024)

Furthermore, for Barker the beauty of language is essential while he does not use his theatrical language to be moralistic. In other words, he does not use his language to convey moral messages. This is clearly shown in his play *Gertrude – The Cry* which is his reworking of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Obviously, Barker repudiates the moralistic language of Shakespearean drama used to reinforce specific values. Because of that reason the end of his play deviates a lot from that of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (Ibid). In addition to his poetic language, his

plays are full of obscene language, this is quite compatible to the nature of his characters which is ecstatic and erotic. Barker clarifies the importance of language and using it intentionally to create unease in the audience, as he says:

**I place the words in the mouths of certain characters sometimes abusively, sometimes erotically, and sometimes with calculated excess, and always with the deliberate intention of creating the unease in the audience which is for me the condition of experiencing tragedy. (Khalvati, 2019).**

His focus is on words, the vitality of obscene language that the characters use in order to defy and respond those who use language to deliver certain moralistic messages. He is well skillful in doing so. In this regard, Dunn states that Barker's theatrical achievements are due to his skillful use of language in the service of his plots which are informed with moral dilemmas.

To depict images, Barker utilizes language and play texts in a vehement manner. This subverts the conventional modes of definition. Moreover, he endeavors to "reclaim language from a sense of social crisis expressed as social determinism" (Ibid). A sophisticated articulation is used by Barker to provide more colors to the dialogue of his characters which is contradictory to the language used by ordinary people advocated by carnival. Such a sophisticated use of language is tied to the formation of carnival effect and articulacy is one of the main tools of the creation of a carnival atmosphere.

According to Charles Lamb, Barker's aim and purpose is to restore language "to its pre-eminence in a theatre that aspires to the status of a radical art form". In addition, in his well-known play *The Europeans*, he uses a series of class styles of speech. This play shows sophisticated and well-articulated parts which feature amiable scenes. In this regard, Lamb states:

The title of the category is both ambiguous and apposite in the sense that the language which is deployed as a vital tool by Barker's characters to seduce others evades whatever controlling acts which characters/individuals seek to take to harness its power (Lamb, 2005).

Barker emphasizes that language is the most important and reliable tool that helps and strengthen his carrier. Barker's characters articulate a language and diction that seem contextually irrelevant. His plays are best known for their verbally sophisticated attack on culture. Regardless of whether it is poetic or vulgar, Barker's language is always non-naturalistic. He portrays it as a speech as contrived as poetry, dislocated, at times lyrical, frequently crude (Barker 1998). His incorporation of caesura, repetition, alliteration, rhythmic cadences, pauses, ungrammatical syntax, imagery, and polysemy, which can be demonstrated in any of the quotations

featured in this essay, creates a distinctly artificial mode of speech, highlighting that the characters are consciously embodying roles (Finburgh, 2008).

## CONCLUSIONS

Howard Barker's rejection of the perspective that theater should serve a certain ideology is well reflected and expressed in his use of language. His language of theater is free from any ideological aspect. Barker empowers his characters with freedom of expression, words are said with no cultural, political, or ideological boundary. His attempt to flourish and make changes within British theater is well noticed in his use of language. Barker has established a sophisticated poetic language to give more colors to the articulation of his characters. His drama is characterized by a well-arranged and rich language with diversity of subjects.

His concern about language in theater is to restore language to its privileged position in British theatre that aspires to the status of a radical art form. He refuses to use language as a tool to differentiate between classes within the English society; his characters could speak the same language regardless to their social position as language should be a tool for free expression not differentiation. His aim is to go beyond the traditional use of language within the British theater; his deliberate and conscious use of language is what Barker is mainly known for. Above that, Barker does not provide any interpretation for the words he uses. He has used language as his tool make changes through his plays mainly after 1980s to have new audience with different perspective regarding what they hear on stage; he writes for the audience therefore his language is left for them to grasp an interpretation.

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