

The Treatment of Violence in Howard Barker's *Judith*

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ABSTRACT

As a postmodern dramatist, Howard Barker does not assume any presupposed meanings or messages of his writings. However, he deliberately and systematically works on deconstructing those 'grand narratives' that shape and give meaning to this world. In *Judith*, Barker challenges the audience's understanding of history and their knowledge of the biblical story of Judith. His interest in the story is to defy traditional view towards the events, especially those which are related to religion, gender, history and violence. The current study aims at showing how seduction and extremity of violence constitute the heart of Barker's *Judith*. It also shows how he connects violence to sex, seduction, and gender. Through these elements, Barker creates an atmosphere of uneasiness and bewilderment that necessitates deep thinking on the part of the audience. Barker uses history to rewrite it, religion to reveal his faith in Christianity and violence to reveal it as a human instinct and a necessity. In Barker's play, sex and violence are intermingled as two related sides that form greater part in staging catastrophe. The ultimate goal of this paper is to show *Judith* as the product of The Theater of Catastrophe which relates violence to gender and seduction. As a Biblical story the play embraces a great amount of violence which the researchers examine in detail.

KEY WORDS: Howard Barker, Judith, Theater of Catastrophe, Treatment, Violence

1. INTRODUCTION:

Theater of Catastrophe: The Concept of Religion, History and Violence. In his early works, Howard Barker concentrated on socialist themes and the state affairs of England. Megson C. (2006, p.488) states that, in the mid-1980s, Barker's special interest began to grow in historical and metaphysical speculation which finally resulted in the establishment of his art of theatre known as 'The Theater of Catastrophe'. His theater mainly deals with violence within the context of history and religion; in other words, he relates violence to religion and history. The purpose is to challenge the traditional belief of European people and to question the validity of history and religion as two of the institutions that have struck deep roots in society. This is evident when he, in his 'Arguments for a Theater' (1989), holds that the

purpose of this theater is to provoke anxiety and uneasiness into the audience. To achieve this goal, Barker captures focal historical moments and presents them in his plays in challenging and shocking ways. Challenging conventional view of historical events and rewriting history is one of the main aims of The Theater of Catastrophe. Farhadi & Mozaheb state that history is an effective strategy employed by Barker in a way that he endeavors to forge a link between the past and the present in order to bring the forms of political resistance to light and to regard the constitutive discourses of history and their harmful effects on individuals (2017, p.1). He uses historical situations such as crises, events, and norms to address the current political and social situation of England; he does not believe in the history which is recorded in books and written by historians who abide by certain ideologies. He presents anti-history which delivers a sort of knowledge that people are not prepared for yet. Barker wants his version of history to be different from others. The difference between his version and other historical texts about the same matter "is that he brings a new perspective to these historical issues with an aim to disrupt their referentiality to truth, to ultimate reality of the past as it was actually experienced by the past agents" (Sumbul 2018, p. 13).

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Such a new perspective reveals and defies the oppressive power of historical and religious institutions and addresses their destructive effects on the lives of characters. Then, he stands against the discourse of authority that endeavors to build history in accordance with its ends and attitudes. History is present in almost all his plays as a background or the foreground of a work (Ibid). He himself clarifies this in an interview:

Midhin: Yeah. What about history? If you want us to live life as it might be lived.

Barker: About the past? I know a lot of history. The sad thing about the English – they don't know any history. I know a lot of history. It influences all my thinking all the time. I can't say how it does, but I'm aware of it happening – it does. Many of my plays – many of them are set in historical periods. At university I was a historian, not a literary person. So, I know a lot about history and it influences me. But I don't entirely trust history as a discipline, you know, as an intellectual discipline. So, when people say history proves this or this and history says that's one history there's another history, there's a history we don't know yet. From the other side the victims as well as the history of the winners (Midhin 2010, p. 219).

Here, Barker shows himself as an expert in history who is aware of anything happened through the course of history. Furthermore, he shows peoples' inability to understand history. He does not hide his speculation about history; in other words, he doubts anything happened in the past since there are different accounts the same event happened in the past. Therefore, his substitution for that is a version of history which is unknown by people.

In addition, Barker's version of history is dominated by Christianity, as Groves explains that in order to create a "Christian context within which Barker's atheism can respond, he has returned to history and historical settings in his drama" (2014, p. 47). Barker somewhat paradoxically returned to historical settings dominated by Christian faith and ideals in order to challenge and subvert these beliefs. The intensity of Barker's atheism and disapproval of both religious and secular faith ideologies may partly stem from the destructive impact of his initial loss of faith once he embarked on a relentless search for truth.

Furthermore, the history which Barker tackles is full of violence; he historicizes his stage with extreme use of violence. Therefore, his stage shocks the British audience with excessive physical violence, sexual violence, murder, and atrocity (Gritzner 2010, p. 44). He puts forward the notion that, by using extreme forms of violence and cruelty, theater should confront society. In this way, the purpose of *The Theatre of Catastrophe* is to push the boundaries of tolerance and resistance to pain so that spectators are enlightened about their deepest

pain (Abdul-Azim 2014, p. 479). According to Barker's theatrical ideology, violence and other forms of tragedy could provoke the audience to completely acknowledge the savagery and other traumatizing events that happen in the modern world. The question Barker raises will be about the extent of violence that is needed to serve such a purpose, and if the audiences are ready to have such abundant violence and sexuality and forming proper interpretations that have a positive impact on their thinking and personality (Ibid).

2. THE APOCRYPHAL STORY OF JUDITH

Barker's *Judith* (1990) is based on an old tale which has been written by previous writers like Friedrich Hebbel who wrote his version of *Judith* between 1839-1840 subverting the tradition of the Apocryphal tale that Judith is the savior of her people and a heroine. Jean Giraudoux's *Judith* was written in 1930/31 and Judith is in early twentieth century clothes as she discovers her sensual self in the gaze of Holofernes (her lover) but loses the possibility of fulfillment because of her predetermined role as heroine.

Howard Barker's namesake play *Judith, A Parting of the Body* was written in 1990 retelling the story of Judith (a Jewish widow) who loses her humanity to save the state of Israel from an invading army and is transformed into a tyrant-heroine. Barker retains the well-known and basic plot of the original tale that Judith must sacrifice herself in order to face Holofernes, the Assyrian leader, using her beauty and seductive power as her weapon to attract him and save Israel. However, he complicates the plot by creating lustful, seductive love feelings between the two protagonists. The actions of the play are narrowed down to one single location which is the tent of Holofernes. There is no time and of course no need for introductions. The plot is borrowed and is well known by the audience. The provocative climactic moment of slaughtering Holofernes and the troublesome lustful and seductive intentions are the concerns of Barker. Lamb states that this is Barker's "territory of the catastrophic... where the 'real' regulated world of social ties and obligations fades and desire is free to express itself" (2005, p. 63). The violent catastrophic acts in Barker's plays take place when the imposed social codes are lifted, opening the door for human's basic desires. Judith's seductive power as a woman enables her and makes it easier for her to inflict violence upon the General and overcome his physical power. She has to search for the right moment to conduct the beheading of the general and go back to her people with the head as trophy to be victorious against the pagan hoard.

As mentioned earlier everything happens within a tent where Judith meets the General in the middle of a massive and merciless army. The general has the

opening speech; his words come out before the big battle that will take place tomorrow. While he is speaking, as Judith and her servant enter, he tells Judith to take her clothes off. He makes a connection between death and nakedness saying, "I can see how difficult it is for you. Unfortunately, I only wish to talk about death. It is you who came to be naked... Tomorrow many will be naked. So cruelly naked and smeared with excrement..." (*Judith*, p. 266). Judith tries to remove her clothes stops and utters "This is so much harder than I thought" (*Ibid*). When Barker refers to the nakedness of a character in his play, he refers to a psychological nakedness, or a nakedness free from social restriction and moral codes (Lamb 2005, p. 63). This is what Barker approves; no morality, no ideological ties, no traditional beliefs and no religious restrictions.

Regarding Barker's character, Judith, Messina M. (2014, p. 11) believes that the major dilemma of Judith is to seduce and slaughter. In the meantime, she fights with the question whether or not to use her body as a weapon to accomplish what she is assigned to. The play meditates on the juxtaposition of such topics as violence, murder and sex, love and war, death and life as a means to continue on with life. Subjects like sexuality and violence are indicative of Barker's *Judith* and his works generally. As it is the case in all his plays, Barker in *Judith* intends to push each audience to have the role of interpreter and leave them either amazed or disturbed. Alan Thomas states that what characterizes Barker's *Judith* is extremism of condition and it shows extremes of experience. He uses historical mean and cautiously chosen moments of crisis so as to stage extremity (cited in Constantinidou 2001, 132). It seems clear that death forms a context for all the actions and language within the play. Mentioning death by Holofernes at the beginning of the play sets the main tone of the whole play. His strong fascination with death is clearly delivered and resonates in the lines on Judith and the Servant. Furthermore, the sexual encounter of Judith and the General and the panic of death are closely intertwined when they kiss and their kisses taste death and violence: "HOLOFERNES: Your mouth smothers mine, as if it were a hunger. But it may also be - a violence" (p. 277).

The act of the kissing and the intellectual opening speech by the General are indicative of war, violence, and seduction. For example, Holofernes comment on death indicates that death arbitrarily selects its victims, the proximity and persistence of which justifies the military profession, "The soldiers' 'willful suspension of all logic' and 'collaboration in chaos' is what allows the fight, 'the mad life licensed' in experience and investigation of pain and death of those around" (p. 260). He confronts death with meditation and countless dead bodies of soldiers around him in the battlefield,

inspiring him with wonder and fascination. He knows that his death drive completely prevails over his sexual desire. He is cruel but cannot love or be loved. He deplores the arbitrariness of death which empties life of sense, making killing as meaningful as praying (Gritzner & Rabey 2007, p. 39).

In *Judith* tenderness intermingles with the necessity to kill, cruelty with desire. The servant as the second female character has an active participation in slaying the General when she holds his head down and Judith cuts it off; this suggested the dramatist the idea of portraying her as Judith's unflinching, patriotic, alter ego pushing her to do the action. Rabey & Goldingay note that Barker's Judith has to be deceived by the servant in order to perform the deed. And the action of slaying Holofernes is suspended for a while in which the sword remains mobile in the air (2013, p. 200). Holofernes' words uncover his twisted perspective of life, "But cruelty is collaboration in chaos, of which the soldiers are merely the agents" (p. 261). He tells his visitors (Judith and her servant) that the only thing he desires to speak on is death. The servant responds when she says:

You want to talk about death Of course you do, and she can, can't you, she's shy, that's all. I promise you on this particular subject she can spout on for hours, can't you, go on, show the gentleman how much you. Go on. How well you. Judith. Show him (p. 262).

The Servant tells the General that Judith is also has a strong desire to talk about death; the role of the Servant as an ideologist is to back up Judith when she hesitates due to the nature of her relation with the General. Moreover, she intends to push Judith to continue and engage with the General verbally and emotionally for the sake of their task.

In the mid of the Servants words, the General delivers the very first act of verbal and physical violence when he violently seizes the Servant (while talking to her) fixing her tightly in an upright posture between life and death, trying to strangle her. Till now, Judith is still mute. She is a sexual object that has been displayed several times before and lacks the quality of a participant. While the Servant still chokes, Holofernes states:

We ache for the pain of our companions, I am certain of it, soldiers nourish the secret hope their friends will die, does that horrify you, I only seek the truth of battle, does that horrify you, I only probe the ecstasies of pain (p. 262).

Holofernes words define his personality as a war craftsman and tests the mind state of both Judith and the Servant. This is because he is aware that only in the moments of violence and catastrophe the real essence of both could be revealed; this is Barker's territory where violence becomes an instinct and a necessity to know the reality of humans as opposed to entertainment and joy.

Judith answers the General by saying, "You are killing my property. (Holofernes is still rigid). My property can't breathe" (p. 263). Holofernes lets her go but accuses her for their intrusion; it seems that he is aware of her intention. He addresses her using tough words that reveal her reality "Do you think I can't see you? [The Servant is transfixed.] Your mask. Your fog. Do you think I can't see you? [Pause]" (p. 274). Both Judith and Holofernes are on the same page about what they say; they agree that their words are meaningless and only serve to escalate their fight when the general utters that they adore each other and Judith confirms it (Lamb 2005, p. 79). At the time both hug, Judith's company intervenes like a chorus. Here, the Servant abandons her role as Judith's procuress and now addresses her as equal since she is quite aware of Judith's seduction. She puts pressure on her to perform the killing as it is clear in page 280:

SERVANT. Israel commands you. Israel which birthed you. Which nourished you. Israel insists. And your child sleeps. Her last sleep if

-JUDITH. I am well drilled. [She glares at the Servant. The Sentry cries. Pause. Judith goes to the sword.]

SERVANT. Excellent. [She unsheathes it] Excellent.

The Servant act as an ideologist and an inflictor of violence through Judith. Barker's Judith is to be dealt with as an object by the Servant and her nation to accomplish the task through violence, seduction and deception. The Servant's words are effective and could raise the sense of revenge in Judith to do the beheading.

Judith hits the general with the sword then the Servant hurries to finish the task of the beheading; she is well-trained and for her it is like a business but Judith is stunned. Constantinidou confirms that the mutilation of the general's body confirms the affirmative nature of violation of limits in catastrophe (2001, p. 134). The action of beheading Holofernes, which is staged as sacrificial rite due to the Servant's slogans, is a scene within the play that clearly draws attention. Lamb states that her words refer to two violently dislocated levels:

A right bitch cunt, I was, nearly ballocked it, eh nearly
- [She staggers.] Oh, my darling how I - [She recovers.]
Nearly poxed the job, the silly fucker I can be
sometimes, a daft bitch and a cunt-brained fuck-arse
- [She staggers.] Oh, my - Oh, my - (p. 282).

This parallels the levels of mind and brute body into which the Servant has hacked Holofernes (2005, p. 89). The servant cuts off the head of Holofernes and takes it as trophy; the head symbolizes victory over their enemy. At the same time, she wants to spread fear among his soldiers and guarantees Israel's salvation:

We take the head because the head rewards the people. The people are entitled symbolically to show contempt for their oppressor. Obviously, the spectacle

has barbaric undertones but we. The concentration of emotion in the single object we et cetera (p. 282).

As its clear from all of these events that Barker makes some changes to the tale; unlike the Biblical version of *Judith*, it is the Servant who commits the horrible act of sawing off the corpse's head not Judith. In Barker's tale, Holofernes instructs the Servant to stay, and Judith orders the Servant to sit and watch. Barker includes the Servant as an audience and her presence obliges Judith and Holofernes to perform certain social roles and in turn poses as a metaphor for the real audience and society at large (Zimmerman 2006, 27). In Barker's version, Judith focuses on the decapitated body of the general and declares her aim of making love to it; it is like in seduction world, death does not end the engagement. The Servant is completely terrified and protests:

-JUDITH. How can he be an enemy? His head is off.

SERVANT. Enemy. Vile enemy.

JUDITH. You keep saying that . . . ! I can make him mine, surely? I can love! Look, I claim him! Lover, lover, respond to my adoring glance it's not too late

SERVANT. I think I am going to be sick . . .

JUDITH. No, no, count to a hundred . . .

SERVANT. I will be made insane by this!

JUDITH. Is it love makes you insane? (She lies over Holofernes' body). The Servant is transfixed with horror (p. 283).

Judith's words here entail two levels of meanings. While the act of beheading is socially, politically, and religiously justified as an act done to prevent a massacre, the act of making love to a dead body, though less outrageous than that of beheading, is disdained and rejected as a transgression against nature and religion. (1989, p. 224).

Judith had passion for the General and that passion was a huge mental obstacle in front of her to commit the killing but what helped her to overcome it was her strong discipline towards the state which suffocated her passion and desire. Her passion continues even after the General's death therefore she attempts an attachment with a man denied to her in life but now made unhurt and impotent by death (Gritzner 2010, p. 144). That's why she is rendered insane by her violent action and loses power to move and is fixed to the floor in a state of catatonic horror. On the other hand, the political Servant has a strong desire to escape with the head and does not want to leave Judith especially now she has become a national property. Therefore, she offers some words to relieve Judith's distress and make her capable of facing her paralysis. (Barker 1993, p.176). Hence, the Servant continues to motivate Judith due to her role, given by Barker, as an ideologist as it is apparent in the following quotation. To reinvigorate the paralyzed Judith, the

Servant eloquently philosophizes their present condition:

SERVANT: Firstly, remember we create ourselves. We do not come made. If we came made, how facile life would be, worm-like, crustacean, invertebrate. Facile and futile. Neither love nor murder would be possible. Secondly, whilst shame was given us to balance will, shame is not a wall. Thirdly, it is a facility of the common human, to recognize no act is reprehensible but only the circumstances make it so. These are the mysteries which govern the weak, but in the strong are staircases to the stars. I kneel to you. I kneel to the Judith who parts the threadbare fabric with her will. Get up, now. (JUDITH climbs swiftly to her feet.) (p. 288).

Her speech is influential to alter Judith from a condition of thorough and servile paralysis to a godlike controller; again, this shows the act of the reflex method in seduction: by rejecting the crushing load of sorrow and disgrace, these unfavorable sensations turn into a favorable glory in her deed. She witnesses the feeling of freedom she had when she was free to tell the general lies: she exploits the killing to have a potent new self. She has overcome the powerful character the general revealed at the opening of the play.

When finally, Judith finds strength to stand on her feet, her hatred compels her to humiliate and punish her Servant. She is physically and verbally violent towards the Servant; however, such a deed is just a passing relief for her. She humiliates the Servant by dealing with her as a slave. At the same time, she shows intense verbal violence towards the Servant by forcing her to do what is against her wish:

JUDITH: Who said you could get up. (The SERVANT stops.) And any version that I tell, endorse it. For that'll be the truth. Filth, put your teeth against my shoe. (A black pause) Filth, do (The servant inclines her head to Judith's foot, and is still) I think I can cut off a million heads and go home amiable as if I had been scything in the meadow. Clean this (She holds out the weapon. The servant goes to wipe the blade on a cloth) No, silly, with your hair (pp. 289-290).

Judith particularly dislikes the Servant due to her role as an ideologist though she continuously motivates her to accomplish the task assigned by the state and helps her to return home victorious praised by her nation for her role in preventing massacre.

Barker goes further than this to shed light on the consequence of Judith's deed when in *The Possibilities*, which is published in 1988, deals with the aftermath of Holofernes' slaughter through the play "*The Unforeseen Consequences of a Patriotic Act*" when the Servant sympathizes with Judith since she had slept with the general and says, "perhaps the greatest sacrifice a woman can . . . To sleep with a man against your will" (*The Unforeseen Consequences of a Patriotic Act*, p. 6). Then

Judith gives birth to the general's child; here she loses the power of speech. When the authority of the country advises her to come back to normal public life, she explains her action as a terrible crime since she desired the man she beheaded. In an interview with the theatre weekly *La Terrasse*, Barker (2007, p. 145) states:

Judith's triumph represents the tragic loss of her identity, destruction of her desire, renunciation of her sexuality. I seek therefore not to celebrate her act, but to pose questions about the property of bodies, of desire, of sex and of death.

Barker questions the status of Judith therefore provides no moral judgment but enables her fleetingly to affirm her status as subject. In addition to sex, desire, seduction, death, and violence, Barker sheds light on Judith's personality as being subject or object in the point of view of society, male characters and even the audience.

According to Marina Warner, locating Judith's sexuality at the core of the myth is dangerous. He cautions, "sexual virtue and sexual desire are far too volatile and fluid to be contained within a dialectic of good and evil" (Warner 1996, p. 169). The focus is less on Barker female characters' virtue, and more on their capacity to deceive, seduce and destroy: for example, Judith promised not to lie to Holofernes but subsequently murdered him. The story hence became a warning against the destructive nature of female sexuality. The theme of Judith in her case could be read not as a moral sermon on female immorality, but as a woman's revenge on the man who violated her. Barker's Judith, like many of his female characters, refuses to submit willingly to the normalizing discourses of female nature (Foucault, 1990, p. 23).

Judith becomes property of the state, an object onto which it projects its ideologies of virtue and justice, her name meaning Jewess, which defines her as representative of a people, rather than as an individual:

My body is so
Israel!
My body has no
Israel! Israel!
My body was but is no longer
Israel
Is
My
Body! (*Judith* p. 292)

On one hand, her words indicate that her body is no longer hers; on the other hand, she and Israel are inseparable. She refers to Israel as her own body therefore she used her body to prevent massacre. Part of her words are patriotic and indicate her willingness to sacrifice her body for a general cause. Also, she does not hide her loss of temper and frustration over what she had done to her lover.

3. CONCLUSIONS

In *Judith*, Barker stages human body almost strangled to death, frequently stripped, and mutilated at the end. He mostly focuses on seduction and violence and retains the basic plot story but in the meantime adds his own corrections; he mostly focuses on Judith's behavior opposite to what previous writers referred to. In Barker's version, Judith is a tyrant lover who uses her body as a weapon. She has to seduce and slaughter in order to accomplish the mission assigned to her. In the play, we can easily notice the reversal of roles. Judith resorts to violence leading her to decapitate the head of her people's enemy; she does this to separate Holofernes from all forms of power, political and moral that stifle creative and free thought. Such a separation can be easily realized in Barkers writings throughout his carrier. Judith is put in a situation that she has no option other than committing the atrocity. Barker here focuses on violence as part of the nature of humans and reads the consequences of it.

Hence, Barker's *Judith* presents a shocking and new approach towards drama in England and provides audience with violence, seduction, fear of massacre, anxiety and sexuality. In *Judith*, Barker makes tragedy as his favorite since only tragedy can provide the audience with fear and anxiety. He introduces history, religion and violence to shock people and resist common views. Barker does not provide a moralizing approach or any judgment but wants the audience to be interpreters. Through Sexual desire and violence Barker aims to reveal the nature of Judith as a woman and reveals his concern about them.

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