Lessons from Post-War British Dissent:
Social Anxieties and Responses in Howard Brenton's Plays

D.R.P. Chandra Sekhar
Assistant Professor, Hyderabad Business School,
GITAM University
drpcsekhar@gmail.com

Post-war British theatre has seen waves of dissenting voices that were often attributed to the political and economic turmoil that Britain underwent during this period and the resultant social anxieties. As Michael Billington remarked, "The story of post-war Britain is one of imperial decline…economic uncertainty, social tension, and agonizing introspection…." (ix).

Some critics have seen three critical points in post-war Britain as watersheds in the history of political theatre in Britain. The year 1956, when Britain had to retreat ignominiously from its internationally and internally deplored attack on Egypt to regain control over Suez canal; 1968 when American students violently opposed Vietnam War, there were student uprisings all over Europe, and Soviets invaded Czechoslovakia; and 1979 when Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government came to power initiating unambiguous neo-liberal policies and embracing free market economy (Brandt 101, Day 2).

Against this socio-political and economic background it is attempted to review in this essay how the plays of one of the most radical British playwrights, Howard Brenton, document the contemporary social anxieties resulting from the socio-political and economic changes in Post-war Britain. The essay also attempts to analyse the responses that the playwright depicted through his characters to the represented anxieties.

The Socio-economic Backdrop

The hegemony and imperialist nature of Britain continued even after the decline of the British Empire. The British presence in Ireland is an obvious form of the continued legacy of its empire, and the continued policies of Britain in its support of the US betray this inherent policy in the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, leave alone its support to the US aggression against Vietnam.

Harold Pinter remarks, as recent as 2005, recalling the postwar years:

> Everyone knows what happened in the Soviet Union and throughout Eastern Europe during the post-war period: the systematic brutality, the widespread atrocities, the ruthless suppression of independent thought. All this has been fully documented and verified.
>
> But my contention here is that the US crimes in the same period have only been superficially recorded, let alone documented, let alone acknowledged, let alone recognized as crimes at all. I believe this must be addressed and that the truth has considerable bearing on where the world stands now. Although constrained, to a certain extent, by the existence of the Soviet

> Union, the United States' actions throughout the world made it clear that it had concluded it had carte blanche to do what it liked (8).

And Britain had been the US's closest ally in all these years in the postwar period. The US "has its own bleating little lamb tagging behind it on a lead, the pathetic and supine Great Britain" (Pinter 14). In the same Nobel Prize Lecture from which the above excerpts have been taken, Pinter talks of the brutal condition of the prisoners' camp of Guantanamo Bay constituted by the US:

> What has the British Foreign Secretary said about this? Nothing. What has the British Prime Minister said about this? Nothing. Why not? Because the United States has said: to criticize our conduct in Guantanamo Bay constitutes an unfriendly act. You're either with us or against us. So Blair shuts up (14).

During the US aggression against Vietnam that caused a stir within the US and across Europe, left intellectuals in Britain tried to bring pressure on the Labour Party to stop supporting the US in the Vietnam War, but the Party, as well as the left MPs, was unwilling to yield. Raymond Williams remarks that "the alliance with the US over Vietnam was deciding the basic political character of the Labour government" (*Politics and Letters*, 372). It was a revelatory moment for many like Williams who had harbored hopes in the progressiveness of the mainstream left parties in Britain.

Thus as the immediate postwar years and very recent history suggest, Britain has not lost its imperial heritage at all, irrespective of which party formed its government. As a result it continued to generate dissent among its own intelligentsia.

In spite of the economic decline and considerable internal financial problems, Britain continued to build up its nuclear and other arsenal, with pressures from the USA for rearmament. There was considerable opposition within the British civil society as is evident in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). The CND held massive demonstrations continually from 1959 onwards against nuclear weapons, when Britain signed the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (963), against the Vietnam War (in 1965 and 1968), against the apartheid regime in South Africa (1960). In 1979 an anti-racist protestor, Blair Preach, was killed at a National Front rally. Raymond Williams points out, "But what was generally forgotten was the lesson, not only of the CND experience but also of the left-right controversy in the Labour Party in the early fifties: that there was necessary interlock between the Anglo-American military-political alliance in NATO and the pattern of possible social-economic priorities at home" (*Politics and Letters*, 367).

On the public welfare front, the initial phase of nationalization of the Bank of England (nationalized in 1946), the coal industry (1947), railways (1948) and iron and steel (1949), was reversed by the time Thatcher came to power, and her government privatized British Airways and British Aerospace (1980), British Telecom (1984), public buses (1985), and British Gas (1986). Raymond Williams was deeply skeptical about the nature of the nationalization itself, which did not alter the working relationships and workers' positions inside those institutions (*Politics and Letters*, 368).

But in the fields of education and health there was considerable improvement in terms of broad access to these facilities. As noted earlier, the Butler Act of 1944 gave a boost to the education

sector albeit with a much criticized three tier system of grammar schools, secondary modern schools and 'fee' paying 'public' schools. The critics of this system held that such an educational system perpetrated strong class divisions among the populace. The system was reformed to an extent in 1960 in the form of 'Composite' schools, but remained controversial (Brannigan 222). As the economic system required more and more educated labour, the education system kept getting liberalized. One could see that in the postwar era the university-going student population actually increased manifold. It is significant in the context of the theatre that the graduate population visiting theatres increased.

Apart from the hegemony that the state maintains through culturally coercive methods, as in subsidies to theatre and arts and propaganda, it also on the sides creates a section that seizes and trains 'weapons' on the very state that supports them. It is the *students'* uprisings in France and the US that gave hope of an impending revolution to writers like Brenton. The Butler Act of 1944 must have produced by the 1960s a considerable army of dissidents taking up cudgels against the Vietnam War and nuclear weapons, as well as upwardly mobile status-quoist new middle-class.

Further, talking of the so-called welfare measures of a capitalist regime, the promulgation of National Health Act in 1946 and creation of National Health Service in 1948 in the postwar egalitarian euphoria should be contrasted with the dilution of the welfare role of the government by the 1973, when NHS was reorganized. In fact, between 1945 and 1970s, successive Labour and Conservative governments vied with each other to offer various welfare measures including affordable rented housing, and pensions, allowances and financial support funds for the elderly, unemployed, poor, disabled and sick. But by the end of 1970s, the Conservatives unabashedly argued that the state should not make its citizens depend on it but encourage them to be self-motivated.

The Social Anxieties

Such socio-political conditions inevitably result in a great deal of social anxiety. The social anxieties that different sections suffered in the postwar Britain were represented effectively in a dramatic form in Brenton. The different kinds of anxieties of the victim characters in *The Romans in Britain* reflect the anxieties, either symbolically or literally, of a cross-section of the disempowered populations in the British society.

The *anxiety of war* is as much evident in *The Romans in Britain* as it was in the postwar British society. Brenton even questions the war-hero image of Winston Churchill. *The Churchill Play* suggests that Churchill's reputation had been built on deliberately inaccurate propaganda. The common people in fact suffered during the war and cursed Churchill. But the curses were reported as solidarity, stoic resilience and praise for their leader. The CND demonstrations reflect this anxiety, especially after the Second World War ended with a nuclear holocaust. Even through a representation of a primitive form of *religious anxiety* Brenton appears to draw a symbolic parallel between the human sacrifice to propitiate ancient gods and a similar brutal killing in war by an imperialist state to propitiate the war-god. Killing an alien who trespasses either the borders of one's geographical territory or the lines drawn by law was similar in intent, even if the forms have been secularized. Death penalty was abolished in Britain in the same year, 1965, in which the Vietnam

War began. The apparently progressive and humane projection of law was subverted by forced legitimization of off-shore killing, which shows that the primitive fears of the unknown and the alien resulting in religious anxiety take only a modern form. The primitive spirit remains. One could argue that this is a cynical approach to the long progress that humanity made through millennia. But then the fact of the misery of war victims stares in the face. The misery has actually scaled up in modern times.

The fear of the unknown, which results in a religious anxiety, also causes the *xenophobic anxiety*. If there had been no such anxiety, the race riots between the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant population and the black and immigrant population would not have taken place in postwar Britain, no Race Relations Bill (1965) and Race Relations Act (1976) would have been necessitated. The *kinship anxiety*, which was recognized in the Celts of 54 BC as represented in *The Romans in Britain*, it can be argued, is only as a primitive form of the much more sophisticated-looking ('to look like a policy') bond that unites Britain and the United States through the WASP kinship.

The same year that the Equal Pay Bill (1970) was introduced in the British Parliament, the Women's Liberation Movement was formed in Britain. But it took another five years for Britain to see through the Sex Discrimination Bill. The *gender anxiety* also received a powerful representation in another of Brenton's plays, *Sore Throats* (1979), a derisive play against patriarchy and the resultant domestic violence. This play happily does not take up the responsibility of instructing women as to what they should do with their freedom. The woman does not just walk out on the face of the man, as in *A Doll's House*, but lives on in the way she likes, in an anarchic fashion, in defiance of the Establishment. It is the man's turn to crawl back to her abode on all fours begging for a quid and shelter. The *slave's anxiety* is again symbolic of the anxieties of the working class in postwar Britain as was evident in the massive workers' strikes that added to the 'winter of discontent' in 1979. The workers' disenchantment with the system grew especially during the Conservative regime of Thatcher.

The *criminals' anxiety* as shown in *The Romans in Britain* reminds one of Brenton's plays, *Christie in Love* (1969). Criminality, Brenton suggests, is a symptom of social injustice. Unlike Christie, the criminals portrayed in *The Romans in Britain* belong to the *lumpenproletariat* class.

It is significant that the slave woman is liberated from her slavery through the *lumpen*, but she has to liberate herself from the *lumpen* as well, as she does by killing him. There is class proximity between the two, as well as a class conflict. The violence exerted by Christie is a psychological disorder whereas for the criminals in *The Romans in Britain* violence is a matter of survival. But in both cases it is an aberration caused by a rotten social system, primitive or modern. A similar depiction of a criminal mentality can be seen in a short play of Brenton, *The Education of Skinny Spew* (1969), the fantasy of an infant's vengeance against the adult world. If rights are not ensured, as determinedly as the repressive and unjust systems that are in the form of the state machinery or the customs of the civil society, then the individual or organised violence obtains its

justification and moral legitimacy as counter-violence against the visible or invisible violence of the state or general civil society.

Responses to the Social Anxieties

The responses of victims to their anxieties were denial, surrender, retaliation, suicide, flight, and relief, some of which will be discussed here in detail. Surrender and flight have been the usual responses of victims – individuals, communities or nations – faced with a mightier force. History is replete with such examples. As with all responses that Brenton records, surrender and flight also carry ominous consequences for the victims.

Denial in the face of an anxiety inevitably leads to destruction, though the other responses also in themselves do not guarantee any long-lasting security. It is to bring the toiling masses out of this denial mode that political education becomes necessary. It is only by overcoming denial that one looks for a way out of an oppressive situation, which will be the second step in the search for an alternative system. Political theatre aims to instruct at least a section of the audience about their immediate situation without giving up the primary task of entertaining them, giving them the pleasure of learning. Emphasizing the twin functions of theatre, for pleasure and for instruction, Brecht describes the kind of audience who are receptive:

Learning has a very different function for different social strata. There are strata who cannot imagine any improvement in conditions: they find the conditions good enough for them…But there are also strata 'waiting their turn' who are discontented with conditions, have a vast interest in the practical side of learning, want at all costs to find out where they stand, and know that they are lost without learning; these are the best and keenest learners. Similar differences apply to countries and peoples (Willet 72-73).

It is the desperateness of the victims of an oppressive system to come out of the situation that ultimately frustrates their denial mode of thinking, provided they come across a suitable kind of representation of the reality. Political theatre aims to provide such a kind of representation. Interestingly, in *The Saliva Milkshake*, this 'suitable kind of representation of the reality' comes from the state apparatus to the shock and consternation of Martin, who is then faced with the real dilemma of where he should fit. Empowered with a realization of where he currently belongs, he faces, in the newly revealed reality, a distressing task of choosing between the options once again.

The response of *retaliation* of the weaker victims, as represented by Brenton in *The Romans in Britain*, *The Saliva Milkshake* and elsewhere in other plays, deserves a longer discussion. Brenton's political stand, his evolution as an artiste and his artistic practice appear to hinge on this single motif. Each these plays will be examined here to get at the focal point of Brenton's perspective.

Magnificence portrays the impotent rage of squatters against the much too powerful state. The script of the play significantly carries an epigram from Brecht, "Sink into the mire / Embrace the butcher / But change the world" (*Plays 1*, 33). But the import of the actual play *appears* to contradict the message of this epigram. A group of five young squatters occupy an abandoned building. It is

'unlawful occupancy of the private property', according to the Bailiff who is authorized to evacuate them. Inspired by Maoist principles of revolution – they chant slogans from the *Thoughts of Mao* even while they are violently evacuated – they decide to create a spectacle. The banner they hang out on the occupied building reads: WE ARE THE WRITING ON THE WALL. They want to *show* people that there are one million people homeless in the city of London, all over Hyde Park, Kensington Gardens and elsewhere, 'rammed into cracks in the walls' hidden like litter. And they want to *show* that there are several places like this building, good houses, empty. Instead of *telling* the masses, which they anyway do through their pamphlets that are crumpled and thrown in dustbins by passersby, they want to show them what the squatters should do, which is to occupy the empty houses as a right. The poignant fact about them is that they believe that what they are involved in is the *direct action* in the Maoist way. Except for Veronica, who takes time off from her BBC job to participate in their action, none of them see the emptiness and pointlessness of their action that lasts ten days before they are removed from the building, with Mary aborting her child during the violence and Jed, her husband, getting a nine-month sentence in Her Majesty's prison, where he gets hooked up to a proscribed drug which freely circulates in prisons 'for the enlightenment of lost souls'. Their achievement is summed up in the following words, moments before they are thrown out:

> VERONICA. (*near tears*) Liberation City? (*She draws back the tears.*) I loathe us. I loathe all the talks we had. That we'd really do it. Come down to the people whom it really hits…And do it for them. I loathe us, I loathe our stupid, puerile view of the World…That *we* have only to do it, that *we* have only to go puff, and the monster buildings will go splat…I loathe us, I loathe what we've descended to here…Our domesticity…Ten days with the fleas and the tin opener lost, never for once questioning…That we are in any way changing the bloody, bleeding ugly world…Direct action? For us it's come down to sitting on a stinking lavatory for ten days…Why didn't we get the local people on our side? Oh we bawled a few slogans at passers-by. Got the odd turd back from the street, and philosophized there upon. But 'Mobilize the people?' We can't mobilize a tin opener… (*Plays:1*, 65-66).

The play could have ended with the fiasco of this misguided *direct action* with no considerable loss to the message that Brenton intends to convey. Instead it goes ahead relentlessly. Even after the release from prison Jed continues to delude himself, now dangerously armed with memories of Lenin's quotations on revolution on one hand and the addiction to the proscribed drug, Speed, on the other. He cannot bear the pseudo-revolutionary exhibitionism of his friend showing off Che Guevara on his tee shirt. While he is suffering in prison, his friends are not happy either, submerged in a dreary routine. Reacting to Jed's Sunday-school-teacher-like rapping over the knuckles, Will blurts out in a manner that describes the distance between everyday life and revolutionary ideals:

> Just maybe it's easier, sittin' in a cell. Having visions, Armageddons two a penny….But it's very hard, for us down in Hounslow…No not hard, that's insulting to you. Dreary. Dreary, day in day out. The jungles of Bolivia seem rather far away. Keeping a correct political point of view is something of a chore. Your mind begins to wander. I mean…I know when the

> milkman calls, you should grab him by the throat, and politicize him on the spot. But it's difficult. Specially if you owe him six weeks. An' you want your cornflakes soggy (*Plays:1*, 91).

These lines of Will capture the life of lower middle class life in postwar Britain. Added to the material misery that they need to face is the inner misery caused by their conscience that reminds them of their political responsibility. But Jed wants to break through this drudgery and stagnation through a 'magnificent' gesture. He wants to blow off a Cabinet Minister and acquires the explosives for this purpose. His friends Veronica and Cliff know that the explosives are merely 'silky fireworks. Make a big bang, that's all. One big bang, and after all that, silence'. Cliff frantically reminds him: 'Oh no. Not that. There's only one way, time was you knew it, Jed. Work, corny work, with and for the people. Politicizing them and learning from them, everyone of them'. But Jed goes on with his mission with a clear intent:

> Bomb 'em. Again and again. Right through their silver screen. Disrupt the spectacle. The obscene parade, bring it to a halt! Scatter the dolly girls, let advertisements bleed…Bomb 'em, again and again! Murderous display. An entertainment for the oppressed, so they may dance a little, take a little warmth from the sight, eh? (*He laughs*.) Go down into the mire eh? Embrace the butcher, eh? (*Plays:1*, 95-96)

The irony of appending Brecht's words at the beginning of the text of the play dawns upon us once we hear the same words from Jed's mouth. It is a pathetic irony of profound misunderstanding that led many youth astray. In a not quite unexpected climax, Jed blows himself up by accident along with the Minister who is his target. The last words of the play spoken by Cliff, resembling the anguished cry of Veronica quoted earlier, may very well have been Brenton's own comment on the whole act:

> Jed. The waste. I can't forgive you that...The waste of your anger. Not the murder, murder is common enough. Not the violence, violence is everyday. What I can't forgive you Jed, my dear, dead friend, is the waste (*Plays:1*, 95-96).

A self-defeating form of *retaliation* is a response that Brenton scathingly attacks. Like Cliff, he does not forgive the waste of that anger. It is uselessly suicidal, both in literal and revolutionary terms. The death does not have the impact of Marban's deliberate suicide in *The Romans in Britain* where it unintentionally inspires *retaliating* spirit among villagers on flight. That Brenton gave considerable importance to a critique of the way revolutionary politics were understood by left wing activists in his day is apparent because of its recurrence in other plays. Brenton seems to suggest in *The Saliva Milkshake* that 'liberal' citizens like Martin, sitting on the fence between the Establishment and the revolution – saliva and milkshake, as it were – would have been won over by the revolutionaries if only the revolution had been more rational and disciplined.

Brenton is exceptionally *not* scathing in his critique of the anarchic *retaliation* of victims in *The Churchill Play* (1974). The desperate attempt of the prisoners in the Churchill camp to escape the repression of the British Army is sympathetically treated. *The Churchill Play* is a bitter abuse

hurled at the face of both the Conservative and Labour Parties of the day. Con-Labs, the coalition of Conservative and the Labour Parties, that is imagined in the play, is a symbol of the indistinguishable similarities in the policies of these two mainstream parties. In the play, one finds all the important types of the socio-political scenario of the contemporary Britain: the Conservative leader serving the Con-Lab coalition government, the resentful social democrat opposition leader, the conservatively patriotic army men, the liberal misfit (Captain Thompson discussed in the context of discussion of 'liberal conscience'), the Defense psychologist – and the 'scum', the wretched of the earth, the internees of the prison camp, leading less than a dog's life at the camp for their alleged support to left-wing politics. The revolt of the prisoners is touching and poignant, for it is conscious of its fiasco. A desperate bid for freedom at the cost of their life, an anger that could not be contained any longer, the retaliation is less of a politically motivated act than of an existential need. It therefore carries more conviction than the mindless anarchic violence that Brenton criticizes in *Magnificence* and even within this play in the retrospective comments of internees:

> JIMMY. We brought down Post…
>
> TED. Post Office Tower, oh yes. And they put it up again and clamped down on you. You were the last…farts of the age of Aquarius.
>
> JIMMY. Yeah we were stupid. Yeah we were mindless. Yeah we tore things apart just…for the rippin' sound. 'Long the fault lines of the world. Rip. Rip. But give us this, we really did 'ave it in fer 'world, eh? Y'got to give us that. We really…had it in for the world (*Plays:1*, 136).

The Churchill Play, performed first in 1974, is set futuristically in 1984. Writing a note on the play in 1986, Brenton comments: "I wish the whole play was pointless now. But too much of it has begun to happen, though inevitably in a different way and tone and degree to how the play describes it. It is a satire which says, 'Don't let the future be like this…' (*Plays:1*, 108). The left wing Labour MP who refuses to be part of the Conservative-Labour government and who is now on a visit as part of a Committee, regrets while the uprising of the prisoners is in progress:

> MORN (*rambling, to himself*). We should have done it. Years ago. Factory floor, street level. Taken means of production, given power into people's hands. '45. '64. '78. We had the democratic space. But somehow there were always good reasons. Day to day, little crises. For not. Not (*Plays:1*, 174).

But it is too late, Morn seems to regret. The iron hand of conservatism reduced the space for any attempt for change. As Morn regrets too much of moderation, Jimmy regrets too much of extremism, of the past.

While documenting the social anxieties and different forms of dissent in his works in the political and cultural context here may be the answer that Brenton provides to the question as to what kind of form should dissent take to get out of the social anxieties. Joseph Frank knows that the USSR betrayed the working class not just within its territory but across the world. He feels that no

revolution is possible within England and the Western Europe in general. He knows for certain that little acts of bravado, insignificant travesties of 'direct action', empty slogan-shouting cannot constitute revolution. Cliff and Veronica in *Magnificence* suggest working along with people, 'come down to the people to whom it really hits', learning from them. It is a long way to revolution, a long process sustaining it – not one big bang and then, silence. Disillusioned by socialist extremities, and Situationism and its short-lived legacy of the late '60s, Brenton's perspective might have been chastened.

The dissent of 'liberal conscience', of representatives of Establishment like Captain Chichester, Captain Thompson, Graham Hay and Martin, is not only absolutely ineffectual but also dangerous to their own individual selves. In their attempt to get the best of both worlds, the comforts and status ensured by the Establishment on one hand, and the humanitarian ideals of the revolutionaries on the other, they lose both the worlds. They are disowned by both sides. They enjoy sympathy and trust from neither side. To really appease their 'liberal conscience' they also need to 'come down to the people to whom it really hits'.

Positively, Brenton appears to suggest that the action agenda for those who 'come down to the people' would include working for a long revolution aimed at a cultural transformation – introspection, conscientization, mobilization, action on the street, pressure politics – and eventually transferring the spirit into a political transformation – seizing the state power and transforming the capitalist, imperialist, market-oriented economy into a democratic, egalitarian, classless, anti-racist, anti-patriarchal, anti-imperialist people's power. This list of demands seem to form the crux of the political theatre practice of Brenton, as they come scattered through the various experiences he provides for his audience.

Speaking about his political views in 1986, Brenton says that they are,

> naturally and passionately expressed in these plays…. It is not a matter of 'pushing my ideology' at the audience. That is how the world appears to me. It is glaringly obvious to your author that the western world is in thrall to a system that respects nothing but money and power, that the Third World War began at the time of the Korean War and has been in progress, in slow motion, ever since, and that liberation lies in democratic and socialist movements, and if we are to survive and have a common destiny it will be communist (Preface to *Plays: 1*).

Like Joseph Frank in *Weapons of Happiness*, Brenton retains his dreams in spite of the multiple setbacks in their realization. Like Joan in *The Saliva Milkshake*, he dreams for "A land…Without want. Without ignorance. A land of science. Abundance. Democracy and peace". But unlike her he does not believe that it should necessarily be "A bloody, brutal ugly business getting it".

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