

NEW REPUBLIC FOR ECOLOGY: BOND, LEAR AND THE BISHOP

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ABSTRACT

*This paper exposes the possibilities of ecological re-reading of the play *Lear* by Edward Bond. It lays out an introspection of the policies regarding ecological conservation. Only an open forum, irrespective of the concepts of sovereignty and state, will solve the real issues related to ecology.*

KEYWORDS: *Technosphere, Ecology, Amazon, Laudato Si', Querida Amazonia*

INTRODUCTION

When *King Lear* was rewritten by Edward Bond as *Lear*, the author unveiled the disastrous dimension of power exercised by humankind. The play is more political than ecological, to be precise, it may not be written with an ecological perspective, but it leaves a space for it. It is justifiable to reread Bond's *Lear* from an ecological perspective, for he himself has made the play a political rereading.

The Author's Preface contains revelatory statements regarding power invasions in the biosphere. The biosphere, as time goes by, becomes more and more technosphere. The technosphere has more possibilities to exert the brute force of power since it erases the limitations of space and time: "We evolved in a biosphere but we live in what is more and more becoming a technosphere....But a species living in an unfavourable environment dies out. For us the end will probably be quicker because the aggression we generate will be massively expressed through our technology" (Bondlxiv).

The evolution of biosphere to technosphere raises political challenges. More accurately, the shift from *bio* to *techno* distorts the very composition of the sphere. The basic modality is changed. Life that thrived once is subjugated. In Bond's *Lear* this subjugation is presented as the radical changes in the disposition of characters.

In Bond's *Lear*, characters change their texture occasionally. They switch their roles from prey to predator. Fontanelle, who has suffered severely at the hands of her father, unleashes violence in her turn. Same is the case of Lear, who has tormented his daughters and later succumbs to suffering caused by them. The fate of the characters varies as they gain or lose power. What remains the same throughout the play is torture and suffering. Another feature that has continuum in the play is the wall constructed by Lear. The presence of the wall does not prevent the fate of the land of Lear but it enables only a smooth switching of nature of characters within the wall.

The characters in *Lear* are embodiments of suffering and violence in the turn of time. A suffering Fontanelle on the stage represents the suffering ecology, and the scourging Fontanelle represents the violence of humanity. The same character symbolizes suffering ecology and pain-inflicting humanity. When it comes to the issues of biosphere, the

younger generations of looters may become environmentalists of this epoch. The mourners of the past have put on the attires of torturers. What remains unchanging is the fate of ecology. It is being tortured at all times.

Fontenelle sadistically inflicts violence on Warrington. She says, "I've always wanted to sit on a man's lungs. Let me. Give me his lungs" (1.4.14). *The Hindu* titled their editorial on 27 Aug 2019 "Earth's Burning Lungs: On Amazon's Rainforest Fire." The deplorable state of Warrington refers to fate of suffocation of the earth. Fontanelle who was ill-treated by her father Lear was then the representative of the suffering ecology, and Warrington who at present bears the atrocities of Fontanelle represents the ecology which is being ill-treated by the dark elements of humanity.

Bodice too makes the same move when she pokes the needles into Warrington's ears. She says, "[Y]our pardon has been refused. He can't talk or write, but he's cunning – he'll find some way of telling his lies. We must shut him up inside himself" (1.4.15). Attempts to shut up the causes of environment are prominent all over the world. Arguments from 'practical' perspective mute the cries of the ecology.

Our generation is contaminated by the anti-environmental thoughts and deeds of our predecessors. What is handed over is the lesson of exploitation. The basic thoughts are distorted. Lear is well aware of the unfair ways of his two daughters. He is sure of their characters for they are brought up by their own father. The cruelties unleashed by Lear during his reign have (un)predictable consequences in the lives of his daughters. He expects treachery from the hands of his own daughters in return for his evil doing.

The Gravedigger's Boy carries bread in his hands; Lear asks him whether it is poisoned. And the Boy gives the reply, "No." Thus Lear makes the logical conclusion that he is not a spy sent by his daughters. Lear says, "Then my daughters didn't send him. They'd never miss a chance to poison good bread..." (1.5.17). We must carry poisoned bread with us to prove that we are the descendants of our predecessors.

Often ecology and femininity are paralleled since they both suffer unjustly at the hands of predators. Bond's *Lear* does not make such identifications. Ecology is on one side whereas the entire humanity, irrespective of male or female, is on the opponents' side. Ecology undergoes suffering at the hands of the entire humanity incessantly. The crime done to ecology by the whole humankind is grave, and it prevents welding of any other characters with "ecology". Let the "ecology" stand alone at the suffering end.

In Bond's *Lear* the character of the Bishop is to be specially mentioned. The character of Bishop refers to metanarratives in the society. He represents the conscience of the religion. He blesses the warring King: "Our prayers go with you into war, sir. God blesses the righteous..." (1.2.9). The Bishop ensures prayers for the invasions of the king. Bond moulds the character of Bishop with the features of medieval thoughts.

Unlike the patristic period (the Church Fathers of the first seventh centuries) of Christianity which was eco-centric, tolerant and mystical in their approach to the entire ecosystem, the medieval period witnessed a shift. The contemplations of patristic spirituality were purely ecological. They see the Nature as the book of revelation along with the Bible. Revelation is contained in both books. Both bear witness to the Creator (St Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise*, 5:2).

The Bible starts its narration in the garden which is full of trees, calling one of them "the tree of life" (Gen 2,9). The biblical wordings *ū-lā-šā-mā-rāh* and *lā-ā-bā-dāhin* Genesis 2,15 have the literal meaning "to tend it and keep it." The

words have underwent numerous translations, “to till it and keep it”, “to cultivate it and keep” “to dress it and to keep”, in different versions of the Bible, according to the orientation, concern and predominant thought of the translators.

The Garden of Eden has a river which is divided into four branches (Gen 2,10) – Pishon, Gihon, Tigris and Euphrates. The garden of Lear has a fountain. Eden was nature whereas garden of Lear refers to culture. Now Bond’s *Lear* is fear gripped by the fountain. The fountain which once had romantic appeal to him and now it frightens the king: “I remember some of my dream. There was a king and he had a fountain in his garden. It was as big as the sea. One night the fountain howled and in the morning the king went to look at it. It was red. The servants emptied it and under the sea they found a desert. The king looked in the sand, there was helmet and sword” (1.7.26).

The pollutants have contaminated our rivers, which were full of fresh water once. It is this heinous harm that we have done to our rivers and rivulets, that appeared to Lear in dreams. So he asks the relevant question: “Do we work to build ruins, waste all these lives to make a desert no one could live in?” (3.2.80). The Church has travelled far from its spokesman in *Lear*. The documents of the Church express its concern for nature and ecology more evidently. It transpires in the latest document on ecology, *Laudato Si'*: “The violence present in our hearts... is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life (par. 2)”.

Unlike the Bishop who urges Lear to the war field, the post-synodal exhortation *Querida Amazonia* reminds us of the mystery and drama that envelope ecology, precisely of the Amazonian ecology: “The beloved Amazon region stands before the world in all its splendour, its drama and its mystery (par. 1). Ecology retains its mystery always; it remains incomprehensible to humans. Unlike the Bishop in Bond’s *Lear*, the Pope, who is the Bishop of Rome, sounds differently: “The Amazon region is a multinational and interconnected whole, a great biome... I am doing so to help awaken their affection and concern for that land which is also “ours”, and to invite them to value it and acknowledge it as a sacred mystery” (*Querida Amazonia* par. 5).

The Church has titled the final document on Amazon as *The Amazon: New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology*. In its preparatory document published on 8 June 2018, the preamble stated that “In the Amazon rainforest, which is of vital importance for the planet, a deep crisis has been triggered by prolonged human intervention, in which a “culture of waste” and an extractivist mentality prevail”. It underlines the importance of the region to the entire planet:

The Amazon Basin encompasses one of our planet’s largest reserves of biodiversity (30 to 50% of the world’s flora and fauna) and freshwater (20% of the world’s fresh water). It constitutes more than a third of the planet’s primary forests and – although the oceans are the largest carbon sinks – the Amazon’s work of carbon sequestration is quite significant. It covers more than seven and a half million square kilometres, and 9 countries share this great Biome- Brazil, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Peru, Suriname, Venezuela, including French Guyana as an overseas territory (*The Amazon: New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology* par. 1).

On the other hand, the Brazilian President Jair Messias Bolsonaro raised the conspiracy factor on Amazon wildfire on 24 September 2019 at the 74th session of the United Nations General Assembly. He said:

It is a fallacy to say that the Amazon is the heritage of humankind, and a misconception, as confirmed by scientists, to say that our Amazonian forests are the lungs of world. Using these fallacies, certain countries instead of

helping, embarked on the media lies and behaved in a disrespectful manner and with a colonialist spirit. They even called into question that which we hold as the most sacred value: our own sovereignty” (UN News, “Brazilian President Speaks Out against ‘Media Lies’ Surrounding Amazon Fires.”<https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/09/1047192>).

What is ecological is interpreted as political by the president. The term sovereignty serves the purpose of the wall which was under construction by Lear.

At the opening of the Bond’s *Lear*, there is a wall. The scene begins “Near the wall.” The construction of the wall is a life-long project for Lear. The wall proposes a self-contained system where terms, definitions, formulations and interpretations are stipulated by the system itself. Inside the wall, it is easy to connect ecology with autonomy and sovereignty of the State. Lear says, “I started this wall when I was young... I stopped my enemies in the field, but there were always more of them. How could we ever be free? So I built this wall to keep our enemies out...” (1.1.3). Thus a wall is more a political apparatus than a protective measure.

Justice is not prevailing within the walls. Ecology cannot exist inside it. Thus Bond expresses his anguish, “What ought we to do? Live justly. But what is justice?” (lxiv). The Bishop in *Lear* blesses the King’s invasion whereas the Pope in the Apostolic Exhortation has stood for the ecology. The political leadership is closely imitating the King in the opening of the play. But Lear who boasted of his wall in the first scene has abandoned his motives of political gain as it reaches the end of the play. In the final scene, he is trying to demolish the wall with a shovel. He complains: “The tool’s got no edge. No one cares for it” (3.4.87). Yet, his confidence is inextinguishable: “I’m not as fit as I was. I can still make my mark” (3.4.88). The change of mind in Lear’s case is not reflected in the leadership of this time. The reality of the present is lagging behind the play.

Lear has started to demolish the wall. When the wall is destroyed the divisions no longer exist. The concept of common home rather than protected or fenced home contributes to the conservation of ecology:

The urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can change... Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home.... Particular appreciation is owed to those who tirelessly seek to resolve the tragic effects of environmental degradation on the lives of the world’s poorest (*Laudato Si’* par. 13).

Within the borders and walls, ecology is least protected. Concepts of “reservations”, “protected areas”, “conservation” and “no encroachment” are other walls within the wall of a nation. They too have no relevance since these terms have not succeeded in stopping the fast depletion of the ecosystem. These concepts have the only relevance of reiterating the political thoughts related to a nation.

A nation with its resources and political thought alone cannot provide protection of ecology. The attempts for international guidelines also are inadequate since they contain political walls in disguise. *Laudato Si’* states:

We lack leadership capable of striking out on new paths and meeting the needs of the present with concern for all and without prejudice towards coming generations. The establishment of a legal framework which can set clear boundaries and ensure the protection of ecosystems has become indispensable; otherwise, the new power structures based on the techno-economic paradigm may overwhelm not only our politics but also freedom and justice (par. 53).

“Technosphere” of Bond is modified as “techno-economic paradigm” in *Laudato Si’*. Technosphere proves to be the greatest threat to the biosphere. Technology, when working as the handmaid of economic interests, loots the ecology all the more. The Farmer’s Son who is a representative of the power structure has fired at Lear commands to the workers who moved toward the body: “Leave that. They’ll pick en up. Off now” (3.4.88). The description is as follows: “The workers go quickly and orderly... The Farmer’s Son shepherds them off, and marches off after them” (3.4.88).

Bond’s *Lear*, though ending with the death of Lear, does not extinguish the ray of hope. The hope lies in the concrete action commenced by Lear that he took the shovel to pull down the wall. The walls of political antipathy, high thoughts of sovereignty, ideological compartmentalization and doctrinal distinctions should be knocked down for the purpose of a common home—the ecology. The description of the scene says: “The shovel stays upright in the earth” (3.4.88). It is expected that someone will come and continue the demolition work commenced by Lear. And before concluding the play, Bond adds: “The workers go quickly and orderly. One of them looks back” (3.4.88). He might have imbibed the spirit of Lear: no walls, no boundaries, and no seclusions. Ecology still hopes for the one who looks back to it with an alternate vision.

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