

## STAGING VIOLENCE AND ITS IMPACT IN WERTENBAKER'S *OUR COUNTRY'S GOOD*

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### Abstract

*Postmodern playwrights since World War II have started to deal with themes of violence on different levels. What the war caused has made them think of the indispensability of staging violence and its different types. The present article aims at dealing with the different ways violence is delineated and staged in Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* (1988). It also aims at showing the different types of violence and the impact they have on the characters in the play. Wertenbaker manages to deal with different types of violence showing that violence has become a fixed sign of human life after the second world war. Wertenbaker aims at stirring people against many of the oppression, violence, and injustice done in this world. She wants people not to remain silent.*

**Keywords:** Injustice, *Our Country's Good*, Violence, Wertenbaker

### 1. Introduction

*Our Country's Good* is a play written in 1988 by the British playwright, Timberlake Wertenbaker<sup>1</sup>. The play is set in 1780s Australia where prisoners from the UK were brought to a settler colony as a punishment for their crimes. The play was staged at the Royal Court Theatre in 1988 for the first time, directed by Max Stafford-Clark who suggested to Wertenbaker to write a play based on this novel (Wilson, 23). The play was also staged on

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Broadway one year later which was a huge success for a women dramatist at the time. Critic Enoch Brater thinks that it was a disadvantage to be a woman in this sector. Only after the plays of Fornes, Terry, Childress, and Holder and the rise of feminism, women playwrights and their works gained recognition not only in regional theatres but in the academic community as well. Therefore, women's playwrights were on the rise in the 1970s and 1980s (Brater x). More than that, women brought new perspectives into theatre, and Wertebaker's *Our Country's Good* is a landmark in women's writing in this respect. As for the importance of the play in the history of drama, another influential critic Ann Foster highlights the techniques and aspects that the playwright has brought to the stage when she mentions that other than Brechtian techniques, the play of Wertebaker takes some motifs from Chekhov, combining of laughter and sadness in a Chekhovian manner (454-455).

### **1. Violence in *Our Country's Good***

Wertebaker's *Our Country's Good* clearly examines the different kinds of violence staged in the play. She includes three main experimental perspectives in contemporary drama to show how violence works in her play. The first of these new perspectives was earthiness, which, according to Brater, is a distinguishing aspect of women's imagination. He suggests that "[w]omen are very funny, coarse, subversive. All good qualities for drama" (4). Thinking of this feature, the earthy language used by the women convicts and other male officers in the play is proof of this new contribution of technique. Most of the characters in the play use indecent and aggressive language to express verbal violence in the play. For instance, in the play, Wisehammer uses words such as "cunt", "lick", "nooks", "crannies" and "crooks of England" (17) whereas Meg Long and Liz Arden's speeches are full of slang. Moreover, the marines also use earthy language, especially towards women.

Secondly, the play underpins the possibility of change in human nature due to the harsh and austere circumstances that the characters have lived under. The visible change in women and in the society throughout contemporary theatre is another contribution of the contemporary women dramatists (Brater, 17). Suffering and violence can have a great impact on the individuals' lives and may lead to changes on many levels. For instance, the play within the play that the convicts and some officers organized together is an active expression that there can be change both in the victims and the society itself. Above All, the characters Captain Arthur Phillip and Ralph Clark provide evidence of this idea. For instance, Captain tells

Ralph that they can transform and change not only the victims but the society itself (40-41). Ann Wilson explains this aspect of the play in her article with specific references to colonization and its impact:

This focus on theatre and community marks a shift from Keneally's novel which is concerned with colony and, by extension, with relations of power which buttress the colonial enterprise. This radical shift occurs because Wertenbaker's adaptation simplifies many of the characters, most notably Ralph Clark and Arthur Phillip, the Governor-in-Chief of the colony of New South Wales. In *The Playmaker*, Clark's and Phillip's personal relationships with the colonized – the convicts and the aboriginals – are extensions of their public roles as officers who are the agents of colonization; in *Our Country's Good*, both are represented as essentially good men under whose benevolent aegis the convicts produce the play, create a community and recover their humanity which gives them true freedom. (23)

Despite the belief in the change of the good direction, on the other hand, Verna Foster claims that what underlies the mentality of Captain is the true ideas of the colonization and exploitation at the time (419). Foster also claims that Captain Phillip's name and ideas represent the cultural hegemony of the British monarchs (421). Nevertheless, she sees the play as an "instrument of reform and social cohesion than a ritual reaffirmation of British ideals and customs" (419). Therefore, among the functions of theatre a force for the social upheaval and education can be included.

Thirdly, Wertenbaker's emphasis on the importance of women taking part as actors and writers in the theatre is strongly evident in the production and performances of the play. The inclusion and dominance of women characters add diversity and various points of view to the matters about colonization and violence. Wertenbaker is a writer and theatre manager, so women gradually started to take part in the business in the 80s and 90s, and that brought the chance to listen to the women writers and their troubles and concerns especially on the issue of colonization and post-colonial studies. This play was a step in that issue.

Another contribution that Wertenbaker made to the literary canon is that she uses language functionally inside the play structure and dialogues. Susan Carlson thinks that the language and its richness in *Our Country's Good* has an important place in Wertenbaker's career, in the sense that the characters have sensitivity to the language signalling hidden messages and acts of plot-twisting: For instance, in the play convict John Wischhammer is in love with the dictionary, Liz Morden speaks elaborately, and for some of the characters, language is a tool for dominance and local power struggle against the colonizer. In that sense language and its

function as a way of oppression and violence “was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonised” (135). The main idea scrutinized by Wertebaker in the play is that verbal violence causes tremendous psychological damage to an individual person’s identity than torture or any other forms of physical violence. Wertebaker emphasizes in the following quotes the function of verbal violence: “If you silence a people, if a culture loses its language, it loses its tenderness. You lose your countryside, your parent, and because culture is essentially verbal, you lose your history. I have a fear of enforced silence. Silence leads to violence” (Wertebaker qtd. in Mackenzie). As observed in the extract, the worst form of violence is the linguistic one that tarnishes the psyche and mentality of an individual. The oppression and exploitation by language is the most dangerous one as it turns the victim into a cultureless and coarse monster. Society loses its history and words thus remains silent and the only way to unleash its feelings is action in the form of violence. The characters in the play as analysed further in the text are all fitting examples of such phenomenon.

Theatre is important because more than creativity it emphasizes the social background of the era and the message of the play. The background is important in *Our Country’s Good* as well, because the characters in the play are “based on people who sailed with the First Fleet” that were sent as settlers to Australia (Gibson 1). The First Fleet comprised of 11 ships which set from England in 1787 to establish a penal colony. The fleet carried more than 1,000 convicts and marines, therefore some of the names in the First Fleet and the play are similar (1). Susan Carlson thinks that although the play is set in 1780s Australia, the world is much like the 1980s Great Britain. The resemblances are that the conservative government is the point of discussion, the country’s manufacturing is destroyed, and the trade unions are disempowered (137). While reading the play these should be considered: The kind of crimes for which hanging was the normal punishment at this time, crimes are considered punishable by transportation? Another matter is the conditions in English prisons of the time: The people who were penalized to be transported died because of bad conditions on ships. And another factor that led to a need for transportation was the need of the empire to send men abroad and build colonies and control them by their citizens who will also colonize the state culturally and economically.

The playwright delineates different types of violence to convey a picture of what was going on in Australia during that time, and also to go with the mainstream of the theatre of that time, which depicts violence in all its types. One type of violence that is depicted clearly in

the play is physical violence. Punishment is used as an oppressing force in the play by the government officials against the settlers, especially through verbal assaults. The main criticism of Wertebaker is that these people are hanged and transported to Australia for minor crimes like assaults or stealing a piece of food from stores or someone. For this reason, the opening part of the play is important for the discussion. Wertebaker calls this part (prologue) segment “Identity” where two speeches by the convicts' John Arscott and John Wisenhammer are delivered. Another aspect of violence seen in the play is to starve the prisoners as a kind of punishment. Prisoners are not given enough food or water as a kind of punishment practiced by the authorities. Most of those prisoners are convicted because they had to steal to eat. John Arscott analyses the feeling of hunger and its effects on the human psyche and body, thus gives us a message that it is a basic need for humans to be fed and these convicts are hanged or transported because they basically try to have something to eat and satisfy this instinct of hunger. Arscott tells how hunger affects the body and his long times of hunger in the transportation ship and also in Australia:

Hunger. Funny. Doesn't start in the stomach, but in the mind. A picture fits in and out of a corner. Something you've eaten years ago. Then the picture gets bigger. Full plates. Hunger moves down to the tongue. The tongue feels like a balloon. Then further down. A burn at the back of the chest. After that the pains begin. Streaks in the stomach. (17)

John Wisenhammer, likewise, talks about the pain he feels being away from his own country. This psychological damage he feels is another type of violence depicted in the play. He speaks of how he feels homesick and talks about the hardships of the voyage and his feelings for England. He thinks they are thrown to this end of the world and forgotten here:

At night? The sea cracks against the ship. Fear whispers, screams, falls silent, hushed. Spewed from our country, forgotten, bound to the dark edge of the earth, at night what is there to do but seek English cunt, warm, moist, soft [...] Alone, frightened, nameless in this stinking hole of hell [...] we'll remember England together. (17)

Later in the play, Wisenhammer talks about justice saying that words within at the beginning is dangerous: for him “Injustice” is the ugliest word in the English language (33).

Critic Yi-shin Shih points to the “discourse of civilized other” and the “discourse of savagery” in the interpretation of the play and especially the theme of punishment and exploitation (3). Captain Philip is considered as someone using the discourse of the civilized other, while most of the convicts use the discourse of savagery. These discourses are

important because they give us different definitions and evaluations of the terms - punishment and justice. For him as a civilized person, a crime must be punished properly while the other discourse showed that crime can survive in the life struggle. In the play, scene three of act one is called “Punishment” pointing to its centrality in the play’s total message. In this part, the characters Captain Watkin Tench Governor Arthur Phillip, Judge David Collins, and Harry Brewer argue about the punishments of hanging and transportation. While Phillip and Harry think that the punishment is too excessive for such crimes, Tench and Collins think the opposite. They see such punishments as a warning and a tool for justice and order in the colonies and at home regardless of their psychological results. Phillip objects to this idea stating that “Could we not be more humane?” (17). But Tench opposes telling that “justice and humaneness never have gone hand in hand. The law is not a sentimental comedy” (17). It is very interesting to notice how the authorities twist some general concepts to serve their purpose. For example, justice is used as a tool to inflict pain and violence against the convicts, even when those authorities know that people steal because they have no option in this battle of survival.

Phillip highlights how violence is practiced in the name of justice. He somehow thinks that there should be order too but he objects to the horrid spectacle of the hangings. He thinks that it does not change anything, but the convicts continue doing what they do all the time. Furthermore, Collins talks about the impact of violence in domesticating the convicts and making them submissive to the authorities. He brings the issue of the “mortar of fear” which psychologically threatens the convicts not to go out of their words (17). He shows how a simple act of stealing is sometimes punished ruthlessly. He says that Arscott was sentenced to 150 lashes for an assault and how similar sentences happened for stealing from the public stores. Collins and Tench are depicted as cruel men who practice all types of violence against the convicts. They want the convicts to suffer. Tench’s depiction of how lashes violate the skin is a visual depiction of that punishment that was too cruel (17-8). More than that, Tench thinks that hangings are the convicts’ favourite form of entertainment (18). During the talk, Phillip suggests educating the convicts so that they will be more sensible, but Tench and Collins object to this idea (18).

Sarah Freeman says that tragedy was central to the Western tradition for centuries, and it can have the potential of changing the social upheaval towards a better civilization (201). Because of that, in *Our Country’s Good*, Wertebaker presents us a story like Dickens’s

social realist ones and raises the questions of colonialism, violence and social injustice. Freeman also argues that Wertenbaker writes in a mood that captures the main characteristics of postmodernism and post-colonialism (208). Moreover, the punishment inflicted on the three people in the play is proof of the violent acts practiced in the name of justice. Violence is clearly seen in the excessive punishment of the system. Harry Brewer lists these three people: Thomas Barrett, 17 years old and transported for seven years for stealing a sheep, James Freeman is Irish and transported for assaulting an 82-year-old woman, and lastly Dorothy Handland stole a biscuit from someone and she hanged herself (18). These examples show that the authorities are not after violence and terrorizing the convicts and not after justice. However, these examples of excessive punishment do not seem to change Collins's mind because he wants the hangings to continue (18).

Part of the psychological violence can also be seen in the people of the authority themselves. Harry Brewer, for example, feels the injustice in the system and remembers the people he hanged in a mood of remorse and psychological disturbance. He is haunted by Handy Baker's ghost. The violence he practiced gnaws his conscience and his soul, and finally led to his death in darkness because could not manage the heavy burden of his guilt. In the play, Harry talks to Ralph often and tells him about all types of violence he and his other people practiced against the convicts. Even when Ralph tries to persuade him that he is not guilty and responsible for executions, Harry is haunted by the ghosts of the people he had hanged until that day (19-20). Ironically, even if he feels guilty and sensible, during the play Harry is shown as a sexist and sees women as material and property. He has obscene language always toward women. Wertenbaker "kills" him in pain and disillusionment which he may deserve. For instance, in a scene where he forces Duckling to have sex with him, he says "sell yourself to a convict for a biscuit. Leave if you want to. You're filthy, filthy, opening your legs to the first marine. You whore" (27). Under these circumstances of violence and oppression of both men, and the harsh system rules Ducklings says that "I wish I was dead. At least when you are dead you are free" (28). This is just one of the samples of verbal violence and its horrific psychological effect on the individual.

However, Wertenbaker's depiction of how the convicts try to refuse all kinds of violence practiced in the name of justice makes them a symbol of humans' endeavours to stop injustice. Foster thinks that the play convicts take part in the story allows them "in small ways to undermine the authority and give the actors a sense of self-worth and hope for the

future” breaching the psychological burdens (1997 417). However, in the play, other than Tench and Collins there are some other characters who believe that violence is a perfect way to bring justice. One of them is Ross who says that “this is a convict colony, the prisoners are here to be punished and we’re here to make sure that they get punished” (23). Phillip resists the fact that they can be reformed, and they are already punished by a long exile to an unknown land where they will live for a long time (23). Collins’s harsh views change somehow at the end of the play. For example, when Ross is determined to hang Liz Modern and shouts “She’s guilty. Hang her”, Collins does not want to hang an innocent woman (49). However, in a materialistic inhumane calculation, Ross thinks that there are 800 “thieves, perjurers, forgers, murders, liars, escapist, rapists, whores [...]” on the island and the number should be decreased for a better society (49).

Justice is a lost concept for the punishers and authority on the fleets and in the settler colonies. They are harsh and inhuman towards the convicts, most of whom are sentenced to death for trivial felonies. The convicts and some sane officials call for justice in the story and they organize a play inside the play to entertain the people. However, the word justice has lost its meaning to such an extent that even rational people do not believe it. Inside the play when Wisenhammer claims to write a play about justice, Sideway utters these words about justice and the possible benefits of the play they will perform for the journey:

Wisenhammer: I will write you a play about justice,

Sideway: Only comedies, my boy, only comedies. (*Our Country’s Good* 52)

The innateness of human violence could be regarded as a reason for the desire for harsher punishment urges of cruel characters in the play. This idea is verbalized by Tench in the play. He says that people with such urges have the habit of vice and crime in their nature, that is, habits are difficult to break, and the innate tendency is nature (24). Tench urges that these people are not criminals for their stomach and hunger but born criminals and will never get reformed. They should be punished, and this is justice for Tench. For instance, Liz Morden’s words on her experience of a crime present us with this view (36, 38). Wertenbaker does not forget to mention the things that Liz went through. She was raised cruelly in a strict environment and after this transportation, she became a wild animal for the officers in the colony. With this character and her life story, Wertenbaker conveys that violence brings violence and silence is the sign of violence.



Sinister dogmatic views on punishment and justice are given by the talks of Reverend Johnson and Captain Phillip. Johnson says that people can be reformed but especially women should be reformed because they are sinners with compassion (24). Johnson represents the scholastic church thought on vices and has a sexist view obviously. Phillip thinks at this point that “the theatre will remind them that there is more to life than crime, punishment” (25). Another figure in the play who comments on punishment and justice is Ketch Freeman, the hangman. Similarly, he has religious reasons for punishment and justice, he fears the wrath of God and women (32). He is a sexist too who is on the extremity to state that God forgives all but women (32). However, he makes his way for compensating for his cruelty during execution when he says he was told “to be hanged or hang” (44). These are some examples of the feminist agenda of Wertebaker to point out that the punishment not only hurts the colonized but also the oppressor.

## **2. Conclusion**

In conclusion, *Our Country's Good* describes the journey of the First Fleet which transports convicts from England to build a colony there. It presents different types of violence, psychological, verbal, and sexual. These different types have an impact on the characters in the play. The play includes the questioning of the system and inhumane actions of the empire and its higher-ranked people. The punishments are excessive, and justice is a matter of personal discussions out of reasoning and affection. Wertebaker summarizes the conditions of these convicts and the people who had to work in such places. It is indeed plausible why Wertebaker's study concentrates extensively on speech and its political impact, given that she grew up in a region where the native tongue had been largely destroyed. As a result, this play is quite private to Wertebaker who has witnessed directly the consequences of a silent society and is deeply moved by it.

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<sup>i</sup> Timberlake Wertebaker is a British playwright who also produced screenplays and worked as a translator. She grew up in Spain's Basque Country and educated in France (Bush 3). Wertebaker was the resident writer for the Royal Court Theatre from 1984-85 and worked in the Executive Council of The English Stage Company from 1992 to 1997 (Aston 149). She worked as a distinguished professor of Theatre at Georgetown University, Washington D.C. in the academic year 2005-2006. In 1988, she won Evening Standard Award for Most Promising Playwright for her play *Our Country's Good*. For the same play she won Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best New Foreign Play (New York) in 1990. As a result of the successive accomplishments in media and literature, Wertebaker was made a fellow of The Royal Society of Literature in 2006. Her other famous plays include *The Love of the Nightingale* which is an adaptation of the Ancient Greek legend of the rape of Philomela by her brother-in-law Tereus, and revenge undertaken by Philomela and Procne written from a feminist outlook. Another play is *Three Birds Alighting on a Field* (1992) which is set in the 1980s and tells the story of various characters in a failing art gallery and their attempts to improve their prestige.