

CONSIDERING NATIONAL POLITICS WITH UNIVERSAL
RELEVANCE: DAVID HARE'S *THE ABSENCE OF WAR*

ULUSAL POLİTİKAYI EVRENSEL TUTARLILIKLA DEĞERLENDİRME:
DAVID HARE - *THE ABSENCE OF WAR*

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Abstract

*Politics has always captured the imagination of playwrights because it is directly related with social life. The reason for playwrights' interest in politics is that it directly affects the lives of societies which they bring to the stage. The competition between political parties to hold the power is a natural part of the democratic process. David Hare, in *The Absence of War*, dwells on the rivalry between the parties in power and opposition in his country and generalizing the nature of this rivalry, he adds it a universal peculiarity. This study is an analysis of the playwright's approach to politics, the war to hold power within a country and the mostly invisible competition for leadership within the same party.*

Key Words: *Politics, Political Parties, Competition.*

Özet

*Sosyal yaşamla doğrudan bağlantılı olduğu için, politika her zaman oyun yazarlarının ilgisini çekmiştir. Oyun yazarlarının politikaya ilgi duymalarının nedeni, sahneye getirdikleri toplumların yaşam biçimleri üzerinde politikanın doğrudan etkili olmasında yatar. Siyasi partiler arasında iktidara gelme savaşı demokratik sürecin doğal bir parçasıdır. *The Absence of War* adlı oyununda David Hare iktidar ve muhalefet partileri arasındaki yarışma üzerinde durur ve bu yarışmanın doğasını genişleterek ona evrensel bir nitelik kazandırır. Bu çalışma, oyun yazarının politika, bir ülkede iktidarı elde etme savaşı ve aynı parti içindeki görülmeyen liderlik savaşı konularına yaklaşımını ele almaktadır.*

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Politika, Siyasi Partiler, Rekabet.*

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Since theatre has always had close ties with political issues, playwrights have mostly taken social themes into consideration from a political standpoint. The history of British drama, too, has unquestionably exerted a similar development. Especially after World War II, British theatre has become more of a politically oriented arena of discussion. Playwrights have excessively dealt with politics because it is a suitable medium, for the most part, in their public statement (Bigsby 1993: 289). In this way, they have had a chance to question a number of issues concerning those in power who are expected to improve living conditions of individuals. This attitude to politics and political affairs does not only reveal the existing situation in England, but also aims at seeking answers to some political questions of universal relevance. The way playwrights have focused on the issue may undergo a variety of criticisms from various quarters, but one thing is certain: politics is a concept arousing irresistible feelings in the minds of individuals in the modern world. It helps those sharing sensible thoughts of universal validity have a wide horizon in their daily commitments.

To establish a rigorous basis for politics, playwrights in England in the post-war decades have tried to achieve a deeper search year by year. Such concepts as 'war', 'peace', 'freedom', 'equality', 'economy', 'welfare', etc. have taken their unique places among the areas of interest mostly handled with a particular focus of attention on lived experience. Thus a kind of melting pot of ideas about the relationship between established political convictions and individual viewpoint generated a literature of political orientation (Wandor 1993: 7). Of the leading figures of the Fringe Theatre in Britain, David Hare, basing his theme mostly on concerns playing a large part in the lives of individuals, has continued to contribute to the post-war tradition of criticism of society and politics through theatre (Olivia 1990: 2). Hare, in whose "dramatic works, politicians and institutions are specifically given a higher degree of accountability" (Takkaç 2006: 334), has focused on politics and social issues within national boundaries in most of his plays and a world-wide scale in some particular ones with an eclectic exploration of the social and political conditions manifesting themselves in the world of politics.

As far as his understanding of politics is concerned, Hare can be said to have uniquely shifted from a personal viewpoint to a national, and then to an international one in delineating political standpoints. Writing, *Stuff Happens*, which is "about events leading up to the Iraq war" (Tagami 2006: L2), and

which "is an effective political play" (Siegel 2006: 10), he explicitly demonstrates that he, as a dramatist caring for how things operate in the modern world, does not suggest ideas only on national politics but handles political principles within a universal perspective. Hornby's evaluation about *Stuff Happens*, revealing that "the scenes were basically accurate and the characterizations completely agreeable" (2005: 650), supports the appropriateness of the playwright in dwelling the issue at hand. In fact, the critic's assessment of the playwright's precision in dealing with the themes he brings to the notice of the audience can be generalized for his other plays on national and global institutions because Hare cautiously observes the political framework of the modern age and makes reliable definitions. His appraisal of contemporary people as individuals who "are living through a great, groaning, yawling festival of change" (Itzin 1980: 333) is suggestive of this observation. His struggle to point out whether what every individual experiences is what makes people happy, whether people's criteria should be collective, and whether persons in today's problematical world would somehow be happy is the indication by means of which his drama can be evaluated. (Hare 1978: 69)

The Absence of War (1993), the third part of his trilogy, including also *Racing Demon*, "which is a brilliant play about faith and holding on to faith" (Davies 2002: 74), and *Murmuring Judges*, a critical assessment of the legal system in Britain which "actually treats less than 2 percent of the crimes in Britain, convicts even fewer criminals, then recycles them in jails that prove training grounds for further misdeeds" (Glenn 1994: 219-20), is a play examining aspects of domestic politics but revealing implications of worldwide relevance at the same time. Hare's interest in active participation in politics is not limited to writing plays, he had taken active part in political issues before writing this play and has continued being active in this crucial arena afterwards, too, as a dramatist whose ideas are taken seriously:

Part of the renaissance of the *Daily Telegraph* in the late 1980s was a brightening of the leader pages with columnists. At the start of the 1997 election campaign, the *Telegraph* presented his election 'Comment team', containing altogether nine regular columnists. These were to be augmented by 'an array of guest writers', including a daily 'Alternative Voice' from the left-wing playwright David Hare ('always controversial'). (Seymour-Ure 1998: 44)

Hare, a playwright with a keen eye on political matters, does not dwell only on politics in *The Absence of War*: severe consequences of the war are also closely witnessed as well as a number of other issues concerning daily lives of people. Therefore, it is not out of the ordinary to note that, before starting his discussion about political issues in the play, Hare makes the audience recall their knowledge of war bringing up the destiny of soldiers who have lost their lives in wars since 1914. He feels obliged to refresh the audience's memory noting that they owe a lot for being able to live freely today to "the price of freedom" (2) paid by their forefathers in wars up to now. He does not, without a doubt, limit the scope of freedom with only British people; he generalizes it to include the men and women of other nations to attach a universal meaning to war, which is inseparable from politics.

In order to lay emphasis on the importance and significance of peace, Hare helps those living in a country in peace remember the period of war during which things were different. His comment on such a period, proclaiming the behaviour of people under dire circumstances, may be regarded as an approach intended to urge people to make a comparison between their own time and once-experienced hard period: "The country all pulls together. People do what needs to be done" (40). Yet he presupposes that peace may also create an atmosphere of debate between rival groups in the country, and that only the nature of war changes. This suggestion is to be weighed up as an indication of the critique of the society including politicians directing it.

The dramatist deliberately establishes a suggestive relation between war and politics to point out the piece of information that human personality is of a nature always in search of power. In this regard, the occurrence of wars, as Hare seems to advocate, cannot be dissociated from this general tendency in every issue touching on human life. Moreover, it is obviously proposed in *The Absence of War* that politics is a peculiar type of war and war is a peculiar type of politics. The play indicates that the underlying question in this specific concern is the irresistible passion to attain some goals as observed in any country in the world. This central point, brought to light objectively in the play, reminds the audience of the fact that the struggle for this purpose results from the conviction that political power is an opportunity to establish some principles of life and existence depending on the criterion of success of some passionate individuals. In view of this notion, the issues suggested in the play

may be said to show the association between theory and practice through the representatives of several positions side by side. In this way, Hare delineates political strategy as a crucial factor determining the fate of a nation, which is really a lesson in political psychology with implications reflecting the originality of this area of interest. This makes it possible for him to concentrate the attention of the audience on the assumption that the characteristic features of politics in countries with political systems like the one in England are almost the same.

Establishing this kind of a relationship at the beginning of the play between wars and politics, referring to wars as an end result of greed in politics, the playwright communicates with his audience concentrating on the nature of politics at large. Here, a question concerning Hare's intention comes to the fore: what does the calling of this living synthesis demonstrate? An appropriate answer to this question should include the point that Hare is classified, as Baitz puts it, among those "waves of playwrights who speak to their own generation" (1998: 34) intending to enlighten them on what they need to know to set up paramount principles of life and existence in the modern world. Obviously, this is an especially important process for the writer in that it enables him to convince the audience of the indispensability of capturing the spirit of the age.

Reconciling his view of politics with the conditions of the world at the beginning of *The Absence of War*, the writer proposes that politics should serve the welfare of societies in essence but, as seen in practice generally, numerous plots that have become a natural part of politics have increased the lack of confidence in politicians. For Hare, politicians' lives are full of undesirable characteristics such as hypocrisy, self-indulgence, insatiability, ambition and dissatisfaction; and this prevents them from performing their main service in an appropriate way. For this reason, deliberating over people's needs in essence, and wishing to witness improvement in this area of great import, he wants politics to be of prime importance for everyone in the world and "to fulfill a real need in people's lives" (7). And he considers himself one of those who really care for the conditions under which they are forced to live, and who should raise their dissatisfaction concerning vital issues in their lives.

To inform the audience of the exact nature of politics and war of powers in the political system of his country, Hare, in the first place, describes the

events related to the condition of George, the leader of the Opposition Party, not seen in the play until Scene Three. For Andrew, his minder, "The government has cars. And teams of civil servants. Resources. Buildings. Access to the facts. But George has much less. He has only his private office" (3). Moreover, those in power are presented as ones who "Never slacken the leash" (4). The dramatist's critical approach to this sort of "political passion" (Zoglin 1996: 99) is a significant evaluation of politics in the modern world. His comment on the inequality between the conditions faced by party leaders in power and opposition also reveals a familiar aspect of political systems all over the world: the utilization of political power. No party leader can make use of this very effective weapon while in opposition. Hare insists that this type of politics, political ways and political objectives should ultimately cause political tricks, the result of which directly influences the lives of all the members of a society. Thus, his passionate involvement in this peculiar aspect of politics may be evaluated as the reflection of the effort, as much as possible, to be a conscious member of the modern world in which everything has much to do with politics.

Written with the above-mentioned considerations in the playwright's mind, the play stresses a point clearly known by everyone the world over: if politics meets people's needs, there will be no remarkable objection to it, if not, all details of political issues will inevitably be discussed unceasingly. The wide-reaching validity of this idea is what *The Absence of War* is based on: politicians' criticizing their opponents for their inefficiency and the struggle for power to be in charge of public service. In fact, Hare's approach to the issue is that politicians find it easy to criticize a large number of things about the issues connected with the areas on which politics exerts some influence. The following assessment by George is of this kind:

The country reels. The country is tired. This government is tired. It has lived out its life. It has been here too long and now it continues without any vitality or effective policy.

(From all round him there are cries of 'Question!', 'What's your question?')

It exists purely for one purpose: it exists in order to continue to exist.

(There is uproar.)

It feels, it looks, it sounds like a lonely drunk wandering through the streets at four-thirty in the morning, muttering to itself, blaming its misfortunes on others and desperately searching, scrabbling through the early morning trashcans for any political ideas it might still be able to lift.

(More cries of 'Question', 'Ask a question'.)

It falls. It falters. Only power itself motivates it now. The head has been cut off. But the chicken keeps running. How long? The honourable members ask me for a question. Yes I will give them a question. Please. Please tell us how long? (10-11)

George's above expression shows that the rules of the fight between political parties are mostly determined by parties themselves and their leaders. As the leader of the party in opposition, George can find lots of things to criticize including even the time of the election to influence persons on the electoral roll, which is a sign showing, as well, that the play "offers a different kind of dilemma: a battle over how to approach the electorate" (New Statesman & Society 1993: 29). But this does not mean that the presupposed advantages will come true: those in opposition can never be sure that voters listening to such things will easily be convinced. He acknowledges the point that no one can trust someone else on this slippery ground, and demonstrates the untrustworthy nature of campaigns during elections, utilizing the viewpoint of Oliver, George's political advisor: "the people do stupid things. Like wear your bloody T-shirt and then vote against you". (15)

In addition to the immorality observed in the political system in England, Hare, in order not to lose universal relevance, makes generalizations of the political dissatisfaction in the world. As an instance to support his perspective he disapproves of the rulers of Europe through George's axioms, and stresses that there is almost no impeccable character in the world of politics. George finds it degrading that Kaisers still "run Europe" (25), which is an idea that becomes particularly important when the changing characteristic nature of the lives of people in the whole world is weighed up. Although the resemblance of the system in England with that of Europe is not openly stated, one can still get the impression that the playwright is not content with the conditions experienced both in England and in other European countries.

It should be noted that Hare does not limit political issues with the struggle between party leaders, what is experienced just before elections, and rulers of countries; he handles domestic economy as another major area of interest in politics and in politicians' lives. He is of the opinion that competence in economy is a must, a responsibility as well as a merit, and no party leader can be said to rule a country properly without supplying the economic needs of its citizens. For him, economic competence of parties and party leaders in particular must be able to cause effective and positive changes in the life of every citizen of the society. That's why, "change for change's sake" (28) in vital issues in a country is not favoured in *The Absence of War*.

The dramatist's truth-seeking suggestion concerning various aspects of economy is quite outstanding given that it makes clear the widely-held supposition that the rules of economy are not always applied by those who are in charge of the public service. Encouraging politicians, saying, "If you don't take risks, then you don't make mistakes" (31), Hare notifies the necessity of taking vigorous steps. He presents the case of those in power who prefer to disregard the rules of economy for fear that they may not be able to be re-elected as a test case putting forward the unreliable nature of politicians. And it is not surprising for him to stress the point that political parties care more for their future than the future of the nation. When it comes to taking risks, as Hare thinks, politicians should never ignore the real nature of the conditions faced.

Having defined the inevitability but inapplicability of taking risks on the part of politicians, Hare does not exclude from his play the common supposition that labour parties cannot manage economy in a proper way. Even George's publicity advisor, Lindsay's ironical assertion that George is "the only thing standing in victory's way" (34) reveals this point clearly enough. Making a responsible member of the Labour Party say such a thing, the playwright draws attention to the long retained structure of parties. More to the point, this is also presented as the essence of the delicate balance between the viewpoints of George, the opposition party leader, and Charles Kendrick, the prime minister. Kendrick sees opposition as a party to run Britain down and tries to impose his ideas on voters:

This, I know, is a brave decision. It's not one I have taken lightly at all. It is not in any sense impetuous. Because, on the contrary, it is taken to avoid a most damaging risk. We cannot have prosperity, we cannot have sound financial practice until the danger-however remote-of a possible Labour government is removed from the back of people's minds.

I would not allow a creeping paralysis to undermine the very real strides of progress we have made.

I will fight this election-alongside my wife Carole-because I am tired of the relentless negativity, of listening to an Opposition which does nothing but run Britain down. That tires me. Because this is a great country. I believe, the greatest on earth. So for my children, and their future children-as well as my wife, Carole-let us end the uncertainty. (37-38)

As seen clearly from the content of Kendrick's talk, the ruling Liberal Party is almost threatening voters with a dark future if they favour not the Tory government but the Labour Party. Dwelling on this aspect of politics, the dramatist suggests messages which cannot be limited only with the case observed in England because the point he deals with is an issue which is thought to have universal bearing. Actually, so striking are the similarities throughout the world in the playwright's opinion concerning traditional understanding of parties that he cannot help saying "life is much less tricky for the Tories" (17) through George's mouth.

Since *The Absence of War* reflects the world-wide implication that conservative parties manage economy better than labour parties, being in charge of money is hardly regarded as a matter George can overcome. That is why, George is advised not to claim any success at this point. When it comes to putting into effect some economic measures, the distinction between parties become more apparent. The resolution of the Labour Party in favour of abolishing "mortgage tax relief" (45) in order to finance spending plans, a very decisive step unexpected from the Labour Party, causes a conflict even among those who occupy leading positions in the same party. Hare seems to have deliberately included this matter in the play. His crucial point, as it seems from this proposition, is to tell the public "However unfair it is" (44). Due to the common belief that economy is thought to be dealt with better by Tory governments, the critical approach in this matter to the Labour Party is reflected as a supposedly common but essentially misleading belief.

Portraying this concern vividly, the writer imposes a kind of superiority on 'fairness' rather than 'equality' as regards the appraisal of political parties especially in a country which is about to hold elections. But he does not disregard the fact that there must be a way to evaluate politicians and political parties. As far as he is concerned, politicians cannot be evaluated properly with a scale other than the norms of the society and without the magnitude of socially accepted values.

Another point of interest to be taken into consideration even-handedly for the global relevance of the play is the case of party leaders overtly stressed through George's set of circumstances. The dramatist openly supports the thought that actions of party leaders should be consistent with the expectations of the general public. He includes even George in the group he criticizes for this reason even though he presents him as a party leader who dislikes the behaviour of politicians indicating the general assumption that what happens is what they foresee. His suggestion that party leaders should be careful in evaluating their position is a two-ended opinion: criticism and evaluation of themselves, and criticism and evaluation of their opponents. Keeping in mind the fact that criticizing oneself is not an all-inclusive application in politics, Hare points out that politics can only be approached more accurately if politicians come within the reach of the nature of political issues appropriately, and he does not favour policy-makers who always handle problems from their partial perspective. In this regard, the success of politicians in power is taken into account from a viewpoint reflecting the inclusion of the expectations of the members of the society in *The Absence of War*. To establish a close link between the daily needs of the members of the society and the attitude of politicians towards the expectation of the public, Hare discloses a discussion on the way governments spend money. He includes even the money spent for military ends in the play as a point to focus on. Yet he prefers not to dictate his own ideas in respect of whether governments should spend money in peacetime in order to wage a possible war in the future. For him it is a kind of behaviour concerning "an act of sense" (46) and "an act of strategy" (46). However, when his personal view is considered, it can be suggested that he is certainly against war, but he does not ignore the inevitability of securing the prospect of the nation just in case.

Hare may be said to have considered the history of mankind, which has often included wars, and then reached such a conclusion. This is a remarkable

point that leads him to put the blame on politicians who, he believes, are responsible for the outbreak of wars. He knows that the effect of wars being in the minds of people, one of the urgent needs of the citizens should be 'moral imperative', which must be the sole power to lead societies. Thus he criticizes the kind of political systems in which rulers do not properly handle things. But he does not disregard its intrinsic difficulty: he is aware that conditions experienced in the contemporary world do not let politicians "Fight evil" (84), the prime requirement from those responsible for the future welfare and security of the whole world.

Being a play focusing on a domestic issue in a way reflecting universal relevance, *The Absence of War* reveals a unique example of the common political debate to be seen in any country before an election. And as an innate part of democratic process, waiting in opposition with the aim of having a chance to do something is considered a difficult way of existence. The play's exciting theme disclosing this fact reaches its climax in the scene of the interview between Linus Frank, a television programme maker, and George. It reflects the cause and result of change when the general supposition towards various parties is viewed:

LINUS: There's a question now, Mr Jones, I'd like to raise with you ... to do, if I may, with your policies ... and the feeling perhaps you've now changed policy so often that no one quite knows where your party stands.

GEORGE: Yes of course I've heard that. It's true we've, er, changed certain things, certain, er, ideas ... but of course that's just being responsive, just being responsible, responding to what people say.

LINUS: Yes but surely...

GEORGE: If I may just finish. We can't win on this. When Tories change policies, it's called flexibility and it's said to show strength. When we do it, it's vacillation and people say that we're weak. (67)

The above conversation culminates and ends with Linus' questions about the abolition of mortgage tax relief. George can neither openly support nor openly deny the plan. The outcome of this interview is the worst thing to happen to George, and to the Labour Party in a period so close to the election. As a matter of fact, Linus has obtained this secret plan, which he uses against George without hesitation, from some members of the Labour Party who, most

probably, deliberately did such a thing to end George's leadership in the party. Hare regards this as a unique example of "an ironic comment on fidelity" (Kanfer 1998: 23) which is supposed to take place in all human commitments. This, among others, supports the idea that he makes every attempt to reveal the struggle for leadership in parties as a point next to ideological fight between parties, and to put forward the piece of evidence that people may often enough use some political weapons in the peacetime. (Bull 1984: 61)

Hare includes as many details as he can about the nature of politics in the play to demonstrate that he approaches the issue relevantly. Dwelling on the question of rivalry is also a case serving this purpose. Hare focuses on the competition to hold the power within the same party as a critical point just as important as the war for supremacy between countries and rival parties within the same country. And he notes that without conformity within a party institution it becomes even more difficult to direct the whole nation, as observed in George's appraisal reflecting that he distrusts Malcolm: "I don't know, Malcolm. You're like a lot of people in the Labour Party. You want to be its Leader one day. A Life Labour Party politics. The gossip. The factions. The arguments. (84-85)

Involving such an undeniably probable instance in the play, the playwright aims at illustrating the fact that, although a party leader has to work with a team of his own, he may sometimes have to face up to unexpected disloyal conduct of ostensibly loyal members. George's fault is to trust everyone around him. In a sense, he lives in a world created by his team, never hearing that anything is wrong. His team keeps him away from television and newspapers. His life is so confined within the borders framed by his team that no one can have the chance to be able to talk to him about fundamental issues. Hare requests that a party leader should not be like a patient and those around him should not behave like nurses. He wants politicians to behave in an appropriate way, to make decisions expected from them, and to organize their actions in accordance with the inevitable necessities of their countries and political parties.

The discussion on whether to change party leaders when it is clear that a party will most probably not win the forthcoming election is a further point of significance in Hare's estimation. The play makes a clear-cut distinction between parties, giving a convincing example from the world of politics. And

the behaviours of party leaders are tested on a decency scale in this respect. Hare "is more interested in the contortions decent people put themselves through to follow their obsessions while maintaining decorum" (Corliss 1993: 51). To tell the truth, decency is evaluated in the play as a concept of universal relevance whatever the conditions may be. This approach, of course, attributes to the play a somewhat different feature: *The Absence of War* has kinship with "Condition of England" novels (Leithauser 1995: 80) because it has a peculiarity that helps create a drama with social and moral messages in addition to political ones.

In his effort to reflect the overall manifestation of politics and of political parties, Hare inserts his political ideas into the play's message so that his understanding of politics as a constructive agent in the lives of individuals could be openly revealed. As George declares, while addressing an audience of thousands in an arena before the election, his socialism "is concrete. It is real. It is to do with helping people. It is the way in which we go forward now to make this a country in which everyone is helped." (95). This type of an assessment should be thought to contain the elements of the idealism in the playwright's mind. Hare emphasizes the point that politicians mostly know what to do, but they would rather not do it. The fact that George is questioning why he cannot speak of what he believes is really a mind-stimulating description of the nature of politics and the hindsight of those preoccupied with it.

Hare concludes the play making Tories win the election. George, losing the election, decides to leave his position, even proposes -ironically- to join Tory Party. The leader of Tory Party, Kendrick's comment that "The nightmare of Labour government has now receded" (108) indicates the continuity of the existing system. And George's expression that "Being told everything I love and value no longer meets the needs of the day" (109) is a sign of disappointment. Ending the play in this way should be seen as the critical attitude of the writer towards the very nature of politics as a field of competition which is not much different in other countries from the one in England.

Consequently, in *The Absence of War*, Hare openly puts forward his expectations from politicians. His evaluation of himself clarifies his stance to playwrights as well. "Artists write according to what they are moved to do, not

what they're told to do, and not for sociological need" (Marmion 2005: 36). He firmly states that politics is a profession in which nothing is without a positive and negative result. The significant point to note about the message of the play suggests that there is an inevitable need to establish mutual trust on which everything for a hopeful future can be based. Otherwise, people will always find enemies within their own countries as well as finding them outside their borders, and a never-ending war will be kept on in the world. This arresting reality is openly stated in *The Absence of War*. Hare's resentment against politics and politicians must be evaluated as the definition of the outcome of the displeasing experience he has personally witnessed: "We have seen. We have known. And we have not changed" (Chambers and Prior 1987: 18). This shows that Hare, feeling the need to take place in the political arena as a playwright, tries to find out "the answers to political questions" (Hare 1986: 115) which are raised in his country but which also have global relevance. And, unfortunately, he sees that wars never end, they only gain new and distinct characteristics in periods when people think that the world is in peace.

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