

Violence in Peter Weiss's Play *Marat /Sade*

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Abstract:

Peter Weiss was born in Germany. When Hitler came to power, his family emigrated to Sweden in 1939. Weiss hated war which deprived him of his country, friends and relatives. As a committed writer, he discussed social and political situations. He wrote *Marat/ Sade* in 1964. The play takes place in a lunatic asylum in 1808. In the play Marquis de Sade hates the corrupt bourgeois society he belongs to. He detects the violence hidden under the slogans of the French Revolution. It is a revolution that is responsible for irrational and sadistic aspects of life. Weiss was frustrated by that kind of cruelty. According to him violence prevailed when art retreated. He believed that the artist must have the freedom of thought to change and improve his society.

Violence in Peter Weiss's Play *Marat /Sade*

Peter Weiss was an avant-garde dramatist. He was born in Germany. When Hitler came to power, the family emigrated to London, Czechoslovakia, then they settled in Sweden in 1939. Weiss expressed his hatred of war: "

I was always very frightened as
a child, always afraid of power
and soldiers and force.¹

Weiss lost his old friends and relations:

I left Germany as a school boy in '34, and
later all my friends went to war as warriors, and
I don't know what happened to the rest of them²

As a responsible playwright, Weiss was aware of the chaos and the disappointments of the world. As he believed that commitment was superior to detachment, he tried to discuss present social and political situations. Weiss's sense to alienation forced him to feel that he belonged to the whole world. Writing about personal problems was not enough:

So for me it is very difficult to imagine to write only about a small, private sphere and I find the most stimulating dramatic ideas in the conflicts which are going on just now in the whole world.³

In 1966 Weiss was supposed to be one of the judges at a mock-trial that Bertrand Russell meant to stage, the trial of President Johnson for war crimes in Vietnam.

In 1964, Weiss wrote his play, *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean- Paul Marat as performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charaenton of the Marquis de Sade*⁴ The action is set in a lunatic asylum on 13 July 1808. The play deals with betrayal of the French Revolution and its aftermath.

Weiss imagines a meeting taking place between the individualist Marquis de Sade who defends Marat, one of the leaders of the French Revolutions who has cruel tendencies. He defends commitment and actions.

The play is written and directed by Sade who is interned in the asylum. He hates the corrupt Pre-revolutionary establishment, the corrupt empire and the bourgeois society he belongs to. As he explores himself, Sade discovers pleasure in pain, cruelty and destruction. He is fascinated by the chaotic violence hidden under the slogans and banners of the French Revolution. Then he finds out the real motives of persecutors. He sees the savage, irrational nature of cruelty and violence unleashed by the sadism of the Revolution. So he denounces it as he foresees the corruption of power and becomes hostile to those in authority.

Why all these calls to the nation

It's too late Marat

Forget your call

It contains only lies⁵

Weiss expresses through Sade, his disillusionment with the Communist Revolution.

Sade realizes that France is ruled by people who transmute their sadistic destructive tendencies into repressive activity against others leading to their violent deaths. Geoffrey Gorer says that Sade's ideas :

Explain the horrible fact that whenever men get unstrained power over their fellows, whether in revolution or counter-revolution,... they will practice _____ on their victims the most revolting tortures.⁶

As he believes that frustration is the essence of the human condition, Sade turns to ruthless individualism. He does not believe in any possible improvement of society. " Witnessing scenes of plunder, scale and savagery, he was racked with nausea".⁷

The uncompromising Sade undermines revolutionary hopes as he believes that individual liberation is the only way for salvation. The social revolutionary Jacobin leader Marat believes that ideas are not enough to pull down walls. He justifies the use of cruelty and violence as being inevitable for social change.

The debate between Sade and Marat provokes contemporary dilemma. Weiss believes in the social role of the artist who must have the freedom and the ability to change and improve society with his writing. According to Weiss, the chaotic atmosphere of his creation characterizes the art under repression. When art retreats, violence and anarchy prevail as he comments:

We have seen so many revolutionary countries where the results of revolution didn't really appeal to the original meaning and goal of revolution. Goals such as freedom of thought, the freedom of art have not been achieved in many countries in the degree in which it was planned from the original revolutionary view. This is the point Sade makes very clear in the play, that he doesn't believe in revolution as long as it does not free the individual at the same time. Revolution is his whole being and art must free itself too.⁸

Marat is a victim of self deception as his hopes are illusory. He detects the expansion of imperialism, the growth of technological military institutions leading to exploitation and oppression. So he is considered the enemy of the army, the court and the clergy. He becomes a scapegoat.

The inmates of the asylum performed the play representing revolution against need and hunger. They complain that the revolution

does not help them. It just robs the houses, confiscates lands and imprisons men.

The madmen are symbols of the vast majority of beings on this earth not powerful enough to win a lasting victory, not intelligent enough to choose themselves efficiently into the future. They are trapped by the circumstances of their lives, they are buffeted from one side to the other without understanding themselves or the forces that determine them.⁹

They appeal to Marat who is in isolation. He suffers rapid decline from an idealist to a mad man:

Why is everything so confused now

Everything I wrote or spoke

Was considered and true

Each argument was sound

And now

Doubt

Why does everything sound false¹⁰

He has to stay in his bath for long hours to relieve himself of the painful dermatological symptoms that result from his solitary confinement in a dark room. He is stabbed by the melancholic Girondin Charlott Corday who considers herself saint with a mission to accomplish, to save France. Marat's murder is an association of social violence with erotic perversion.

Violence provokes counter-violence and revolution is destroyed by its own excess. Geoffrey Corer admires Weiss's contemplation of the violence and barbarism of the world as he says: "No European writer has penetrated more deeply into the destructive motives of those who seek or hold power."¹⁰

Weiss works on three different levels of time with a multitude of locations and events. The technique of the play within the play presents the audience with a stage audience who participate in Sade's play about the murder of Marat as they get excited and hysterical. The director of the

asylum Colmier watches the play as audience. He also interferes with actors, with his patients and with his bourgeois society. The play – within - the play involves numerous flashbacks, repetitions, interventions, ritualized delirium, dumb show, pantomime, songs and a dance of death. Sighs are heard and a scaffold is seen.

Weiss borrows his theatrical methods from many forms of the conventions of the Epic Theatre, the Theatre of Cruelty and the Theatre of the Absurd as he himself affirms:

Well, Brecht of course greatly impressed me. Not only his plays but even his theories about dramatics, and even of course the theories by Artaud whom I admired very much... Beckett and Ionesco - everything which is in Modern Dramatics influences and one is related to it in a way.¹¹

Weiss considers *Marat /Sade* with its physical violence, intellectual ideas and overwhelming impact as a revolutionary cleansing of society. Ronald Hayman describes the play:

... starting with its title, everything about this play is designed to crack -the spectator on the jaw, then douse him with ice-cold water, then force him to assess intelligently what has happened to him ... then bring him back to his senses again.¹²

The play conveys the following message: Revolutions lead to dehumanized murders.

NOTES:

1. Walter Wager, ed., *The Playwrights Speak*, (London: Longmans, Green and Co.LTD, 1969), P.151.
2. Ibid.,p160.
3. Ibid.,p164
4. The play will be referred to as *Marat /Sade*
5. Peter Weiss, *Marat/Sade* , (London: Marion Boyars, 2001), p. 89.
6. Patrick Roberts, *The Psychology of Tragic Drama*,(London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1975), p.139.
7. Sybil Wuletich, (The Depraved Angel of *Marat Sade*, Contemporary Literature, Vol.9, No.1 (Winter) 1968. P 98.
8. Wager, *The Playwrights Speak*.pp 157-158.
9. William I.Oliver, *Marat /Sade* in Santiago, Educational Theatre Journal, Vol 19, No.4 (Dec., 1964), p 495.
10. Weiss, *Marat /Sade* , p98.
11. Roberts, *Psychology of Tragic Drama*, p139
12. Ronald Hayman, *Theatre and Anti-Theatre: New Movements Since Beckett*, (New York: Oxford University Press 1978), p.204.

العنف في مسرحية بيتر فايس (مارات ساد)

أ.د. صباح عطا الله

جامعة بغداد/ كلية التربية ابن رشد للعلوم الإنسانية

ولد بيتر فايس في المانيا. عند وصول هتلر الى السلطة هاجرت عائلته الى السويد عام ١٩٣٩. كان فايس يكره الحرب التي حرمته من بلده، اصدقائه واقاربه. ناقش فايس الاوضاع الاجتماعية والسياسية ككاتب ملتزم. كتب مسرحية (مارات ساد) عام ١٩٦٤. تقع احداث المسرحية في مصحة عقلية عام ١٨٠٨. يكره الماركيز دي ساد في المسرحية المجتمع البرجوازي الفاسد الذي ينتمي اليه ويكشف العنف المختفي تحت شعارات الثورة الفرنسية. انها ثورة مسؤولة عن الالوجه اللاعقلانية والسادية للحياة. كان فايس محبطاً بسبب هذا النوع من القسوة. بالنسبة اليه تراجع الادب ادى الى ظهور العنف. اعتقد فايس بضرورة حصول الادييب على حرية الفكر لكي يغير ويحسن مجتمعه.