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## The Man and the Land: Unknown Fatherland and its Trauma, in Osborne's *Luther*

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In the present paper, we would go for another study of one history play by John Osborne –*Luther*. We would see how far it is truthful to ‘history’, a particular cult of Metanarrative, looking at the history “from below”. The history plays have a long tradition, from *Henry V* to *Left-Handed Liberty* and so on. Osborne has at least three plays to his credit that deal with materials of past; with people who are associated with a world of faith, morality, bigger truths, transcending realities: *A Subject of Scandal and Concern* (1960), followed by *Luther* (1961) and the later *A Patriot for Me* (1965). The present discussion would explore *Luther* (entered Royal Court, July 1961) as a study of an individual, problematizing his positional ‘truth’, revealing his character as an awe-struck man, who has failed to revive his paternal relations, lost in the labyrinth of the *unheimliche*.

Freud, in his *Totem and Taboo* (1913), discusses how the ‘primal horde’ is influential in a modern, singular individual’s crisis. According to Freud, the ancient world was divided into several patriarchal clans. The chief of the clan is the head of all the women also. Other men of the clan, who were virtually his sons, became furious for this and ultimately killed the clan-leader, establishing incestuous relations with the women:

Cannibal savages as they were, it goes without saying that they devoured their victim as well as killing him. The violent primal father had doubtless been the feared and envied model of each of the company of brothers: and in the act of devouring him they accomplished their identification with him, and each one of them acquired a portion of his strength. The totem meal, which is perhaps mankind’s earliest festival, would thus be a repetition and a commemoration of this memorable and criminal deed, which was the beginning of so many things...(qtd. In Coupe,129)

Osborne’s *Luther* is a play that comments on the modern individual’s crisis, by looking a little back! Written in 1961, *Luther* is the story of an individual going through intense physical and mental calamity, a large part of which is associated with his relationship with his father. A vehemently anti-establishment figure, Luther, the ‘mutineer’, easily became an “inexorable Osborne choice” (26) as Ferrar would put it. The sense of evoking the ‘uncanny’, as we have discussed in two plays in the first chapter, is presented more coarsely in this present play. The context of the sense of unfamiliarity here is centered on the notion of ‘killing’ the father! Be it however figurative. The issue well-fits the collapsing state of the Empire where the men are capable of impotent anger only. ‘Father’, the word in this play does not merely stand as a

person, a man who is the socially sanctioned guardian of the child, but hints at the *heimliche*, the Metanarrative existence, the negation of which is the core cause of all the anxiety and neurosis. It's a breaking down of the paternal grand narrative that destabilizes Jimmy Porter, Archie, Redl; the posterity is in a distressfully deserted condition, as a consequence. But the story goes farther. At first we may discuss the story, a little.

*Luther* opens with the protagonist entering the Convent of the Augustinian Order of Eremites at Erfurt in 1516; the plot goes on to explore the shaky Luther who is ever-worried about his behaviour. In the very first act, his stressed relationship with his father is laid bare. Luther is seen to be ready for his first Mass, and his father, though reluctant at the best about his intellectually superior son's proposed vocation, generously donates in favour of the church. The second act presents the "ecclesiastical huckster" (as said by Osborne himself), Johann Tetzel, who has got the famous 'deal': money in exchange for sin! Now, the central conflict of the play comes to fore; in the next scene we see Luther giving a speech against any kind of 'indulgences' confronting Tetzel. He denounces the Pope breaking completely from the revered order of Roman Catholicism. Up to this we see a somewhat linear development in Luther's character; but after this, in the third act, Luther slowly takes up the face of authority. He condemns the peasant revolt which also is a product of the same resistance that Luther was trying to build; but he did never support them. In the last scene we see a 'Domestic' Luther calmly cradling his baby.

Now, *ab initio*, *Luther* is a one-man show. Luther is shown as an individual who has been confined within his own brooding mental anguish regarding himself:

I was fighting a bear in a garden without flowers, leading into a desert. His claws kept making my arms bleed as I tried to open a gate which would take me out. But the gate was no gate at all. It was simply an open frame, and I could have walked through it...(I.1,19)

Luther is less shown as a prime rebel and more as a neurotic which is evident from his versions at different points of time in course of the play including the above one. Constipation, epilepsy, sweat characterize this hero, who is otherwise 'known' as the primal 'Pater-figure' in history. It is an 'unknown' Martin Luther who not only is frightened but frightening too. The figurative, almost dreamy languid thought expressed in the above passage exemplify the intense melancholy of an individual who is no public figure but a single individual whose fate is to suffer: "I am alone. I am alone, and against myself." (*Luther*, 20) and it is here that Luther permeates through the Osborne-temperament. He is holding the filial question up in front of a barren age which first kills its grand-narrative, to give it the status of a rebel/ a superficially glamorous look later; to 'Totemise' it/him, to allegorize, and thus to distance it and make it extraterrestrial. Osborne adapts a very radical stage direction in this context that is reminiscent of Sean O' Casey's anti-clerical attitude to show his scorn and disgust for an unconscious age; an age that is responsible for slaughtering its own soul, divorcing itself from the existential truth, may be forever. In the beginning of the second act, he gives a significant note:

After the intense private interior of Act One, with its outer darkness and rich, personal objects, the physical effect from now on should be more intricate, general, less personal; sweeping,

concerned with men in time rather than particular man in the unconscious; caricature not portraiture, like the popular woodcuts of the period... (*Luther*,56)

Thus it's a pastiche, rather than a valorized version of the long-passed 'paternal' assurance. The figure of a reformer is traditionally associated with the assurance of sanity, a security that leads to a collective faith, which is the familiar one. But Osborne is trying to deal with it in a totally different manner; he unravels the countenance of seriousness, the familiar grave shade and reveals the ironic comicality that strips Luther of all his grandeur, all his wisdom, all his guarantee; thus he presents an individual that just forms a part of the plural mini-narratives in a desolate landscape, that debars the notion of the organic collectivity. Inspired by Erikson's psychobiography, *Young Man Luther*, which was published two years earlier in 1959, Osborne depicts the man penning *Ninety-Five Theses* in his feet of clay. The sense of assertion is metamorphosed into that of betrayal.

The doubtful ambience is much like the "Dream Plays" of Strindberg; in his famous preface to *A Dream Play*, Strindberg presented, "the disconnected but apparently logical form of a dream", (Styan, 43) creating that trance within which "time and space do not exist" (Stylan, 43) and in which "everything is possible and probable"(Stylan, 43). Osborne himself has adopted from Strindberg (*The Father*). We will deal with this time theme, good and bad of it; but before that let us have a look on the filial myth. In *Luther*, the filial myth is recurring and is many-fold: the collective stature of the 'Hero' is first trimmed down to that of a mere 'protagonist'; secondly, Luther, instead of himself being the grand narrative, (as his pose has been to posterity, in the 'written' history), is shown as an agonized son, searching for the Metanarrative in a pluralistic soulless, freezing world of the carnivalesque. This story is made complex with the intrusion of the myth of Christ as the eternal 'Lamb', facing all the ordeals in this world, which is lost to man! A separated child in a violent without – this is, as it could be said, the crux of the tale. The age-old conception of relating to the 'eternal' forsaken child, namely Jesus Christ –which gives a sense of secured position, or rather a position to be regained in future, a thought prevalent in an Eliot or a Yeats –is ravaged with this Protestant Reformer's confused fanaticism, his quarrel with his father and his almost Osbornian (!) angst against his mother:

You disappointed me too, ... But I loved you the best. It was always you I wanted... my mother disappointed me the most, and I loved her less, much less. She made a gap which no one else could have filled, but all she could do was make it bigger, bigger and more unbearable. (Stylan, 52)

Not only this, but this scholar, a Master of Arts, a descent individual, having the religious aura at his back thus substantiated his point retelling past in the following coarsely manner: "She beat me once for stealing a nut, your wife." ((Stylan, 52)

The father's stature in Osborne's works comes with a sense of negative authority, an imposition that can be traced in Lacan's notion of *le nom du père* (the name of the father) and *le non du père* (the 'no' or the negation related to the positional superiority of the father), in his seminar *The Psychoses* (1955–1956) which is much influenced by Freud's mythical father in his

*Totem and Taboo* (which is pointed out at the beginning of this chapter); where the ‘no’ and ‘name’ are juxtaposed as well as mingled, as Lacan shows it. In the present play, in the first place the negativity is associated with Hans, Luther’s father, who is in a partial way the proposed Doppelgänger, the evil melancholy in Luther. A ‘sans’ to ‘sons’: Hans’ attitude to his own son is that bitter, when they feud regarding Luther’s inclusion in the monastery while Luther asks why Hans allowed him to enter the Monastery:

HANS: What, to your monkery, you mean?

MARTIN: Yes. You could have refused, but why didn’t you?

HANS: Well, when your two brothers died with the plague

...

MARTIN: You gave me up for dead, didn’t you?” (Luther, 54)

So, the father left the son for the dead! It is the confused conviction of the modern man; this is quite relevant in the context of the tormented Osborne generation: it is the negation of the father that, to him, left them in a bizarre locale, completely clueless with a bleak feeling of being abandoned; this invites an interesting and intriguing comparison and contrast with Blake’s handling of the same problem of the child’s abandonment by its father; but what about the mother, with whom the baby is to be in a literally physical dyad? The mother as in almost all Osborne-creations is unbearable to her sons; she is a person who gives the boy a sense of physical anguish first which turned into a mental one getting obsessed with sin.

The real ‘mother’ with the general known notions of care and protection is conspicuous by her absence in all Osborne plays; this figure of a mother can be associated with that of the motherland which is equally unbearable to them; and thus the ‘centre’ in its every respect has been unable to hold the ‘things’; and that is how the sense of uncanny that it begot, gave birth to a fragmented reality, a plural one, where the children are divided into many parts running and rushing from one relation to the other, from one institution to another in search of solace. In his another adaptation *Hedda Gabler* which has a TV production too, what Osborne does is a crucial breakdown of the grand narrative of the familiar concept of a woman, a mother. What Geoffrey Cannon observes in the *Sunday Times* (1 March, 1981) would suffice: “she appears a bitch, and Hedda is not merely a bitch. The Osborne version ... has turned Ibsen’s tragedy into a study in cynicism” (Hinchliff, 117). As a whole, the sense of uncanny is evoked in each and every notion of relationships, in the vey inkling of a pseudo-modern state. Again, in *Luther*, he is associating the mother with Patriarchy, which system, in a Symbolic world, all signification leads to. After that nut-stealing episode, as a consequence thereof, both his parents as a total unit of negation became (to him) associated with the Lacanian ‘paternal metaphor’ [Seminar *La relation d’objet* (1956–1957)]: “Always before, when I was beaten for something, the pain seemed outside of me in some way...But, on that day, for the first time, the pain belonged to me and no one else, it went no further than my body...” (*Luther*, 53)

What Luther suffers from is a tremendous trauma, a fear of uncertainty, of sin, of abysmal fall, as nobody is there to stand by him, no physical-spiritual assurance but a crude contradictory, cold

world. This issue of a psychological vis-à-vis spiritual alienation with the Father/ known reasonable grand narrative could be seen in Kafka's life also: a master of the allegorical anecdotes of man pitted against pitiless condition, Franz Kafka (1883-1924), much before Osborne located the pattern of irremediable distress in his works. Specific biographical information of Kafka is worth mentioning here:

His tortured relationship with his father appears to have been a dominating influence in his work... His father –authoritarian, self-confident, bullying, philistine. Kafka –timid, sensitive and literary. 'In front of you,' Kafka wrote, 'I lost my self-confidence, and exchanged it for an infinite sense of guilt' (qtd. in Coupe, 133)

Luther's guilt-laden psyche has got innumerable pains engraved thereon –the sense of separation, the notion of incapability to cling on to, and finally the brooding gloom of an impending broken Metanarrative that he, and as if only he, has sensed excruciatingly. The creeping skepticism regarding the validity of the religious texts, in an uncouth manner, reveals the utter superficiality of the whole affair that they are in: Luther's constipation is symbolic of the barrenness; it is a figurative constipation that a modern man suffers from; a difficulty to produce, to get involved in any productive/purgative purpose, leading to melancholic behavior. Luther's father fixation is double folded: first comes his biological father with whom he could never come to terms with; and secondly, the spiritual father, the Almighty, attending whom is a Herculean task for the protagonist for his own peculiar sense of debasement. It is a failure to be reunited with the proposed sacred existence, the known Metanarrative of the Father, the known salvation that plays the pivotal role behind the piercing disquiet.

The father-son relationship is radical in many of Osborne's plays. The strain is shown in its extreme forms in some other works too: the first of Osborne's two playlets, *The Blood of the Bambergs*, shows a photographer who turns out to be the natural son, deserted by the father, of the royal house he went to shoot. Loathing is the primary device which Osborne uses to show his reactions to these situations; the protagonists in a fretfulness, produced by the sense of *unheimliche* betray signs of radical hatred in an irrational cosmos: a mockery of the cause célèbre, Osborne's *A Bond Honoured*, an adaptation of *La Fianza Satisfecha* by Lope de Vega describes the foul Leonido who apparently is a foil to the meek and timid Luther but parallels him in the fact of being distanced from the father, the God. One can understand the almost Artaudian stun that the scene can produce, just like Bond's plays.

The motif of rebellion, again another grand narrative, is treated and seen in its most aberrational way in both the plays. The apparently static scenes with verbal arguments of *Luther* refer to the sense of gross violence stirring underneath. The stage direction of *A Bond Honoured* holds this grossness up more vehemently, with its actors behaving like animals as Osborne was willing to have it in their acting: "extremely violent, pent up, toppling on and over the edge of animal howling and primitive rage. At the same time it should have an easy modern naturalness, even in the most extravagant or absurd moments. It requires actors like athletes who behave like conversationalists" (Banham, 76). The 'primitivity' of the dark old age, as if it were, is rejoining the present age of machines. The dark shadow hovers around the psyche of the modern protagonist who laments the loss of the collective togetherness. Luther's Germany, in spite of

having chronologically freed itself from the dark fetters of the Middle Ages, the imposing religion, soul-crushing societal bonds, still inhabit the dark shadow of the past, doubly walking with 'time present'(!), just like the England of Redl or Porter, that could never get out of the Edwardian shadow to begin afresh. As a result, hostility in 'intellectual' garb sets the keynote of *Luther*. The ghost of past harks back with a brooding sense of downheartedness. The subtle references to Luther's obtuse physical factors are to be noted carefully; he, as a scholar, has recurrently staggered on with his paranoiac tendencies, becoming a laughing stock for his fraternity. Brother Weinand reprimands him, in the following way: "You must know what you're doing. Some of the brothers laugh quite openly at you, you and your over-stimulated conscience. Which is wrong of them, I know, but you must be able to see why" (Luther, I.2, 28) Luther is shocked and shuddered at every moment thinking of nothing but the Almighty's Wrath. The negation of the Doppelgänger enters into the soul that is cramped within a 'wormy' body. It is the 'within', Osborne is bothered with; he clearly exclaims that while answering the question, why he gave up the project of rewriting *Coriolanus* in an African setting. He said, while giving an interview to the *Observer* (30<sup>th</sup> June, 1968) that he was confused as to what should he do: whether it would be advisable for him, to rewrite a play concerning the public affairs, a play which is described by Bernard Shaw as the finest comedy by Shakespeare, or to indulge in the unbearable inner crisis, "when all my instincts were focusing down on interior things and people's inner self," (Hinchliff, 117-18). Luther's agony lies in the 'inner self' of the reformer, within the public superego. His apprehension foreshadows the baggage-full Jimmy who is unable to see any good, brave cause, in the midst of a world bereft of any positivity, an 'unhomely' one.

Osborne not only portrays such characters as, Luther, Jimmy or Archie craving for the known concept of a grand narrative, but at the same time, and paradoxically enough, he himself strips them of all the grandness, as in case of Hedda (among the women) or Luther (among male characters). Luther is characterized by his alienated self, estranged from his father first and then from the spiritual assurance of the Heavenly vicar. How strange is the event! The boy is at a loss seeing his own father; physically disturbed with his bowl, mocked at by his friends for "over-stimulated conscience", he seems to be oblivious. But the father is stern and only there to increase the crisis, instead of solving or attempting to soothe him. A man of conscience, Luther is greatly stirred by the vicious side of the 'holy' profession, he is in; engaged and involved in the socio-political issues of his time Luther is hurt enough in the manner his father talked to him, about the religion in which he desperately is trying to find a forte. But as it seems, this is the reality which he has to come to terms with.

Osborne has a huge corpus of adaptations behind him. Racine's version of *Euripides*, Pound's *Homage to Sextus Propertius* re-read the past; and at the same time, newer contemplations on the preceding age's works enriched them; the posterior and the anterior mixed and mingled in order to develop that Bakhtinian dialogism, the essential postmodern plurality. When Osborne adapts figures from classical antiquity, what he does, is to make a spoof out of it suiting his 'constipational' age that is not capable of the sublimity, that the texts feature. This proclamation echoes another contemporary's discourse whose famous *Seminars* were creating tumult in the same flatulent 50s and 60s: Jacques Lacan. Drawing heavily upon the Platonic conception of love and transference, as something missing, yet still leaving a faint memory, probably somewhere in the "collective unconscious" of this fallen age of ours, Lacan's analyses of both *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* echo that of Osborne's.

*Luther* is a play that, in its several facets point through the notion of negation, at the negation of the knowiness associated with the affinity, affection and passion which the age severely lacks. Straightening out the individual Luther out of the poker face of the staunch critic of the Church, rival of the Pope, Osborne makes visible the trembling man dreaming of the unknown dangers:

...crucified, dead and buried; He descended into Hell; the third day He rose from the dead, He ascended into Heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. And every sunrise sings a song for death. (*Luther*, 31)

Christianity in its most negative façade is presented only to emphasize its inability to get hold of the transcending experience. Modern, concocted interpretations of the Holy Scriptures bring to mind only the sickly suggestions of doom, damnation, death and disaster. This theme again can be compared with that of *A Bond Honoured*. In his review in *Plays and Players* (August 1966) Martin Esslin pointed out how Osborne's existentialist protagonist has been 'portered' with the baggage of martyrdom ultimately surrendering to the Moors. Most importantly, Osborne did not radically change the original version, but only curtailed portions of Vega's piece that focus on the religious fervor and repentance for one's deed leading to a sublime reunion with the Heavenly Father. In the original version Leonido attempts to fasten Christ the Shepherd, who vanishes to appear as Christ the Redeemer transmuting Leonido into a repenting man. But Osborne highlights only the incestuous affairs, the abuses that Leonido hurls upon others, almost without any redemptive intimation. This essentially reveals the futility of attaining the transcendental signified that breaks the concept of any organic perception of purity. Thus Luther can only see the negative side of the things; the loutish reality unleashes its claws on him, what impels him to say: "It's this, just this. All I can feel, all I can feel is God's hatred" (*Luther*, 30).

In the midst of staid theological discussion Luther brings in the issue of his constipation. One serious voice contemplates God, and the other, of the man, its most ignoble aspects. The plurality of the individual thus comes out. Now, historian Gordon Rupp who edited the volume of Martin Luther in the *Documents of Modern History* opined that this issue of constipation is ambiguous: for, according to him the historical fact is that, before the year 1521, which in the play occurs in Act-III, scene-1, Luther did not have this kind of physical complication. This fidgety nature of the calm monk Luther, his inability to concentrate on the discussion and his distraction, all are symbolically represented. All forewarn the fact of the grim comicality of an individual who is carrying the baggage of the sense of the uncanny castration, of being left-out, of unimpregnation, of loss and mortality. What Jeffrey Carnes opines in his discussion of Plato's *Symposium* and Lacan's 'habitual' inclination towards this text is worth quoting:

The impulse toward sex has its origin in the recognition of castration –of the loss (or impossibility) of fullness. Zeus, the phallic father, punishes and says 'no' yet also gives us sex (while hiding his own desire). Indeed, this *coupure* or cut gives rise to the individual subject himself, who is a *symbolon* –a tally, a half of his former self, but also a *symbolon* in the sense of a signifier. This



individuation, not freely chosen, is the source of sexual desire, a mark of our mortality and imperfection... (qtd. In Miller, 209)

The above myth hints at the fact of 'individuation' as something unwilling, a fact that the subject will try to cross and overcome; his very sense of 'being' is allied to the concept of the *coupure*, the cut; and he finds himself in an anarchic world, without consolation or support; he would definitely attempt to figure out a cosmos out of the chaos. The sense of the authoritative negation associated with the name of the father is recurring; again, in spite of penalizing the child, the father also confers on him the sex but with a sense of incompleteness.

Now the man who is able to shake the order realizing the danger looming large on humanity, "There will come frontiers, frontiers of all kinds –between men – and there'll be no end to them" (Hinchliff, 54), metamorphosed thus: "Christ! Hear me! My words pour from Your Body! They deserved their death, these swarming peasants! They kicked against authority, they plundered and bargained and all in Your name! Christ, believe me!" (*Luther*, 110) The person who earlier proclaimed to be 'holy' and good, who can bring down violence only on himself, speaks thus. It was a personal quest, as it seems, which in course of time reveals the 'unworthy' Luther, the lost lamb in an unknown forest at night (!): "I lost the body of a child, a child's body, the eyes of a child..." (*Luther*, 24)

Within Luther what sprouted is the Symbolic order of patriarchy. And it is apparent, that he is unable to push through the people who first felt instigated by him. Now he speaks the language of the State; he talks about conquering: "The world was conquered by the Word, the Church is maintained by the Word –" (*Luther*, 109). It is the Church which is his place and he has created his own space out of it. He has a strong sense of belonging; and for him the 'thing' to 'cling on to' is the Church. Luther's 'hamartenein' is to take the Church as the ultimate Metanarrative. The church is non-answerable, for even he does not get a satisfactory answer from the authority, for his question, where he has erred; Luther's story is told between two constricted smooth states of his life –he begins with the role of a serene monk and ends with the role of the decent father.

*Luther* reveals the generational angst, in favour of the porter-generation, who suffers from a severe 'lack', a 'lessness' an 'incompletion'. The play shows two fathers, first Hans, secondly, and very briefly, at the fag end, Luther. The issue of father as the Metanarrative is crucial to the discussion. The full generation of Osborne suffers from the non-protectiveness of the father; the fathers are shown as the dying Gods, either helpless making the sons unaided or oppressive, as the *coupure*. If Hans is a Doppelganger, a double-walker who makes Luther both anxious and insecure, then Luther himself is no less a Doppelganger who more prominently walks with two supplementary selves: carrying his father's shadow in a different way he infringes in the garb of the Reformer, satisfying his own superego, that of the calm saint, leaving the revolutionary one. Thus he deserted his 'sons', the revolutionaries, in a state of utter incompleteness. It is a story of the races of Doppelgangers. The "once upon a time" is lost long ago. As the child, the modern man tries to find it first in the impotent and hence restrictive father, then in the society and religion. As he sees the breakdown of the grand narratives, one after the other, the crumbling of all that he dreamt of, he gradually evolves into one of them like the hero of Ionesco's 'Rhinoceros'. Now he becomes another rhinoceros, another Doppelganger shadowing his posterity.

Self-reference is the most important tool used by Osborne in the play: the “words” coincide with the “deeds” in its literal sense. The Knight –as symbolically it is indicated –is the transformed Luther; we could at least hopefully assume that he has been defeated for the moment, but not forever. The strong Luther, the leader of the ground-breaking peasants, foiling the effeminate clergy, cannot rest cradling his baby for long; may the faces change but the show must and will go on. In the ending of the play that hint is there at the junior Luther: the next generation of Osborne, or the next to next would be able to fill up the gap and reach that time, which abolishes the mechanical chronology, with all indemnity and certainty, to begin the old story afresh.

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