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Enactment of *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, in John Osborne's Play, *The Entertainer*

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Abstract:

The early 20th century, in Europe witnessed varied forms of mass communication and the entertainment industry has evolved as a new tactic to generate capital for capitalists. Adorno and Horkheimer were among few who showed concern on commodification of culture in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, published in 1944 by Frankfurt School. The work is undoubtedly the most influential publication of the School, written during the Second World War. John Osborne, a British playwright belongs to the same period and acknowledges, executing social criticism through his plays. Where Osborne introduces his play, *The Entertainer*, "The music hall is dying, and, with it, a significant part of England. Some of the heart of England has gone; something has gone; something that once belonged to everyone, for this was truly a folk art (NOTE), The theorists write in preface of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, "In keeping with its theme our book demonstrates tendencies which turn cultural progress into opposite" (xiii). The implication and reflection of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* are explicitly visible in Osborne's play, *The Entertainer*. This paper aims to highlight the enactment of critical theory of Max and Adorno through Osborne's Play.

Keywords: commodification, Frankfurt school theory, Kitchen Sink drama, Music hall, industrial revolution.

The Entertainer is a three act Play by John Osborne, performed on 10 April 1957 at Royal Court theatre, London. It is the theatre, known for its commitment to new and nontraditional drama and inclusion of new star like Laurence Olivier. Olivier played the famous role of the entertainer on stage, directed by Tony Richardson. "It is both family tragedy and allegory for a declining post-war England" ("Amazon Reviews"). The combination of Osborne's notoriety and Olivier's fame proved irresistible. On 10 April 1957, the premiere of play was on and it was reported in 1957 in the Evening Standard, to get "booked out for the entire season." It was immediately reported in the other Daily, Evening News, "biggest money-spinner for advance booking at the Music Hall size Palace Theatre for years for a non-musical play." In *The Scotsman* on 22 Nov. 1957, Osborne comments watching *The Entertainer* in the theater as a place, "Where during an evening, you can see part of England dying before your eyes. As a true master Osborne succeeded in demonstrating true emotions on the stage. A hopeless last entertainer of dying Music Hall expresses his views about Osborne that he "was people like

Archie who knew they were fighting a lost battle but had not given up" (JO 77). The play was about triumphant nationhood. British integrity had been violated and Suez crises symbolized the most acutely its breach with the past. The death of the Music Hall, once symbol of people's vitality, and the loss of British prestige abroad were still redeemable. The *Entertainer* is an elegiac play and Osborne was successful in presenting it on the stage.

The story of the play is set against the background of the dying music hall tradition, symbolic of Britain's post-war decline of its loss of its imperialism, power, cultural belief and identity. *The Entertainer* highlights the spirit of England that has been tattered because of the financial and moral breakdown during the period in England. The *Entertainer* is Archie Rice, a mediocre music hall artist upholding a dying tradition in an English seaside against a background of the 23'1956 Suez Crisis'. *The Entertainer* documents the Britain of 1950s as the country recovers from two World Wars and is faced with another incident that looks for a period as if it might lead to a third World War, Suez Crisis (1956). John Osborne's play broke away from the English tradition of playing middle-class drama in theatres with middle-class patrons. In the theatres, the patrons stay largely the same although the new media of television is changing all that with the televised drama at a different socio-economic group. "Kitchen sink" drama, led by playwrights like Pinter and Wesker and Osborne, is new. Osborne has used *The Entertainer* to emphasize on the social, political and cultural issues that have been taking place in Britain since 1945. In an article, *The Last laugh: Comedy as a political Touchstone in Britain from "The Entertainer" to "comedians,"* John Harrop writes:

As an institution the music hall has been dead some thirty years, but in that period it has become of interest to socialist, sociologists and some playwright as a symbol of the true working class heritage the new British society is seeking. In attempting to create an egalitarian social ethos free from bourgeois associations, there are those in Britain who look back at the music hall an example of a truly popular cultural form. ("The Last Laugh")

The play is based on declining of music hall in Britain which was once a popular form of entertainment. Music hall continued during the interwar period, but no longer as the single dominant form of popular entertainment in Britain. The reason was simple: "The improvement of cinema, the development of radio, and the cheapening of the gramophone damaged its popularity greatly. It now had to compete with Jazz, swing and Big Band dance music. Licensing restrictions also changed its character" ("Oxford Music"). The exemption of the theatres from this latter act prompted some critics to denounce this legislation as an attempt to deprive the working classes of their pleasures, as a form of social control, while sparing the supposedly more responsible upper classes who patronized the theatre. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer were among the critics who focus on new and changing tendencies of contemporary society. They together wrote *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), a work of philosophy and social criticism on modern society. Osborne seems to be so influenced with it that, *The Entertainer* has become the manifestation of the theory. Theorists criticize about the new amusements in modern

times: “[t]he flood of precise information and brand- new amusements make people smarter and more stupid at once” (*DOE*xvii). They further write:

The conspicuous unity of macrocosm and microcosm confronts human beings with a model of their culture: the false identity of universal and particular. All mass culture under monopoly is identical, and the contours of its skeleton, the conceptual armature fabricated by monopoly, are beginning to stand out. Those in charge no longer take much trouble to conceal the structure, the power of which increases the more bluntly its existence is admitted. Films and radio no longer need to themselves as art. The truth that they are nothing but business is used as an ideology to legitimize the trash they intentionally produce. They call themselves industries, and the published figures for their directors’ incomes quell any doubts about the social necessity of their finished products. (95)

The new age of industrial revolution led so many changes in England and one of the changes consequently attacks the territory of musical taste. Thus more professional forms of entertainment arose from traditional theatre in response to the rapid industrialization and urbanization of previously rural populations during the industrial revolution. Max and Adorno clearly disclose the filth of industrialization in the preface of their book- “Under the given circumstances the gifts of fortune themselves become elements of misfortune” (xviii). Osborne like a master playwright smartly enacted the defects of industrialization which were attributed by theorists, through the setting of the play where he showed, “The house where the Rice family live is one of those tall ugly monuments built by prosperous business man at the beginning of the century” (II). This house is built by Billy, once prosperous and famous at music hall business. Now it is called, ‘tall ugly monument’ like ‘dying music hall’. Billy is also a retired man of retired art of theatre. This is an impact of new age, derived essentially after industrial revolution. It is mainly the industrialization that turned this place ugly which, “holiday makers never see- or if they do, they decide to turn back to pleasure gardens” (II). The residence of Billy “is not residential, it is hardly industrial . . . full of dirty blank spaces, high black walls, a gas holder, tall chimney, a main road that shakes with dust and lorries. The shops are scattered at the corners of narrow streets” (II). This is the England, introduced by the playwright in the beginning of the play. This portrayal of the play’s setting indicates the line of theorists: [t]hat the hygienic factory and everything pertaining to it, Volkswagen* and the sports palace, are obtusely liquidating metaphysics does not matter in itself, but that these things are themselves becoming metaphysics, an ideological curtain,*within the social whole, behind which real doom is gathering, does matter (*DOE* xviii). These gloomy surroundings reflect the ruined condition of the people living in it as well as financial and emotional bankruptcy of the country as a whole. This is no more the age of the old man, Billy but a new age of industrial revolution. It led so many changes in England and one of the changes consequently attacks the territory of musical taste. Thus more professional forms of entertainment arose from traditional theatre in response to the rapid industrialization and urbanization of previously rural populations during the industrial revolution. Archie's father, Billy got out of the business in time, leaving Archie to struggle in a decaying milieu. Billy shows

his apprehensions towards the miserable condition of Jean and Archie. He talks about the prosperous and happy past of Archie as a child, "He was a smart little boy himself. Used to dress them in sailor suits then" (23). But he is struggling now against the present misery. He as well as all his children has become the culprits of the mean society. Showing his apprehensions against the present status of people, he expresses, "I feel sorry for you people. You don't know what it's really like. You haven't lived, most of you. You've never known what it was like, you're all miserable really. You don't know what life can be like" (23). The miserable state of mind of Billy is reasonably understood from the theory of *Dialectics*, "Today, however,*the past is being continued as destruction of the past. If, up to the nineteenth century, respectable education was a privilege paid for by the increased sufferings* of the uneducated, in the twentieth the hygienic factory is bought with the melting down of all cultural entities in the gigantic crucible.* (*DOE* xvii). Billy discussed about this new disturbing development to Jean in theatre of music hall:

BILLY. . . . These nudes. They're killing the business . . . it's dead already. Has been for years. It is all over finished, dead when I got out of it. I saw it coming . . . They don't want real people any more.

JEAN. No, I suppose they don't.

BILLY. They don't want human- beings. Not any more . . . Gets half his posing girls in there if you ask me. (. . .) Well, why should a family man take his wife and kids to see a lot of third- class sluts standing about in a nude? . . . They're all skin and bone. (18)

The theorists dismantled the fake glory of popular culture of present time which they clearly denounce by writing: "Animism had endowed things with souls; industrialism makes souls into things" (*DOE* 21). Osborne assimilates with the critical theory of Adorno and Horkheimer, and sculpted Archie, an artist of entertainment industry who is failing to continue clean entertainment. Unlike his successful father, he failed to find any success in Music Hall and the reason is explained by theorist that with the inherent danger of culture industry cultivates false psychological needs among audience and can only be met and satisfied by the products of capitalism. Unfortunately, Music hall does not suit the capitalist to deprive wealth from the masses and so this art is also retired like other old things including old Billy, but Archie is not ready to give up like his father who is still wearing the same clothes of his old times, "probably twenty-five years old- including his pointed patent leather shoes- but well pressed and smart" (13). Billy's cloths show the temperament of Edwardian culture. Men used to "wear tall, stiff collar cloths as do women's broad hats and full Gibson girl hairstyles" ("1900"). Billy's gleaming "watch chain", "fixed collar with a tie- pin beneath the tightly knotted black tie" all reflect his age. Strangely both father and son do not resign from the Edwardian era (13). Music Halls were also the significant medium of entertainment during Edwardian period. It had its grace in times. Billy speaks, "with a dignified Edwardian diction". It has got "- a kind of repudiation of both Oxford and Cockney" "Indeed, it is not an accent of class but of period. One

does not hear it often now” (13). There is an elegiac nostalgic note of protest in the play for the Edwardian era, in which music hall had flourished. Time has drastically changed and it is the emergence of new age. It is no more Edwardian and absolutely not of music halls. It is arrival of Jazz and Rock’n Roll, “Music. The latest, the loudest, the worst. A gauzed front-cloth. On it are painted enormous naked young ladies, waving brightly coloured fans, and kicking out gaily. Written across it in large letters are the words “ROCK’N ROLL NEW’D LOOK” (12). There is always an interference of society to make things popular and the failure of music hall in Britain can be understood from Adorno’s theory of ‘Dialectic of Enlightenment’ that says, “Everything has value only in so far as it can be exchanged, not in so far as it is something in itself” (127). Zuidervaart, Lambert further opines that:

[T]he culture industry involves a change in the commodity character of art, such that art’s commodity character is deliberately acknowledged and art “abjures its autonomy” (DE 127). With its emphasis on marketability, the culture industry dispenses entirely with the “purposelessness” that was central to art’s autonomy. Once marketability becomes a total demand, the internal economic structure of cultural commodities shifts. Instead of promising freedom from socially dictated uses, and thereby having a genuine use value that people can enjoy, products mediated by the culture industry have their use value *replaced* by exchange value. (“Theodor W. Adorno”)

In *The Concept of Enlightenment*, Max and Adorno object, succumbing human being mere ‘a commodity’, “Its brutality, which keeps the individual up to the mark, no more represents the true quality of people than value*represents that of commodities”(22). Authors further comment in the essay, *The cultural Industry*:

Nevertheless, the culture industry remains the entertainment business. Its control of consumers is mediated by entertainment, and its hold will not be broken by outright dictate but by the hostility inherent in the principle of entertainment to anything which is more than itself. Since the tendencies of the culture industry are turned into flesh and blood of the public by the social process as a whole, those tendencies are reinforced by the survival of the market in the industry. (DOE 108)

Billy is consistently instructing Archie, “These nudes. They’re killing the business . . . it’s dead already” (18). The society has become totally commercial where everything is designed according to market’s needs, as in Billy’s view, “[t]hey don’t want real people any more” (18). Market fancies business to attain profit and business does not require human but material to formulate material. To sustain in the market the human is reshaped into material. A material or machine does not have any emotions so can be used for any purpose to yield money. “Naked young ladies, waving brightly coloured fans” are not human anymore but have been transformed into machines” (12). Adorno and Horkheimer call it an obligatory phenomenon of cultural

industry which “does not sublimate: it suppresses, [b]y constantly exhibiting the object of desire, the breasts beneath the sweater, the naked torso of the sporting hero, it merely goads the unsublimated anticipation of pleasure, which through the habit of denial has long since been mutilated as masochism. . . . Works of art are ascetic and shameless; the culture industry is pornographic and prudish. It reduces love to romance” (III). Archie is a lost person in a state of alienation, “[an] armless man trying to reach out eventually grasps the comedy of his falling down every time” (JO, Harold ferrar 21). He feels his futility among the sexy ladies on the stage all the time to attract the attention of the audiences. He compares him with “these posing girls” get more value on stage than him. He understands the unwanted place of him on stage, “I wouldn't think I was sexy to look at me would you!” (32). It is a slow demise for Archie which this mean society has chosen for him. It is an “objective discharge of business primarily means that business is discharged according to *calculable* rules and without regard for persons is also the watchword of the market and, in general of all pursuit of naked economic interest” (“Alienation” 25). As a performer, Archie is in tremendous pressure while performing on the corrupted stage. He is helpless to bear the filthiness on stage. He moreover questions the poor condition of the present status of theatre and feels his worthlessness in it, “I don't know what we're coming to. Look at the songs they sing! . . . it's all rubbish, isn't it?” (32). Instead of honest realization, he is cheating himself behind the curtains. “fortune will not smile on all” (32). The concept of fate has been instigated in the minds of poor by capitalist to continue the unquestionable torture upon the workers like Archie, as “[t]he powerlessness of the workers is not merely a ruse of the rulers but the logical consequence of industrial society, into which the efforts to escape it have finally transformed the ancient concept of fate” (DOE 29). “In the demand for entertainment and relaxation, purpose has finally consumed the realm of the purposeless” (DOE 128). The entry of Archie in the play takes place in Scene Two on the stage. The set has a painted curtain of glamorized topless dancers, a desperate attempt to drag in an audience that wants to see nudity. Archie mostly performs in a spotlight in front of the stage curtain but occasionally we see to the rear the bare breasted figure of Britannia. He arrives on the stage with the song, written by him:

“Why should I care?

Why should I let touch me!

Why shouldn't I, sit down and try

To let it pass over me?

Why should they stare,

Why should I let it get me?

What's the use of despair,
If they call you a square?
You're a long time dead-
Like my pal Fred,
So why, oh why should I bother to care?
If they see that you're blue, they'll- look
down on you
So why should I bother to care? (Thank God I'm normal!) (24-25).

Archie Rice, the protagonist and the entertainer projects the heroic failure in the society, a sympathetic figure who was into the cold war against bourgeois society which Jimmy Porter so raged against in *Look Back in Anger* (1956). Archie tries to survive as a performer in music hall in an age when the music hall had been vanished. His survival is a compromise with a hope against, “. . . dead behind the eyes” (72). He, himself accepts and calls the people like him, “. . . dead beat and down and outs . . . drunk maniacs, crazy . . . bonkers . . . flaming . . . bunch . . .” (54). But he is worse according to Jean:

You're like everybody else, but you're worse- you think you can cover yourself by simply not bothering. (. . .) You think if you don't bother you can't be humiliated, so you just roar you life out in four- letter words and just hope that somehow the perks will turn up. (77)

Theorists blame the society where, “overwhelming mass of the population, are trained as additional guards of the system, so that they can be used today and tomorrow as material for its grand designs. They are kept alive as an army of unemployed.” (DOE 30) This victim is appealing to people to stop mocking on his failure. Archie explains the condition of people like him: “We're not really funny. We're too boring. Simply because we're not like anybody who ever lived. Archie's daughter, Jean frequently insults poor Archie. On that, his simple response is, “Go on insult me. I don't mind. . . . Whole lot of people make a whole lot of money out of that principle” (77). However it seems impossible for the audiences to feel poor man's misery as their motive is to get entertained in any cost. It is like an unattached relation of machine to machine where human does not share any feeling to other human. And Archie's effort to convince his audience seems futile:

All the time we're trying to draw someone's attention to our nasty, sordid, unlikely little problems. Like that poor, pathetic old thing there. Look at her. What has she got to do with people like you? People of intellect and sophistication. She's very drunk, and just now her muzzy, under-developed, untrained mind is racing because her blood is full of alcohol I can't afford to give her, and she's going to force us to listen to all sorts of dreary embarrassing things we've all heard a hundred time before. She's getting old, and she's worried about who's going to keep her when she can't work any longer. (54-55)

The war changed British society like any other event since the Industrial Revolution. After war, the relationship between the workers and employers became stressful. The market became competitive where industrial relations deteriorated because of higher commodity-prices relative to lower wages of workers. The new government approached with revolutionary and the greatest changes in Britain's long history. The Labour government struggled heroically to deal with the problems: "to improve standards of living, move to a 'mixed economy', close the trade gap, maintain its armed forces in sufficient strength to meet a new threat from Communist Russia, and to keep of its overseas bases" ("History of England"). Labour government also looked forward to the proposal of welfare society where there was a provision for milk for babies; juice and cod-liver to children in the country. Family allowances had already been introduced before the War's end. These welfare schemes have commonly been launched in other war-affected countries also, to facilitate the poor and helpless. The social critics and theorists, in the beginning of the book, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* reveal the mean reality behind welfare schemes as, "[t]he self-deception of the masses in this respect-for instance, in all democracies- is highly advantageous: making people small and governable is hailed as 'progress'" (*Excursus* 36)! Glamorous-policies of government are nothing but show off to impress the public. Osborne exposes the contemporary reality through his play. Its protagonist, Archie expresses the truth, "National Health won't bring you wealth". He discloses the pitiable condition of victims like him by saying, "We're all a bit slewed, which means that we're a bit more sub-human even than we usually are . . . I'll bet the patients in that hospital all freeze to death – he must be saving the National Health thousands" (58). Archie and people like him are being treated as failures and society is treating them as disasters, having "problems that nobody believes in . . . something that people makes jokes about, because we're so remote from the rest of ordinary everyday, human experience" (54). It is undoubtedly hypocrisy of the British politics which on the one hand receiving appraisal of 'welfare society' but on the real side doing nothing for the people, like Archie who are in need of welfare. "We don't get on with anything. We don't ever succeed in anything" (54). In *In The concept of Enlightenment*, theorists call welfare schemes as "professional rackets" (30). 'Welfare' has just become another tool for politicians who have created "the ideological illusion", where "the workers, the true providers are fed by the leaders of industry,* whom they feed. Thus the position of the individual becomes precarious" (121). Phoebe, too mocks at the over expenditure on welfare which is in no way deriving any wellbeing to her countrymen. Osborne created Archie who has been victimized in capitalist state where, "everyone knows that they are helpless within the system, and ideology must take

account of his” (*The Cultural Industry* 121). Archie is in the clutches of the present time. Andrew Wyllie writes in an article, ‘The Entertainer’, “Archie is trapped. He is a man out of his time – too young for music hall and too old for politics. In a more complex way he is also a man out of his class” (“The Entertainer”). So as a victim, he is helpless to perform in variety theatre whose hallmark is a sort of shallow cheapness, most memorably and symbolically embodied in the person of a nude Britannia. Whereas the obsolete nature of music hall is pointed up by the neatness and uprightness, variety theatre is popular for “striptease acts” (“The Entertainer”). The theorists explain:

Far from merely concealing the suffering under the cloak of improvised comradeship, the culture industry stakes its company pride on looking it manfully in the eye and acknowledging it with unflinching composure. This posture of steadfast endurance justifies the world which that posture makes necessary. Such is the world—so hard, yet therefore so wonderful, so healthy. The lie does not shrink back even from tragedy. Just as totalitarian society does not abolish the suffering of its members, but registers and plans it, mass culture does the same with tragedy. Hence the persistent borrowings from art. Art supplies the tragic substance which pure entertainment cannot provide on its own yet which it needs if it is to adhere to its principle of meticulously duplicating appearance. Tragedy, included in society’s calculations and affirmed as a moment of the world, becomes a blessing. (*The Culture Industry* 122)

Hence Osborne’s play displays the critical theory of Max and Adorno’s stage. Where critics express their concern about the demeaning contemporary society and deteriorating state of cultural industry in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Osborne used an effective medium of play and enacted the theory into characters and situations. As they say, “Action speaks louder than words”, the same way - Osborne’s play gives better understanding of perceiving a complex theory. The playwright powerfully represents as how penniless Archie struggles to survive in dying music hall, and his posing with nude girls not only portrays the helplessness of the character but also reveals the submission of the playwright to show nudity, though indirectly, to cater to the new demands of mechanical and materialistic society as “mere things obeying the inexorable laws of marketplace” (Theodor W. Adorno”).

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