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Mark Ravenhill's some explicit polaroids: a play as the reverberation of consumerist culture

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Abstract

Some Explicit Polaroids is one of the most sensational plays reflects consumerist culture of 2000s twentysometings is described as controversial. *Some Explicit Polaroids* is a political criticism on the confrontation of the two generations and reflects consumerist tenets, which hold values of globalisation. This study tries to prove that Ravenhill's work is totally reflection of the logic of consumerism and post-consumerism in terms of contemporary British society that is subjected to contemporary plays mostly. This study particularly unveils the perception of consumerist culture that is embodied within the scope of Ravenhill's perspective on British society; therefore, it aims to shed some light the globalised and cruelly capitalised world. The beginning of this study discusses the ongoing understanding of theatre and its representative perspectives after nasty nineties, as well as the social, economic, and political processes that led to the arrival of In-Yer-Face Theatre. Additionally, Mark Ravenhill's theatre aesthetic and his contributions towards contemporary British Theatre are briefly revealed. In this study, the evaluations written on consumerism and globalization are dealt with according to their resonances in the play.

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1. Introduction

This study aims to scrutinize Mark Ravenhill, one of the most significant playwrights of In-Yer-Face Theatre, which began to gain influence in Britain at the beginning of the Nineties. *Some Explicit Polaroids* is one of the most sensational plays reflects consumerist culture of 2000s twenty something is described as

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controversial. The play is a political criticism on the confrontation of the two generations and reflects consumerist tenets, which hold the values of globalization in it. This play is seen as a follow-up to *Shopping and F***ing* because of its treatment of current consumerist society and the amoral circumstances of the twenty something age set. This study tries to prove that Ravenhill's work is totally reflection of consumerism and in terms of contemporary British society that is subjected to contemporary plays mostly. It is predominantly seen that this play casts capitalist characters similar to *Shopping and F***ing*, for instance, Jonathan is a product of consumerist society, it can be said that he reproduces the figure of Brian in *Shopping and F***ing* who has a capitalist worldview. He gives priority to money more than anything else, which is the symbol of consumerism. This study particularly unveils the perception of consumerist culture that is embodied within the scope of Ravenhill's perspective on British society; therefore, it aims to shed some light the globalised and cruelly capitalised world. In this study, the evaluations written on consumerism and globalization are dealt with according to their resonances in this play.

Some Explicit Polaroids's debut was performed in September 1999. It is based on Ernst Toller's 1927 play *Hoppla, Wirleben!* (Hurrah, We Live). "Toller's play dealt with precisely the same kind of political compromise and betrayal explored in *Some Explicit Polaroids*" (Bilingham, 2007, p.139). Ravenhill puts forth the same topic by using a younger generation and political issues. Ravenhill fictionalizes two plots that reverberate in two generations. De Buck makes it clear that:

The first plot line focuses on Nick, who is released from prison after being incarcerated since 1984 for attempted murder on Jonathan. Helen is Nick's former partner in anarchic rebellion has now established a firm reputation as a local councillor and wants to sever all possible links to her past. The second plot line displays the lives of Tim, Victor and Nadia. Tim bought a sex slave, Victor, who is only concerned with his beautiful body and obsessively flees all negative feelings; Nadia has sexual intercourse with men to avoid loneliness. In the end, the younger generation is dispersed, whereas the older generation reconciles after a peaceful confrontation between Nick and Jonathan." (2009, pp. 24-25).

It is obvious that the play reflects the contemporary London. The play begins with Nick's discharging from jail and he tries to adapt to this postmodern society. As a socialist activist, Nick was jailed for the reason of kidnapping and persecution of Jonathan who represents a capitalist figure in the play. He is released from prison only to find that the friend who encouraged him to carry out the attack is now a New Labour city councillor and is hoping to become an MP. It is easily seen that Helen's political ambitions have been decreased to struggling for public transport between housing estates and shopping malls. Though Nick's first encounters with the minutiae of everyday life leave him disoriented, Helen refuses to let him stay with her, and she suggests that: "You start with the little stuff [...] bit by bit you do what you can don't look the bigger picture, you don't generalize" (Ravenhill, 2001, p.236). In the play it is disclosed that a conflict has formed between the older generations versus the young. Pavis delineates that: "The two opposing groups fail to meet. Nick alone, set adrift on his release from prison, can move easily between the two and hesitates to commit himself to either, feeling divided between neoliberal reformism and alienated nihilism but feeling quite happy with his drug-filled, marginal status" (2003, p.11). In the younger generation, Nadia is a lap dancer who is afraid of being alone, and therefore, she has sexual intercourse with men. Tim is a gay man who is HIV- positive and purchased a Russian sex slave over the Internet, Victor, who represents the trash culture and consumerist society. In this sense, Jonathan, who is a capitalist drug-dealer, is Nick's political nemesis. Although Jonathan is a respectable businessman in this capitalist world, he blackmails Helen who desires to pursue her career by entering as a New Labour MP. The two generations face each other, and they present their inner conflicts openly in the play. In *In-Yer-Face Theatre British Drama Today* Aleks Sierz remarks that:

The militant leftist certainties, the bigger picture that Nick once believed in, seem simplistic when juxtaposed with Helen's concern with trying to make life more bearable for the poor; the hectic fantasy of Tim, Nadia and Victor's happy world seems fatuous when confronted with the realities of HIV infection, domestic violence and loveless sex. By bringing Nick into conflict with Helen, Tim, Nadia, and Victor, Ravenhill forces all of his characters to look again at what they feel, believe and want to do. Conflict is what enables each of them to break out, however briefly, of the prison of loneliness. (2001, p.147)

It can be understood that in *Some Explicit Polaroids*, Ravenhill presents the conflicts that revolve in a gap between the young generation and the old. When he is released from prison, Nick feels alienated in this society, and he has difficulty comprehending what is going on.

As in *Shopping and F***ing*, in *Some Explicit Polaroids* the shadows of postmodernism can be explicitly seen; Wallace states that "Nadia and her friends Tim and Victor introduce him to the new world of postmodern trash culture of consumption at its most self-indulgence. Their celebration of the inauthentic, the kitsch and the frivolous clashes with his apparently hopelessly outdated values and politics" (2005, p.273). In Ravenhill's work, it is presented by Victor and Tim's dialogue: Victor: And you're trash? Tim: We're both trash. Come on, eat something, and eat some rubbish. (He gets his pills out.) And Nadia's trash too really. She's all right; you'll get to like her after a bit. She's been good to me. We have fun together (Ravenhill, 2001, p.244). In *Theatre Today - the new realism* Vera Goetlieb puts forward this tenet:

Another aspect of the postmodernist ideology is that by reducing everything to commodity, nothing has any value. On its own, this too has reinforced the sense of direction, feeling of chaos and, again, offered an alibi for those wishing to turn away from previous valuations of culture and entertainment to leave market forces and box office returns to provide the critique. (2003, p.11)

In this respect, Ravenhill casts capitalist characters in the play similar to those *Shopping and F***ing*. Jonathan is a product of consumerist society, and he outspokenly refers to her politics that shapes his mind accordingly what he read. He reproduces the figure of Brian in *Shopping and F***ing* who reflects a capitalist worldview throughout the play. He gives priority to money more than anything else, which is the symbol of consumerism. Jonathan voices his own capitalist ideology when he demands money for drugs:

Jonathan: Do you have any money?

Helen: I'm sorry.

Jonathan: Money. I'm rather hoping that you're carrying cash.

Helen: No.

Jonathan: I really could do with an injection of capital.

Helen: No chance.

Jonathan: Thing is they send you out of rehab and what they don't take into account is you need a good lump sum if your dealer's even going to offer you some second-rate gear.

Helen: I don't give money to people with a drug problem.

Jonathan: I have a cash problem. My problem is I think you've got some money and I don't want to use force to get it from you. (Ravenhill, 2001, p. 262)

In *Me, My iBook, and Writing in America*, Ravenhill admits that his plays “report upon, maybe even critique, a world of globalised capitalism” (2006, 132). It is noticed in Jonathan’s lines: “There’s the multinationals, the World Bank, NATO, Europe and there’s the grass roots, there’s roadshows where you listen, but still when all’s said and done...” (Ravenhill, 2001, p.259) Wade also states that: “the matter of community and coherence, however, extends beyond national boundaries and points to a global reorientation of politics and knowledge. The fall of the Berlin Wall stands as something of a political and epistemological watershed, ushering forward a realignment of global power, the rearticulation of identity positions, and the dismantling of ideological assumptions” (2008, p.286). In the play, the idea finds its resonances in Victor’s line: “The world is not so big, you know? There’s the same music, the same burgers, the same people. Everywhere in the world. You can keep moving all the time and still be in the same place” (Ravenhill, 2001, p.303). He uncovers the globalised market power in the world; you can purchase any item anywhere because the same item is marketed all over the world. It is actually a criticism of capitalism and postmodern consumerist society. Leslie A. Wade highlights Ravenhill’s aim:

Ravenhill remains desirous of some force or appeal that might assuage the troubling aspects of unchecked global capitalism. What one finds in Ravenhill’s work is a sort of prevailing question and a recurrent confusion-how to retain the moral imperative of socialism given the fragmented and dispersed condition of the global order (and the status of knowledge). The ethics of otherness seek a similar aim-to relate responsibility to the other without the mediation of law, nation, identity, or ideology (2008, p.287).

Ravenhill touches on his own conflicts in *Some Explicit Polaroids* through Nick, who represents an old socialist, while Jonathan stands in as capitalist in the play. Nick assaulted Jonathan owing to his capitalist attitudes towards Helen’s father. When he is released from jail, he bumps into a couple of boys in the lift who try to sell him drugs. He makes nothing of these changes and says: “you shouldn’t be selling drugs at your age. One of the boys responds: How else am I gonna buy a PlayStation? ... What the fuck is a PlayStation?” (Ravenhill, 2001, p.232) Nick also tells Helen in the play “I tried to ring you. Let you know. But I was there and I couldn’t work out how to get the money in and there’s a girl behind me and she says they only take cards and I’m like cards? What the fuck does she mean card?” (Ravenhill, 2001, p.231) Therefore it is certain that he is alienated from today’s world, and he has inner conflicts towards the contemporary lifestyle. Moreover, the playwright emphasizes the conflict of socialism in Helen’s lines: “I was twenty. Everyone was a fascist or a scab or a class traitor. *Eat the rich*. We used to chant that, I mean what the fuck did that mean - *eat the rich*? ... Well, everything’s changed” (Ravenhill, 2001, p.235). Nick and Jonathan reproduce the anger of political realities in the play, and they symbolize the conflicts of political and ideological realities of contemporary society. Ravenhill suggests that “the lifestyles of today’s bright and those who were once angry, antagonistic and politically active reflects badly on both” (Sierz, 2001, p.147). In this sense, Wade sums up Ravenhill’s own inner conflict as follows:

Clearly the play underscores the need for some point of resistance, some assertion of value that works to counter the dehumanizing effects of an increasingly powerful global capitalism. Ravenhill appears ambivalent on this matter, nostalgic for a larger ideological frame from which to combat a marketplace that reduces all to commodity, yet suspicious of any totalizing outlook that is too certain of its premises and proposals. (2008, p.296)

In *Some Explicit Polaroids*, Ravenhill emphasizes political nihilism and criticism of political systems. “Ravenhill’s play is reduced to a vulgar comedy on sex and nihilism” (Pavis, 2003, p.15). His characters represent declining political systems; nevertheless, some of them are consistent enough to maintain their rigid political belief. In this sense Sierz underscores that: “[...] the twentysomethings are free of ideology, which, he

says, allow you to be open to new ideas, they are also lost and confused. By contrast, Nick and Helen are firmly grounded in ideological beliefs, but Helen is seen as dull and Nick cannot join in with youth's frantic partying" (Sierz, 2001:147). It is not proved that the eminent political systems of capitalism and socialism are to be contented. In the play the meaninglessness of these political systems are predominantly dealt with as reflected in Victor's line:

Victor: You are socialist?

Nick: Yeah.

Victor: I hate socialist.

Nick: Right.

Victor: Everything falling to pieces. The buildings ugly and falling down. The shops ugly, empty. The ugly people following the rules and then mocking and complaining when they think that no-one is listening. All the time you know it is rotting, but all the time Everything is getting better. Everything is for the best. The people are marching forward to the beat of history.' This lie. This deception. This progress. Big fucking lie (Ravenhill, 2001, pp.270-271).

Apart from this, Ravenhill reveals the meaninglessness of current political tendencies in Helen's lines explicitly: "And now finally there's a chance to do something. Too late for anything big. Too much lost for any grand gestures. But trying to pick up the pieces. Trying to create a few possibilities for the bits of humanity that are left. I've seen those bastards fuck up the country all these years. Now I want to do something about it" (Ravenhill, 2001, p.281). Contrary to this, Jonathan, who is the most consistent character in the play, does not change his posture. He is a capitalist at the beginning of the play, and he is a capitalist at the end of the play. He is the mouthpiece of the postmodern, consumerist side of the play. Jonathan's lines make it obvious:

Jonathan: I think we both miss the struggle. It's all been rather easy for me these last few years. And I start to feel guilty if things come too easily. But really money, capitalism if you like, is the closest we've come to the way that people actually live. And, sure, we can work out all sorts of other schemes, try and plan to make everything better. But ultimately the market is the only thing sensitive enough; flexible enough to actually respond to the way we tick (Ravenhill, 2001, p.311).

2. Conclusion

To conclude, in *Some Explicit Polaroids*, Ravenhill presents two rival generations in the play, which can be separated into the older generation who are focused on the political issues and the younger generation formed by members of postmodern society as proved by their lines and actions. It is revealed in the play that the sense of dehumanizing effects becomes more powerful because of reckless global capitalism. It is proved that Ravenhill tries to lay bare the logic of consumerism and capitalism with postmodernist tenets; Ravenhill appears to puzzle the audience by raising postmodern social and political issues in *Some Explicit Polaroids* in order to underline the consumerism that is obvious today's world. As a last word, Ravenhill mirrors the political, economical, and social milieu of contemporary British society in this play by casting characters that show those characteristics in their acts.

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