

History, Conflict and Socio-Religious Protest in John Osborne's *Luther*

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Abstract

Luther, a historical play by John Osborne foregrounds the legendary figure of Martin Luther as the texture for the play. The play significantly portrays the age of heavy influence of rigid, orthodox Christianity and the oppression of Pope of the Rome. John Osborne deals with historical figure of Martin Luther as the strong opponent to evil practices of Princes, Electors, Dukes, Ambassadors, Bishops, Counts and Barons. Luther's revolutionary ideas were highly influential to propagate the true Christianity as professed by the Jesus Christ and the Scriptures. *Luther*, the protagonist is being mediated as an Angry Young Man who summarily exhibits the British Society with its contemporary evils and rejects their false, unrealistic ideals and simultaneously aims to restore the religiosity to its prestige. John Osborne, more prominently overcomes with deeper understanding of Historical ethos, successfully portrays the conflict between interior and exterior of Martin Luther and scornfully professes his social criticism through the play. The present paper aims to explore in the realm of historical account, Martin Luther's world of conflicting ideas of religiosity and under his socio-religious criticism over the evil practices of the propagators of Christianity. The paper would also talk about the exploitation of middle classes under the oppressive system of the then British society.

Keywords: History, Obsession, Conflict, Religious Oppression, Protest, Rebel, Socio-Religious Criticism

Introduction

John Osborne's historical play *Luther* revolves around the historical image of Martin Luther, the protagonist, who rebels against the orthodoxy, rigidity and evils in socio-religious ethos of the then Britain. The play takes us back to the age where art, science and even literature were devalued in comparison to religion. Human existence was subject to the power of the Church and the religious practices professed by the Proponents of the Church. The rebellions were

subject to be the enemies of the public and the state. Even the Kingship, monasteries were under the heavy influence of the Pope of the Rome. The Pope of the Rome was offered undeniable, unquestionable supremacy. Religion used to govern the minds of ordinary people and everyday confession to the priest, sacrament was significantly practiced in the age. An individual mind was obsessed with the idea of sin, as sin to Christianity and disobeying to the God. All criminal persons were used to be prescribed with a pilgrimage to a shrine or holy places. Individuals lead their lives in these helpless conditions until they could find *hope against their hopelessness*. Specifically, the religion was degraded to the basest and meanest level. These socio-religious conditioning proliferated the challenge to the authority of the Church and the Pope. Martin Luther, a historical legend, an Eremit of St. Augustinian order, who came in order in 1506, much against the wishes of his father Hans, rejected this religious orthodoxy and rebelled against the evils of the Christianity. John Osborne's play *Luther* finds its background for the play and presents Luther as an Angry Young Man, rebelling violently against all odds in the society. Osborne's Luther can be seen as social reformist in real sense who propagates rational ideas and religion of humanity alone by challenging the Establishment and the Pope of the Rome. The conflicting image of Martin Luther, as historical figure formulates in Alan Carter's view as she fosters here:

Luther may be regarded as of more than strictly historical or theological appeal. Dante's words: 'In the middle of the journey of life, I came to myself in a dark wood where the straightway was lost; apply no less forcibly to Martin Luther than they do to Jimmy Porter. The hero of *Look Back in Anger* retreats into a world of bears and squirrels, whilst Martin Luther seeks salvation in the arms of his nun and their son's love. (Alan Carter, John, 1969:33).

Osborne's *Luther* is conscious of his sins as conceived by the very illusory spirituality inspired from the religion. Initially, the play introduces Martin as dwelling around his *ideas of sins* and confessions which is clearly visible as he cries, "I am a worm and no man, a byword and a laughing stock. Crush out the worminess in me, stamp on me." (Osborne, *Luther* 1961: 19) This leads to the very feelings of inferiority and negativity engulfing his mind and consciousness. His convent background foregrounds a conflict in his mind and ends up with spiritual dilution which demands purification by confession. This very conflict makes him profess *the Word and Will of God* that seeks a salvation.

Almost all the protagonists of John Osborne do suffer the similar pangs of ideological conflict and imprisonment of ideas. Be it Jimmy, Paul Slickey, Archie Rice or Martin Luther. They do lack an initiation or an action from their side, but their psychological commitment, determination and resolution do affirm a psychological revolution in the mind of readers. Ironically, Martin Luther is most unsure when he is the surest in his action. His loneliness, interior conflict engulfs him against himself and confuses his very belief, faith in life. All in all, he falls as the victim to circumstances in religion. He is credited with broken sense of humility when he cleans latrines. The play opens in a year 1507, where Martin is found performing his First Mass Ceremony. Christianity prescribes the First Mass Ceremony as the ritual to express gratitude towards the Christ by serving bread and wine. Significantly, Martin Luther develops disgust over the ritual and emblematically holds his stomach as if he is suffering from constipation. He feels as if he develops a crisis in his belly. This is symbolic of an internal crisis

of Martin Luther. His pain in bowels is an assertion to the central suffering of the society. This incident adds an insecurity, isolation and guilt in Martin Luther's mind which cannot be redeemed by confession, submission or any religious practice either. This triggers his quest for salvation and makes him do challenge to the Christianity, authority and the very Establishment. He begins to preach society that again adds a sense of pride, undesirable in the religion. He prays to the God as:

Receive, oh Holy Father, almighty and eternal God, this spotless host... When I entered the monastery, I wanted to speak to God directly, you see. Without any embarrassment, I wanted to speak to him myself, but when it came to it, I dried up- as I always have (Osborne, *Luther* 1961:38)

What he opposes is the idea of any mediator between the god and people. Osborne ridicules the idea that some contacts of the God can affirm salvation to people so effortlessly. Luther critically comes forward and raises robust voice against socio-religious practices of the Catholic Establishment. Martin's father Hans realizes his troubled conscience and his disbelief in the faith. Being distressed Martin once outbursts, "Churches, Kings, and Fathers- why do they ask so much, and why do they all of them get so much more than they deserve?" (p.41). This is symbolic of a revolution in his mind against the unjust hegemony of the religion. Osborne' Luther comes very close to historical Martin Luther who opines, "*A Religion that gives nothing, costs nothing and suffers nothing is worth nothing*". (Luther, web) Convincingly, Luther proclaims that only God, the Christ is capable to impart salvation and exactly not the Church authorities.

The theme of historical investigation, anger, hostility, and protest continues as Luther develops his insightful philosophy about the *True-Religion*. Osborne's heroes explore how the world they are placed in is entirely wrong and how their exclusive philosophy of well-being is right. Amazingly, their success or failure in this protest is secondary, but their voice is seemingly important. Osborne's Luther falls in similar shades of philosophy as professed by the real Martin Luther, the king as:

Why does not the Pope, whose wealth today is greater than the wealth of the richest Crassus, build the basilica of St. Peter with his own money rather than with the money of poor believers? (Luther, web)

Though, Osborne's protagonists fail to change the world around them, yet, their revolt seems to be valuable in every vain. The father and son share a love-hate relationship, and simultaneously maintain an affection between them. Osborne underlines corrupt religious practices of the Church to sell its indulgences in the market. Tetzel, Dominican sub-commissioner describes the glamour of the Church while selling its indulgences like an insurance company and guarantee the safeguard of its people. John Osborne postulates how the authorities of the Church used to sell its indulgences to save people from their sins ever done and yet to be committed by them as:

I am John Tetzel, Dominican, inquisitor, sub-commissioner to the Archbishop of Mainz, and what I bring you is indulgences. Indulgences made possible by the red blood of Jesus Christ, and the Red Cross you see standing up here behind me is the standard of those who carry them.... Yes, my friend, the Pope himself

has sent me with indulgences for you!...They're only the most precious and noble of God's gifts to men, that's all they are!... (p.50).

Authorities used to guarantee people for their safeguard from the sins which they want to commit in earlier future as well. This exhibits the complete dilution of religious morality in the state and systematic exploitation of people under the oppressive rigidity of the religion. Tetzel continues:

For every mortal sin you commit, the Church says that after confession and contrition, you've got to penance-either in this life or in purgatory...There isn't any one sin so big that one of these letters can't remit it...Not only am I empowered to give you these letters of pardon for the sins you've already committed. I can give you pardon for those sins you haven't even committed but, which, however you intend to commit! (p.51).

Osborne, in modern terms, presents Tetzel, as an insurance company representative causing man's spiritual and psychological dilution by taking responsibility of his family welfare. Martin Luther opposes this very idea of salvation prescribed by the believers of the false religion. His willful rejection and subsequent submission to the manmade laws of eternity that merely exploit common human beings in face of corrupt church practices as vulnerable and meek. Luther stresses that all the agents of God do mislead humanity towards bankruptcy. In fact, he presents the horrible picture of very fundamental fabric of Christianity, misleading souls of the dead. He robustly questions the necessity of Mass Ceremony.

Martin Luther begins to profess publicly against the Pope of the Church and the Establishment. He focuses on the truthful ethics and values of Christian life by the Scriptures. Luther even criticizes the Golden Rose of Virtues by the Holy Roman Catholic Church. Resultantly, the Pope sends him three orders to stop mobilizing people against *the Rule of the God*. But Martin justifies all his deeds on the basis of Holy Scriptures and rejects the manmade Supremacy of the Pope. The conversation between Cajetan and Martin brings forth the callousness in the institution of the Church and monk-ship. Cajetan calls Martin as insanely struggling like a man in fit and animal trapped to the bone with doubt. He finds Martin confused within spirituality and religiosity. Martin is uncertain of his philosophy that fails to convince the common people easily and challenge the supremacy of the Pope. Agrawal Meenal asserts in this regard as, "Luther is the first of Osborne's protagonists to be shown in conflict with his intellectual equals. (Early, 1993:29).

The proceeding scene opens where Luther directly challenges the Pope Leo, the tenth by saying, "Pope has got no authority to amend the Scripture as he likes. The Pope cannot be assumed as the reflection of God on earth." This increases the difficulty of Martin, as the Pope decides to call Martin Luther in the presence of Maximillian, all the princes in Germany, Universities, Potentates and the Church. Pope also warns him if he fails to attain forgiveness, he would be deprived of Christian Burial. Pope's bursts with anger: "There's a wild pig in our vineyard, and it must be hunted down and shot." (Osborne, *Luther* 1961:78). Martin reacts with hostility when he receives the papers through Cajetan sent by Pope. This difficult situation where Luther has to prove his philosophy and stand leads with a conflict in him. Luther focuses on higher realms of his social and religious concern. Osborne takes him to a state of neurotic

anxiety to decide anything with certainty. Luther's physical disability, indigestion, constipation, sweating refers to bowels are all indication of his own tension and insecurity in life. Basically, what he professes the God's Rule as the basis of human life in real sense? He prays for the mercy of God in his anxiety. Yet, Luther overcomes with determination and refuses his submission and exhibits a fighting spirit.

Luther's encounter begins in the presence of Princes, Electors, Dukes, Ambassadors, Bishops, Counts, etc. in the Diet of Worms on 18th April, 1521. The emperor asks him to publicly acknowledge being the author of his controversial books or retracts any of them. Luther courageously admits the authorship of those books. He logically classifies all the books in categories, the first category of books delivers the *Values of Faith and Morality*. The second category serves *Power of Keys that Serves Complaints of Society*. And the third category talks about *Enemies of Religion*. Luther justifies that he finds nothing harmful to society that is written and served through his books. However, he admits, he has been violent through these books which are not expected from a monk like him. Further, he raises many questions like, if he is a liar, what lies he has professed? Through his logical statement he stays committed to *Original Rule of God* alone. Following this, Eck, suggest that Martin should cut some of the passages of Blasphemous references in respect of the Church. To this, Martin answers as:

- Unless I am shown by the testimony of the Scriptures for I don't believe in Popes
- or Councils unless I am refuted by Scripture and my conscience is captured by God's own word, I cannot and will not recant, since to act against one's conscience is neither safe nor honest. Here I Stand; God help me; I can do no more. Amen. (p.85)

Martin courageously states that everything told by the Pope cannot be accepted as truth. Even the degrees of his truthfulness should be tasted against the fire of morality and ethic. All the younger generation in the court gets inspired by these logical and rational professing of Martin Luther. In fact, this inculcates the seeds of revolution in their minds. This heavily raises many questions about the validity, verifiability of the Church and its authorities.

In due course of time, the play moves four years further, where the revolution has taken a shape against the Church, its illogical practices and its authorities. The Knight is seen convincing Martin Luther to accept the leadership of this revolution as people truly charged by his electric fervor by his rational proposition. The conversation between the Knight and Luther puts forth, Luther's ultimate submission to the Holy Christ and the professing of the Scriptures. He says, he had never claimed any leadership. In fact, Osborne never wanted his heroes to revolutionize anything or to take an initiation for social reforms. What he aims is to inculcate a thoughtful revolution in the minds of his audience. He places his heroes in the conflicting situations those particularly overlap with delusion and illusion of their lives. Martin's conflict reflects in his assertion of inner dogma as, "The Princes blame me, you blame me and the peasants blame me"(p.89). Inadvertently, the Knight blames Martin Luther for creating ripples in the still water, for diluting the very consciousness of people and mobilizing them for a revolution. Martin wishes to restore the world with Word of the God. Ultimately, the Knight feels betrayed as same to other people in the Britain. However, Luther feels that peasants deserved their deaths as they rebelled against the authority, Establishment, the Church and the



Christ. The Knight gets surprised at Luther's decision to marry with Katherine Von Bora, a formerly nun. In the last scene, Luther is found in late thirties, conversing with Staupitz, and Katherine serving them. Also, his son Hans is playing around. Luther advises faith in Christ, Holy Scriptures and the love of a woman.

Conclusion

Conclusively, Luther, as portrayed by John Osborne truly stays committed to the historical figure of Martin Luther as the religious reformist in real sense. He falls in the similar fashion of John Osborne's *Angry Young Man* by delineating utmost anger, hostility and antagonism against the religious Establishment during the period. Luther emerges as the conflicting figure within his interior and exterior self while he mediates his religious preaching. His physical illness, indignation, vomiting is equated with his spiritual and external conflict to collaborate in the expository system of Catholic systems. Luther, undoubtedly, rejects the false, unrealistic ideals and aims to restore the religiosity to its prestige. Luther's scornful socialism inculcates a zeal for betterment in the religious system in the Europe. Martin Luther's world of conflicting ideas, socio-religious criticism overwhelms with sound reforms in the religion. Osborne deliberately avoids a kind of political leadership and lacks at the initiation from Luther's side. His withdrawal from his revolt against the Pope is not inspired by the love of woman. What he aspires is the true religion as professed by the Christ, Christianity and the Holy Scriptures. He avoids a blood shade, disillusionment, and resultant frustration from the oppressive religious system. Luther emerges out of his internal conflict by his submission to the *True-Religion of the Christ* and stays adhered to the same. His conviction to God's original religion comes over all and satisfies his thirst. Luther's revolutionary ideas revolutionize the very consciousness of ordinary men and women that take him to real belief, real feel and real faith. His idea of justice, righteousness, peace and true-religion as prescribed by the Jesus Christ prevail to attract rational human mind. John Osborne's outstanding play *Luther* successfully, wonderfully and amazingly re-creates historical, legendary figure Martin Luther, rouses an internal conflict in him and purifies individuals and society at large through his acerbic social criticism.

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