

# Pacifism and Nonviolence: A Study in John Arden's Play Serjeant Musgrave's Dance

السلامية و اللاعنف: دراسة في مسرحية الكاتب جون أردن  
( رقصة العريف مسجريف )

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September 2021

## Abstract

This research attempts to study the two doctrines of pacifism and nonviolence as presented in John Arden's play **Serjeant Musgrave's Dance**. These two doctrines have become prerequisites nowadays due to the bitter suffering of humanity in a world dominated by militarism and terrorism.

John Arden wrote this play at the end of the fifties of the last century to express how man aspires for peace and security. The play, thus, argues that

pacifism and nonviolence are lofty human doctrines in man's life. Though they are not easy to be fulfilled idealistically or even closer to idealism as it is seen from the central character's belief or even his method and the disastrous end he meets; yet man has to strife hard to come closer to them.

**Key words:** Militarism, Nonviolence and Pacifism

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### الخلاصة

تبين المسرحية كيف أن السلامية واللاعنف يشكلان مبدئين ساميين في حياة الإنسان. غير أن تحقيقهما بشكل مثالي أو حتى قريب من المثالية أمر في غاية الصعوبة كما يبدو ذلك من خلال تفكير الشخصية المحورية في المسرحية والأسلوب الذي تتبعه لتحقيق ذلك والعاقبة المشؤومة التي تصل إليها. ومع ذلك فإن على الإنسان أن يجاهد بحزم للوصول ولو قريباً منهما.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** العسكرية العدوانية، اللاعنف، السلامية

يحاول البحث دراسة مبدأ السلامية ومبدأ اللاعنف كما تقدمها مسرحية (رقصة العريف مسجريف) للكاتب المسرحي البريطاني (جون أردن) John Arden (1930 – 2012). لقد أصبح كلاً المبدئين من المسائل المطلوبة الملحة في عالم اليوم بسبب المعاناة المرة للإنسانية في عالم تسوده الروح الحربية وسياسة الاستعداد العسكري العدواني، والنزعة الإرهابية. كتب (جون أردن) هذه المسرحية في أواخر خمسينيات القرن الماضي ليعبر فيها عن توق الإنسان في الأمن والأمان.

If thou dost stretch thy hand

Against me, to slay me,

It is not for me to stretch

My hand against thee

To slay thee: for I do fear

Allah, the Cherisher of the Worlds

{Surat Al- Maida: 28}

## Preliminary:

Throughout the whole history of mankind peace remains a serious goal in man's life. Religious, philosophical and intellectual movements are earnestly concerned with the concept of pacifism and nonviolence.

The violent incident between the two sons of Adam mentioned in the Holy Qura'an might be the first practical attitude, concerning this concept of pacifism and nonviolence, in the history of mankind motivated by material and inhumane causes. Therefore, pacifism and nonviolence is an innate instinct in man, spoiled then by worldly desires and whims.

Peace and security is essential factor for man's stability and progress, depending on heavenly religious teachings and human virtues and values.

This human goal comes more urgent and more necessary whenever srifes, conflicts and actions of violence are inflamed among human communities, states or even within the one unified society or nation. Moreover, this concept has become a doctrine in our modern and contemporary life for those who call for love of peace, rejecting violence and militarism.

The term '*pacifism*' was first adopted by peace activists early in the first year of the twentieth century, at the tenth Universal Peace Congress in Glasgow, United Kingdom. Pacifism, thus, has become a doctrine nowadays to oppose war, violence and military actions as means to settle or solve matters among world powers, regional states; or among religious or political coalitions in the same human and social community.

In the twentieth century two destructive World Wars broke out to kill millions and millions of people throughout the whole world. They destroyed almost all what man had built during many centuries. The doctrine of pacifism and nonviolence comes more pressing during these two World Wars and after them. It also became more urgent during the period of the Cold War between the two world powers of Capitalism and Communism in the sixties of the twentieth century and some years later.

As far as fiction literature is concerned, one may regard the first fictional work to call for pacifism and nonviolence in European literature is Euripides's (485 – 406 B.C.) tragedy **The Trojan Women** (415 B.C) as well as Aristophanes's (445 – 385 B.C.) comedy **Lysistrata** (411 B.C.). However, human literature through the ages up to our present time is concerned with man's peace.

In the mid of the twentieth century, the concept of pacifism flourished more to shape a prominent theme in the literature of our contemporary age due to the tremendous violent actions that dominate human life. The British playwright of the twentieth century John Arden (1930 – 2012) treats this theme in some of his dramatic works, especially in his masterpiece drama **Serjeant Musgrave's Dance** (1959); where the main stream of this play flows in this particular trend of pacifism.

### The Setting of the Play

The incidents of the play take place in a snow-bound colliery town in the north of England during the nineteenth century. However, "*The exact date of the play is deliberately not given*" as the playwright states in his introduction to the play. But he adds that "*the details of costume covered approximately the years between 1860 and 1880*" (5).

The atmosphere of the general scene of the play reveals gloominess, depression and death. From the very outset of the play, we see three soldiers waiting for their officer serjeant Black Jack Musgrave. They are waiting at a canal wharf, carrying with them guns, ammunition and a wooden box which contains a corpse of a dead body. We later come to know that this corpse belongs to the soldier Billy Hicks who died in violent rebellion that took place in an overseas British colony.

The time is evening and the place is solitary; and there is no sign of life as if the shadow of death prevails the whole world of the play. This gloomy scene is portrayed through the words of Sparky, one of the three soldiers "*Brr, oh, a cold winter, snow, dark ... No good sitting to wait in the middle of it. Only makes the cold night colder*" (9).

This depressed death-like scene is portrayed once more later in the scene of the churchyard where the soldiers have to gather. In their reports to the serjeant, the soldiers rarely mention something alive. Hurst reports "*Hardly a thing. Street empty, windows shut, two old wives on a doorstep go indoors the minute I come ....*" Attercliffe reports the same thing: "*Hardly a thing. Street empty, doors locked, windows blind, shops cold and empty....*" Sparky's report has the same meaning "*Hardly a thing. Street empty, no chimneys smoking, etc. ...*" (28 – 29).

Even the soldiers themselves reveal shadows of death as the colliers describe "*Four dead rooks*" (28). The "*Setting in the graveyard, eh, like a coffin – load o' sick spooks*" (31). So the setting of the play throughout almost all the scenes reveals the sense of dread, unsafely and death. Accordingly, the setting of the play guides us plainly to the theme of the play summarized in militarism, violence and pacifism.

### III - Militarism, Violence and Pacifism

Right from the beginning of the play, John Arden presents to the audience and to the reader military life as something hateful and unbearable. The young are taken to join the military service either by force or by deception. This comes clear through Sparky's song:

*One day I was drunk, boys, on the Queen's Highway  
Where a recruiting party came beating that day.  
I was enlisted and attested before I did know  
And to the Royal Barracks they forced me to go. (9)*

Look how they force the young to join the army against their will. However, because of such miserable and dirty life in the army, Sparky decides to desert and to free himself from such life, whatever it costs him:

*When first I deserted I thought myself free  
Till my cruel sweetheart informed upon me (10)*

To desert the army is considered to be a high treason, accordingly the deserter has to face the utmost punishment:

*Court martial, court martial, they hold upon me  
And the sentence they passed was the high gallows tree. (10)*

To remain in the military service or to desert it; in both cases the soldier's fate is to suffer. Arden goes on, through Hurst's point of view to portray the disgusting and dreadful life of a soldier especially in the colonies overseas "We live in tattered tents in the rain, we eat rotten food, there's knives in the dark streets and blood on the floors of the hospital" (83).

The play portrays to us military life as something savage and inhumane through the inhumane character of the soldier. When Annie, the bar maid in the public house of Mrs. Hitchcock is asked to tell them "what soldiers is good for" she replies in a song:

*To march behind his roaring drum,  
Shout to us all: "Here I come  
I've killed as many as I could -  
I'm stamping into your fat town  
From the war and to the war*

*And every girl can be my whore  
Just watch me lay them squealing down. (17 – 18)*

Arden leaves nothing disgusting or even ignoble, but he uses it to describe the soldier and his military life. According to Annie's song war is not so far in meaning than destruction and debauchery. She describes the soldier's character as a scrap to be thrown into a dung hill, "*What good's a bloody soldier 'cept to be dropped into a list in the ground like a letter in a box*" (18).

However, when she arrives at the market place to have a look on the Skelton of her dead beloved Billy Hicks, her beloved; her words stand as an elegy not to mourn her beloved, but also to mourn the life and love of every human being as Glenda Leeming puts it. She states that Annie's sad story "*reminds us that the dead Billy Hicks whom she mourns is not just an army statistic, but the ending of life and love of real human being*" (Commentary: XV). Consequently, life and love stand opposite to death and hatred that war and violence inflame in our human community.

Serjeant Musgrave, the central character of the play and the leader of the deserters believes that military service to man is his life "*A soldier's duty is a soldier's life*" (14). He began his military service as a loyal soldier in Her Majesty's army abroad, thinking that he was fighting for good causes. He discovers later that the colonial wars overseas are unjust and men are killed for unfair causes; therefore, he has to act against such wars calling for peace. As a man of heavenly faith, Musgrave thinks that he was guided by the Word of God while fighting in the army of Her Majesty. Now he still believes that he is guided by the Word of God to act against the sin of war "*Cos all that we know now is that we've had to leave behind us a colonial war that is war of sin and unjust blood.*" (33)

Musgrave's ostensible aim in the town is to recruit soldiers for Her Majesty's army abroad; yet his intention is to show the folk town the ugliness and horrors of war. He has come to this town with a sacred mission, to put an end to the unjust war. Musgrave loses his mind when he decides to use violent means and to kill twenty-five responsible persons, for the death of the men killed in the war. This means that the Mayor, the Parson and the Constable are included.

*One man, and for him five. Therefore, for five of them we multiply out and we find it five – and - twenty .... So as I understand Logic and Logic to me is the Mechanism of God that means that today there is twenty - five persons will have to be (91).*

Still he believes that he is guided by the power of God "*because my power's the power of God, and that's brought me here and all the three of you with me*" (30).

Musgrave is completely exhausted by the matter of war. He is haunted by the idea that he is still guided by the Word of God; but now he appears to lose control upon himself and everything around him. Later on at the end of the churchyard scene and after he is left alone, he finds himself in a confused state of mind asking God for help:

*My regiment was my duty, and I called Death honest, killing by the book - but it all got scrawled and mucked about and I could not think clear .... Now I have my duties different .... My prayer is: keep my mind clear so I can weight Judgment against the Mercy and Judgment against the Blood and make the dance as terrible as You have put it into my brain. The Word alone is terrible: the Deed must be worse (37).*

Musgrave seems to lose everything: his self-control, his self-confidence, his men and may be his mind. Robert Skloot comments on Musgrave's character to come to conclusion that sometimes one can find himself in the same situation of Musgrave:

*a skilled practitioner revulsed and torn by his skill, a believer in rules who finds none to believe in, a man of God's Word who finds the Word incomprehensible, are our troubles if we move beyond the military trappings, beyond fragmentary or limited comprehension, to find our confused and disillusioned and violent selves in him (1975: 210).*

Moreover, it becomes obvious that Musgrave, the military man and the man of Holy Word, who comes to this town to preach against the horror of war, calling for peace, seems to be completely mentally deranged. He is torn between his faith in the Divine Word and his new task in this town to commit a bloody massacre. He is haunted by a sense of guilt that is developed into a nightmare whether he is a wake or asleep. While sleeping in the public house, we hear Musgrave shouting "*Fire, fire! Fire, fire, London's burning, London's burning*". In the meantime, he gives a cry of agony, shivering and moaning, uttering the words "*The end of the world*" (64 – 65). According to M. W. Steinberg "*Musgrave's nightmare is a compound of his sense of guilt and his apocalyptic vision of doomsday and the need to be properly prepared in control*" ( 441 ).

Musgrave's lunacy reaches its uttermost peak when in the market-place meeting (begins to dance, waving this rifle, his face contorted with demoniac fury) as it is described by the stage directions. This horrible dance is interpreted by Thomas P. Adler as God's dance "of mercy rather than of strict retributive justice" (1973:164). Here the Mayor realizes that Musgrave now has really lost his mind "The man's gone balmy," he addresses the Constable to do something. Michael Anderson describes Musgrave as

"someone who adheres rigidly to the rules he has invented, and ends by overstepping the mark with spectacular frenzy" (1979:63). Ann P. Messenger comments on Musgrave's failure that he "is destroyed when his conscience derives him against the public world, against what we see from our perspective in time as inevitable historical necessary" (1972: 309). At the end of the play, Musgrave is arrested and put in a prison cell with the other statistic Attercliffe.

Hurst, who is shot dead by the troops at the end of the play, may be seen as a victim of war and violence. Unlike Musgrave, he does not believe in his sacred mission. He has joined him only to get rid of the military service, and he looks upon colonial war abroad as something filthy and defiled against Human Rights:

*'Cos I thought when I met you, I thought we'd got the same motives. To get out, get shut o' the Army .... I thought o' the Rights of Man. Rights of the rebels: that's me! Then I went. And here's a serjeant on the road, he's took two men, he's deserted same as me, he's got money, he can bribe a civvy skipper to carry us to England.... It's nowt to do wi' God. I don't understand all that about God, why d' you bring God into it! (30)*

As far as Sparky's motives and attitudes are concerned; he is also different from Musgrave's motives and intentions. His motives are seen to be personal to get rid of military service; it is not in his mind to teach people how war is terrible or how violence is inhumane. He is in fact against war and its dreadful crimes and misères. His intention is mainly to live in peace. In his attempt to persuade Annie to run away with him, we realize how simple and plain character he is; nothing in his life to be taken serious, but to live in peace.

*All it would be is: you live and I live – we don't need his duty, we don't need his Word – a dead man's a dead man. We could call it **all** paid for. Your life and my life – make our own road, we don't follow nobody (63 – 64).*



Sparky's character is not fit for a soldier, and militarism is against his spirit. He was put in the wrong place when he joined the army. Of all of the four deserters, Sparky "*was the one who sprang most reality to life – friendly, bright, nervous, the most volatile of the soldiers, always joking and telling stories, afraid of silence and afraid of thinking*" (Hayman: 1968: 23). He seeks to free himself from the army by means of desertion; however, he comes to conclusion that even desertion does not bring him peace or security. Unfortunately, he dies later by an accident in the stable. This incident may show him as a victim of violence whether in the battlefield or in desertion.

Attercliffe the eldest among the four deserters is different in his attitude towards violence and war from the other three. He may be regarded as the best example of pacifism and nonviolence. He is not only against the colonial wars of the British empire, but against any sort of war whatever the causes or the motives.

*All wars is sin, serjeant ..."* (33). *All wars, Serjeant Musgrave. They've got to turn against all wars. Colonial war, do we say, no war of honour? I'm a private soldier, I never had no honour, I went killing for the Queen, I did it for my wages, that wor my life. There was one night's work, and I said: no more killing.* (36)

Attercliffe's pacifist nature condemns and rejects war because of its ignominy. To be a soldier means to be a killer that is why he always feels he is guilty. He does not believe in the holiness of war as Musgrave does:

*I doubt it. Our Black Jack'd say it's not material. He'd say there's blood on theses hands. (He looks at his hands with distaste.) You can wipe 'em as often as you want on a bit o' yellow hair, but it still comes blood the next time so why bother he'd say. And I'd say it too.* (61)

Attercliffe is unable to remove the red colour of blood out of his mind. In other words, he is unable to get rid of the sense of guilt as far as he is still serving in the army. He is no more than a villainous bastard as he calls himself "*So I'm a dirty old bastard in a red coat and blue breaches and that's all about it. Blood, y' see! Killing*" (61). Commenting on his character, Glenda Leeming states that:

*Attercliffe in the first place, is a pacifist, so one of his functions is to express the wrongness of violence and brutality that is necessarily part of military action.... So far his criticism is clear: killing is bad no matter what the circumstances. If Musgrave's plan involves killing, then it*

*is no better than the ways they are trying to testify against.*  
(Xiii)

It is not only the colonial war that the play attempts to treat; but also the question of violence that takes place at home. John Arden makes no difference between the violence abroad through the colonial war or at home; especially when we hear that the colliers in this coal-mining town are on strike asking for justice and profitable wages. This nonviolent strike may reach a point of violent action, as the Parson – who is a member of the town's magistracy - suggests to Mrs. Hitchcock *"If the colliers cannot afford a drink because of the strike – because of their own stupidity – then there is the loss likelihood of their being inflamed to acts of violence"* (15). The Parson's anticipation becomes true when the Constable – the other member of the town's magistracy – informs the Mayor, who is also the owner of the mine, that *"There's been stone-throwing this morning. Two of my office windows is broke"* (22).

John Arden suggests that the rebellious reactions by the natives of the colonies and colliers' dissatisfaction at home are a result of injustice, repression and tyranny. The Mayor's selfishness and cruelty lead him to think only of his own interests and his properties. He is ready to make use of the four deserters to oppress the starving colliers *"Beat these feller's drums high around the town, I'll put one pound down for every Royal Shilling the serjeant pays. Red coats and flags. Get rid o' the trouble makers"*(22) Moreover, the Mayor also is ready to bribe the Serjeant, and in return, the Serjeant has no objection to accept the bribe *"For every Queen's Shilling you give out, I give out a golden sovereign - no two. One for the recruit, and one to be divided among you and your three good lads"* (23).

The irony here is that those deserters who condemn war and violence, and are in the town to show its people the miseries of war and militarism, are supposed to be used by the corrupted authorities of the town against the poor starving colliers at home.

#### IV- Conclusion

In an age dominated by militarism and violence, calling for peace and security becomes at the forefront of man's eminent needs and aspirations. Since the fifties and sixties of the twentieth century, and might be in some decades after, pacifism and nonviolence as human doctrines have become essential themes in the literary works of the post-war literature.

Arden's **Serjeant Musgrave's Dance** which was first performed at the Royal Court Theatre in London in October 1959, stands as one of these literary works of the post-war literature that dealt with the themes of pacifism and non-violence. Because of its "ambiguity" at that time, the play was received by two opposite attitudes of dissatisfaction and appreciation. Arden comments on this puzzled situation stating that:

*I have endeavoured to write about the violence that is so evident in the world, and to do so through a story that is partially one of wish-fulfillment. I think that many of us must at some time have felt an over powering urge to match some particularly outrageous piece of violence with an even greater and more outrageous retaliation, Musgrave tries to do this: and the fact that the sympathies of the play are clearly with him in his original horror, and then turn against him and his intended remedy, seems to have bewildered many people. (Introduction: 7)*

However, in the coming years, it was accepted as Arden's masterpiece and it "has become a prescribed text in English literature examinations" (Hunt: 1974: 18).

The play overflows with lucid ideas about colonial war, violent actions and pacifist attitudes. The character of Musgrave stands for this pacifist trend, though Arden portrays him as unqualified person to fulfill his aspiration. This is due to the difficulty to achieve such complicated human doctrine in one hand; and Arden's own conviction that absolute pacifism is not easy to be fulfilled on the other hand. Arden states at the very end of his **Introduction to the Play** that:

*Complete pacifism is a very hard doctrine: and if this play appears to advocate with perhaps some timidity, it is probably because I am naturally a timid man and also because I know that if I am hit I very easily hit back: and I do not care to preach too confidently what I am not sure I can practise. (7)*

However, Arden said later (in another occasion): "*I did not fully understand my own feelings about pacifism until I wrote Serjeant Musgrave Dance, not about old age until I wrote The Happy Haven*" (Quoted in Arden On File: 1985: 21).

Musgrave preaches for peace and non-violence; yet he is ready to use violent means and tools to execute his mission; the matter which is against absolute doctrines of pacifism and nonviolence.

Among the four deserters, Attercliffe stands as a typical example of the pacifist. He never believes in any sort of violence whatever the motives or means are. However, he ends in the jail together with Musgrave. Throughout the whole scenes of the play, he is seen obsessed by the guilt of being a soldier. His words to Musgrave in the prison cell summarise the main moral of the play; that man's failure to achieve peace resides in using violent means and tools. "*To end it by its own rules: no bloody good.... you can't cure the pox by further whoring*" (102).

Though the play's main theme is war and violence, yet it comprises other themes not so far from this main theme. Michael Anderson argues that it "*is not so much a play about war as about violence in more general terms, and still more it is a play about discipline, repression and anarchy*" (1979: 62 – 63). The three members of the town magistracy: the Mayor, the Parson, and the Constable are mostly motivated by their own selfishness and their own personal interests than by any national, religious or social principles. It seems clearly that they are unqualified responsible men to handle their utilities. In his Conference Paper Akdogan asserts that "*Violence and hypocrisy of the authorities are the most important issues which all add up to one central theme: the cruelty and futility of war.*" (April, 2014, P. 01).

The doctrine of pacifism as well as that of nonviolence are among the most critical human issues of today that are not easy to be treated or achieved. Therefore, Musgrave's failure to fulfill his mission, whatever the causes are, is a message to humanity that "*Complete pacifism is a very hard doctrine,*" yet man has to strive hard to fulfill this aim. Pacifism and nonviolence are sublime doctrines that need magnificent efforts to achieve them.

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