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Moira Buffini's *Handbagged*: British history and politics as indirect sources

Dilek Inan*

Assoc.Prof. Dr. Balikesir University, English Department, Balikesir, 10100, Turkey

Abstract

Literature has traditionally functioned as a means of entertainment and education. In achieving this dual purpose literary texts mostly operate through indirect allusions, implications and concealments. This paper explores Moira Buffini's 2013 play, *Handbagged*, in its use of British history and politics as indirect sources for its subject matter. The play is significant for mainly two reasons: in terms of content and form. Contentwise the playtext can be studied as an approximation, deconstruction and reconstruction of recent British history and politics in an indirect style. Formwise the playwright employs interesting techniques of doubling in creating an older and a younger version of Britain's two most powerful women. While the playwright imagines the private nature of the Queen's and Thatcher's conversations, she creates a satirical, political theatre which is also a rich history lesson. As the title suggests the play is concerned with the past and the way history and politics are crystallised, deconstructed and recreated on stage at present.

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* Dilek Inan: Tel.: 90-266-2412762; fax: 90-266-2495005.

E-mail address: inan@balikesir.edu.tr

1. Introduction

Theatre's context and referent is the world and as John McGrath observes, 'There is no such thing as a de-politicized world' (2002, p. 199). In producing *Handbagged* as a playtext Buffini has been influenced by the history, politics and culture in which she lives. She writes the play in order to promote and disseminate certain values and views in the society. As an important feature of literature, Buffini enriches the audience's opinions of recent politics through indirect and implicit revelation in which the truth is veiled under misremembering, denials, oppositions and 'dementia'. Implicitness as an essential element adds to the mystery and transcendental value of the play. Being fascinated by the 1980s politics, Buffini explores issues and experiments with conventions by mixing the theatrical with the meta-theatrical. The paper is arranged under four main headings and a conclusion: Moira Buffini as a Playwright, Theatre as a Medium for Politics and History, The Play in Context, The Play in Style.

2. Moira Buffini as a Playwright

Contemporary British playwright Moira Buffini who has made her first appearance in 1992, has written a body of work that consists of a dozen stage plays, and six screenplays. She is one of the founders of 'Monsterists Theatre' that aim to write epic plays telling 'big' stories like Shakespeare, Brecht and Howard Brenton did. Monsterist large-scale theatre is different from the minimalist, poetic drama of Beckett and Pinter. Indeed *Handbagged* deals with two female giants of the 20th century British culture, Queen Elizabeth II and Margaret Thatcher, who have changed Britain and the world in various ways. The playwright presents a complicated picture in theatre and explores political and historical statements that are restricted in the public sphere. By referring to stories, anecdotes, facts and imaginary statements, Buffini creates a complex world in order to explore an eventful decade. The single story is told from different dimensions and angles. Buffini's text operates through indirect allusions, understatements, implications and concealments.

3. Theatre as a Medium for Politics and History

As Amelia Kritzer argues 'the stage remains a site of remarkable freedom and power with the potential to continually reinvent itself, present a full range of public issues and create interpretations of these issues through artistic forms that engage the audience in constructing and exploring new political landscapes. (Kritzer 224, 2008). Theatre arts offer a unique forum for the political by involving the audience. In order to produce this forum, Buffini is interested in an achievement of visibility through theatre. She creates political meaning by making visible what has been invisible in real history.

Buffini originally wrote the play as 'one act' for the Tricycle Theatre's *Women, Power and Politics* festival in 2010. She was still writing the longer version of the play when Thatcher died in 2013. Her main aim is to enlighten the young generation about 1980s history and to remind them of Thatcher's era. Kritzer clarifies that a new generation of playwrights create fresh sociopolitical critiques in a post-Thatcher era (Kritzer 26, 2008). Indeed *Handbagged* is a political comedy about Margaret Thatcher's relationship with the Queen highlighting both the key moments and the censored matters of 1980s British politics and history. Buffini speculates about the conversations that might have taken place between the two icons at decisive points in their shared history. Since the play is speculation, the narrative has unreliable dialogues. The heroines deliberately misremember events that are emphasized with frequent asides such as 'that never happened', or 'I never said that' (Buffini, 2013, p. 31, 43, 47, 82, 85, 90). The play, that strongly observes the English nation's diverse feelings and opinions of Thatcher, can be interpreted as a satirical essay on British politics. On one side people praise Thatcher because 'she has ended the cold war, rescued the economy and has done so much for women' (The Guardian, 8 April 2014). While on the other side people remember the distressing times of the race riots, the hunger strikes, the Falklands war. Buffini knows that she writes for a younger generation about a woman who has been an icon, a horror, a saviour all in one personality. (The Guardian, 8 April 2014). The playwright is fascinated by Thatcher's combative and extraordinary character. Thus she identifies The Iron Lady with the classic tragic protagonist as the research has shown her that Thatcher's inflexible and unyielding nature is both the secret of her success and her greatest flaw. She suggests in

an interview that Thatcher's 'extremity as a human being will make her for ever fascinating in the way that Richard III is'. (Curtis, 19 March 2014).

The play has been considered as a witty, entertaining, captivating and an enlightening history lesson by a number of critics including Curtis (2014). It can also be appreciated as a satirical essay on British politics as it questions key moments of the 1980s. Further the title of the play refers to the past and how history is shaped and re-shaped in the present. There are a number of occasions in the play where certain historical narratives are reconstructed and corrected. Therefore the play suggests that historical truth may be a series of approximations and reconstructions. The plot revolves around the weekly meetings between the Queen and the Prime Minister in which Margaret Thatcher gives reports about the race riots, Falklands war, miners' strike, the poll tax, mass unemployment and so on. Since the meetings have been undocumented and in private, Buffini constantly features that the meetings she portrays are inventions and speculations gathered after a comprehensive research. Indeed the older Queen's (Q) and the older Thatcher's (T) counter remarks such as 'I may have thought that, but I never said it' (37), and, 'Whatever we say, must stay within these three walls' (28) all suggest that the play is mostly guesswork, that the narrators are unreliable and that the playwright wittily plays on theatrical propriety. Gardner, too, emphasizes that the play 'cleverly explores the nature of history – and what might have gone on behind closed doors'. (Gardner, 2014).

When Thatcher was elected as Prime Minister of Great Britain in 1979, for the first time in history the country was ruled entirely by females. Buffini's play written and directed by women and concentrating on the Monarch and the Prime Minister with the other two Actors playing 17 different characters from Nancy Reagan to Arthur Scargill has a political charge in itself. Actor 1 and Actor 2 question Thatcher's politics and how much ordinary people are affected by those politics. In general terms, Buffini emphasizes the Queen's inclination to represent all the people in her Commonwealth countries in contrast with Thatcher's anti-African attitude. While the Queen is portrayed as an affectionate, sentimental character, Thatcher is depicted as a tough, indifferent person. Although she comes from a left-wing bias, she is sure she is 'respectful to Mrs Thatcher, and to the Queen, as human beings' (Bosanquet, 2014). In order to underline the dispute between these two women, Buffini features an account of uneasy occasions between the government and the palace especially on issues of the miner's strike and South Africa. It is a widely known fact that 'The Queen has always been a huge supporter of the Commonwealth, while Mrs Thatcher was more suspicious of its value' (Carpenter and Palmer, 2009). There are references to the Queen's dismay at Thatcher's 'uncaring' attitude to the Commonwealth, she was disappointed by the 'divisive' nature of her government to the miners (Carpenter and Palmer, 2009). As much as there is apprehension between them, there is also contentment. Apparently The Queen has been a role model for Thatcher in every way and Thatcher has great respect for her which is noticeable in the way the PM curtsies before the Queen. Thatcher's hats, gloves, coats and handbags have been inspired by the Queen's. They were both wonderfully dressed and perfected by their ever-present handbags. Hence the play's title. Additionally, in a modern British context, 'handbagged' has the meaning 'attacked by a formidable female politician', which actually adds to the meaning of the play (Huntbach, 2007).

4. The Play in Context

1980s was a decade when people were passionate about politics and England was engaged in such societal issues as mass unemployment, riots, obedience to US foreign intervention, privatisation, attacks on trades unions, press abuse, the undermining of democratic institutions, the IRA, the Brighton bomb, and cuts in many areas (Smythe, 2014). By reminding the contemporary audience of the 1980s panorama, Buffini in fact reconsiders and reconstructs the recent British history in chronological order. The play is set in present time when Thatcher and the Queen remember their relationship in the 1980s. The play consists of 15 parts, 9 of which cover Thatcher's first term and the last 6 parts deal with her second term as Prime Minister. One can observe the effects of passage of time in both the Queen's and Thatcher's personal impressions of past events. The dialogue is fictional and guesswork but also the result of detailed research highlighting examples of tension between the government and the palace. Although the play deals with historical political issues in an amusing manner, the resolution part of the play is rather touching with reference to dementia. As the Queen remembers her beloved press secretary Michael Shea and tells the audience that he died of dementia, Thatcher corrects her: "One doesn't die of dementia, Ma'am. It's not a fatal condition. One dies of something else. One lives with dementia" (Buffini, 2013, p.117). Buffini

makes the Thatcher character speak from experience here, as Margaret Thatcher has suffered from dementia in her elderly years.

The interactions between the two women are torn between their younger and older selves. As the scenes alternate between past and present, not only the Thatcher-Queen meetings are made visible but also the behind-the-scenes struggle is made explicit. The characters challenge each other's views as they talk to their characters' alter egos or rather younger selves in order to document what they were thinking at the time. This challenging case actually facilitates the staging of history for the playwright who is mostly interested in the two women's leadership and the clash of their personalities. Despite the disputes, the two women were united in a deep sense of patriotism and enhancement of the country – an idea which is artistically, efficiently and practically embodied through the surrounding Union Jack stage set. The minimalist set, a white steel structure shaped like a Union Jack, proves to be a functional mechanism for the battle of wits. While Thatcher was humour-challenged, the Queen was known for her dry wit. In their weekly audiences at Buckingham Palace, it is well documented that the Queen has not experienced the lively teasing that she had enjoyed with some of her previous prime ministers, because Thatcher has had a habit of 'lecturing' endlessly (Smith, 2012).

5. The Play in Style

Unlike a traditional, realist play, *Handbagged* breaks the convention of the Fourth Wall at moments when characters address the audience directly. While 'Q' and 'T' are aware of the play as a theatrical event and 'Q' keeps asking for an interval, their younger selves 'Liz' and 'Mags' are more involved in real-life historical events. 'Actor 1' and 'Actor 2' complicate the style even more. The play's unconventional style becomes a means for delivering speculative and unreliable narrations in which the characters step in and out in a meta-theatrical set-up. Buffini impersonates the lead roles in doubles in order to present the audience older and younger versions of the Queen and the Iron Lady. While the younger pair (Liz and Mags) conforms to the formality of their sovereign and official roles, their older selves (Q and T) deny their memories of events: When the young monarch says 'Philip and I had put money on the election result' (Buffini, 2013, p.57), the older Queen claims just the opposite immediately: 'No we had not' (Buffini, 2013, p.57). There are several occasions when the older selves object to the younger selves with such immediate assertions as 'I didn't say that', 'It didn't happen that way', 'I may have thought that, but I never said it'. Such disapprovals give the characters the chance to illuminate the details of recent history. These objections also attempt to reconstruct the weekly meetings. Whereas the Queen is obliged to remain neutral in terms of politics, the PM is expected to manifest political judgment. Indeed Q tells T, 'Meeting one's PM is like meeting the other side of the coin. We are both Britain' (Buffini, 2013, p.33). When in fact The PM represents change and politics; the Queen represents constancy and the values beyond politics. Thus the playwright is in pursuit of the truth. In order to deliver the truth the characters break the Fourth Wall several times and speak directly to the audience reminding the onlookers that they are within a play.

In addition to the doubling of major characters, Buffini employs Actor 1 and Actor 2 to impersonate all other remaining 17 roles as diverse as Denis Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, Neil Kinnock, Nancy Reagan and the Palace Footman. (Actor 1 plays Kenneth Kaunda, Nancy Reagan, Michael Shea, Neil Kinnock, Enoch Powell, Kenneth Clarke, a Protester and a (fictitious) Palace Footman. Actor 2 plays Denis Thatcher, Peter Carrington, Geoffrey Howe, Ronald Reagan, Arthur Scargill, Gerry Adams, Rupert Murdoch, Michael Heseltine, Prince Philip). The Footman acts like a filler. He fills the audience in on the history and provides them with the necessary background information especially when the playwright cannot be sure about the spectators' recognition of political landscape of the 1980s. Additionally, The Queens or Thatchers regularly order the youngest character to clarify the events for the young audience. Such meta-theatrical playfulness adds to the humour in the play.

The play accommodates and complicates speeches, accounts, memories, news reports, and Christmas broadcasts along with the playwright's playful imagination. The Palace and The Government disagree on issues like Zimbabwe, the Falklands, bombings, and the riots. Such conflict actually gives the characters the chance to justify and rationalise their opposing opinions. Thatcher's imposing authority as to what will be discussed or omitted is challenged by Actor 1 who plays the fearless parts. He is determined to unveil certain omissions that Thatcher hesitates to talk about: 'I just feel there's some massive omissions here – The huge job losses; unemployment leapt by a million in one year, the unrest in Northern Ireland, the hunger strikes, the women protesters, the huge CND marches, missiles on British soil' (Buffini, 2013, p.54). Actor 1 stands for his author's

opinions by emphasizing the fact that ‘In the midst of all that royal carriage big dress Diana wedding stuff, the whole country was boiling with rage’ (Buffini, 2013, p.55) which Mags denies immediately and explains what it means to have ‘dignity’ and ‘courage’ by reminding that the Queen was shot at during Trooping of the Colour ceremonies and that ‘she passed it by without a word’ (Buffini, 2013, p.55). Actor 1 continues to pressurize Mags on the Belgrano issue informing the audience that The Belgrano ship was attacked on Mrs Thatcher’s orders killing 300 people. However T refutes Actor 1’s accusations and justifies her decisions by warning that her actions have saved British lives. Although the playwright embodies certain occasions that evoke dissatisfaction with Thatcher’s diplomacy, she also highlights particular facts that Thatcher’s politics strive for ‘making Britain great again’ (Buffini 2013, p.72,), that her politics ‘ended communism and brought down that wall’ (Buffini, 2013, p.69). The play fluctuates between opposing ideas and Thatcher’s actions when the Queen’s press secretary Shea says ‘I was going to talk about your decision to allow America to bomb Libya, using Britain as its base’ (Buffini, 2013, p.96), T immediately stops him. Thatcher’s headstrong character is underlined at various points which leaves her alone in many places, as Liz says of Mags ‘Alone in the UN, alone in the Commonwealth, in the Commons, alone in her own Cabinet’ (Buffini, 2013, p.98). In order to criticize Thatcher’s renewing policies Actor 1 and Actor 2 deliver Labour MP Kinnock’s famous ‘I warn you speech’ for 1983 general elections, which is also an input for the young audience: ‘If Margaret Thatcher wins on Thursday, I warn you not to be ordinary -’, ‘I warn you not to be young -’, ‘I warn you not to fall ill -’, ‘I warn you not to grow old -’ (Buffini, 2013, p.77). While Buffini explores the contrasts between public and private personalities, memories and facts, the play presents memorable slogans such as when Mags says ‘I believe in the working class, not the shirking class’ (Buffini, 2013, p.82). The play also details the alliance between The UK and the US when Ron imposes that ‘In a dangerous world, one element goes without question: Britain and America stand side by side’ (Buffini, 2013, p.49).

6. Conclusion

Handbagged provides entertainment due to its playful technique and humorous texture. It also provides education and information through its indirect allusions and references to recent history and politics in Britain. The play reconstructs and questions history and politics with utterances that bear speculation, denials and oppositions. The play sketches the Queen’s uneasy relationship with Mrs Thatcher. Although the women baffle each other they share empathy. The play portrays Thatcher’s tough and confrontational attitudes, yet the ending calls for sympathy. ‘Dementia’ is the last word of the play which may signify that the play is speculation and imagination on past events, yet like the state of dementia, the play communicates that history influences the present indirectly. The major characters remember and rationalize the past events in an impaired and distorted way.

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