

DAVID EDGAR'S DESTINY : A STUDY IN FORM

BY

FAWZIA ALY GADALLA

PH. D.

FACULTY OF ARTS

SOHAG

ASSIUT UNIVERSITY

I

David Edgar (1948- ) is a major contemporary British political playwright, who, like Howard Brenton, David Hare, and Trevor Griffiths, among others, has been politicised by the world political events of the crucial year 1968. David Edgar wrote exclusively for the theatre after giving up his career as a journalist in 1972. First, he wrote apitprop plays for politically - active theatre groups, especially, for the General Will, then he wrote epic and "social realist" plays for the mainstream theatre. Among his important plays are : Operation Iskra (1973); The National Theatre (1975); Destiny (1976); Wreckers (1977); The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs (1978); Mary Barns (1978); Teendreams (1978); Nicholas Nickleby (1980, adapted from Charles Dickens's novel); and Maydays (1983). "Both as a playwright and political activist," Catherine Itzin observes, "David Edgar epitomised

the growth of political theatre in Britain in the seventies."<sup>1</sup>

David Edgar's move towards writing large-scale and more complex plays for large scale-stages stemmed from a realization that :

The techniques of agitprop are incapable of dealing with questions of consciousness, precisely because they portray only the assumed objective essence of a situation, rather than the dynamic between how people subjectively perceive that situation and the underlying reality.<sup>2</sup>

Edgar wanted to write plays dealing with great public events. "What I wanted to do was create a theatre of public life."<sup>3</sup> To fulfil his purpose he moved into large stages. Here are his justifications :

I think it was two things. The prestige of small theatres is small. And there was a feeling that we were better than that. ... The second point, which is much more substantial, is that Howard Brenton and David Hare and I and a number of other people wanted to write plays about subjects which required large numbers of people, and also about public subjects which did not take place in rooms but in areas, which it is nice to have space to represent.<sup>4</sup>

In his search for a more complex form for a theatre

of public life, Edgar shifts from the agitprop to a form which he calls "social realism" :

I became a social realist. I think the only radical alternative to social realism, which is the agitprop, was no longer suitable. Agitprop was a response to the times—an increase in the working-class consciousness and militancy between 1970 and 1974. It was also a response to changes in history or an awareness of what the real history had been. Which may never revert.<sup>5</sup>

By the mid-1970s, Edgar adopted this "social realist" form which can embrace public and topical issues. Destiny and four other plays by Edgar : O Fair Jerusalem (1975), Saigon Rose (1976), Mary Barns, and The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs which he includes in his volume Plays : One are introduced by him thus :

Most of the plays in this volume can be called social realist pieces. That is, unlike symbolist or absurdist or agitprop plays, they present what aspires to be a recognizable picture of human behaviour as it is commonly observed—but, unlike naturalistic drama, they set such a picture within an overall social-historical framework. The characters and situations are thus not selected solely because that's how things are—but because they represent a significant element in an analysis of concrete

social situation. ... Social-realism presents 'typical' characters in a 'total' context. ... The most obvious example of such a play in this book is Destiny.<sup>6</sup>

Edgar's Destiny was first produced on 22 September 1976 at the Other Place, Stratford, then it was transferred on 12 May 1977 to the Aldwych Theatre, London. Destiny which received the Arts Council's John Whiting Award, is considered "one of the most important plays of the mid-seventies."<sup>7</sup> Destiny plays a pivotal role in Edgar's career because it marks his move away from the agitprop technique to the epic and "social realist" technique which carries him into large stages. John Bull observes : "From now on, Edgar's plays were not going to be simplistic, either in terms of their argument or of their form. With Destiny, Edgar turned away from the small halls of the agit-prop circuit, and set out to write a big play for big space."<sup>8</sup> Catherine Itzin sees that Edgar's endeavours as a political playwright culminate "with the production in 1976 of his anti-fascist play Destiny by the Royal Shakespeare Company at their small theatre in Stratford, then on the Aldwych main stage in 1977 and finally on television in 1978- an event regarded by many as one emphatic vindication of the political theatre movement."<sup>9</sup> Steve Grant asserts that "Destiny represents an important development in contemporary theatre insofar as it marks

the 'promotion' of radical theatre to suitably large and prestigious settings."<sup>10</sup> Destiny establishes Edgar's place as a political writer. In Elizabeth Swain's words : "By the time that Destiny was performed Edgar had become very involved politically, as a working activist, speaker and writer."<sup>11</sup> In Destiny, Edgar tried to deal with one of the crucial subjects of the day which is the growing power of conservative and neo-fascist tendencies in contemporary Britain. To investigate his theme, its roots and implications, Edgar portrays an election campaign organized by three political parties : the Conservative, the Labour and the rising Nation Forward which stands for Nation Front, and which is a version of many other extremist groups that prevailed in Britain. Linked to this plot is another which deals with racial discrimination and immigration. Ronald Hayman comments on the topicality of the play's theme and its treatment :

Destiny is better integrated, never making sacrifices or compromises for the sake of immediate dramatic effect. Ambitiously conceived, painstakingly researched and ingeniously constructed, it is a disturbing piece of writing, which centres on an analysis of the factors that pressure people into joining the National Front (or the Nation Forward Party as it is called in the play).<sup>12</sup>

The present paper attempts to study the form of

Destiny which is considered as a landmark in the writing career of its author as well as in the history of British Political drama since the early 1970s. The study will analyse the form of Destiny and its suitability to embrace its public theme. The previous studies on Destiny have not fulfilled the requirements of the present research either in terms of its scope or of its objectives. This formal approach, hopefully, would lead to a fuller grasp of the play's thematic implications. It would also lead to a better assessment of Destiny as one of the most important contemporary political plays in Britain.

The theme of the play is dealt with through a free approach to time, place and action. The play falls into three acts containing twenty-one scenes; the action which spans a long period of time, starts on 27 August 1947 and moves to and fro until it concentrates on a short period in 1976. The action deals with public settings such as, pubs, police stations, picket lines, etc. There are more than twenty speaking parts which carry the action of the play which has a rapid pace. The structure is based on episodic, fluid and cinematic movement. The short and episodic scenes are thematically and dramatically rather than chronologically linked. John Bull comments on this formal aspect of the play :

His general model is a variant of the epic, with frequent changes of location and a series of jumps through history before eventually concentrating on a brief period in contemporary England. The effect is to show the way in which a current political reality is a product both of previous history and of the particular interventions and inter-relations of individuals acting within that history. The objective history is enmeshed with subjective responses.<sup>13</sup>

The technical devices which depend on the continual change of scenes are intended by Edgar to help the audience to grasp the play's thematic implications :

The technique in Destiny I've rather uglily described as 'thematic linking', which is to say that a scene is followed by one which took place seven years earlier, followed by another which took place two years before that : not because I was flashing back, in the conventional sense, but because the answer to the question Scene C has posed took place seven years before and that was scene D, and the answer to the question Scene D posed came two years before that, and the answer to the question scene E posed requires us to return to the present tense. What I wanted the audience to do was actually view the play in terms of its theme, in terms of the social forces involved, not necessarily to be bothered with strict chronology.<sup>14</sup>

## II

Destiny starts with the theme of colonialism and imperialism which forms the core of the British Right. The play opens in India on 15 August 1947, the Independence Day of India from the long British rule. The first scene of the play opens with a speech delivered by Jawaharlal Pandit Nehru who proclaims India's independence : "Long years ago, we made a trust with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem the pledge, not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially ..."<sup>15</sup> The scene emphasizes two kinds of mentality, that of the British with their racial and colonial tendencies symbolized by "a huge, dark painting of putting down of the Indian Mutiny. It dominates the set," (p. 9) and that of the Indians who finally got their freedom symbolized by "the sounds of celebration in the distance." (p. 9) The Indians' cheers mark their yearning for freedom of which they were long deprived by the British. Edgar represents both attitudes from the start by characters who will carry this theme later on in the play. The British side is represented by Colonel Chandler, Major Rolfe, and Sergeant Turner, three different orders representing the British army. The Indian side is represented by the eighteen-year-old Khera who is helping his British masters to pack their belongings before



leaving India for their country. Fascist and racial attitudes dominate the British military men. Major Rolfe sees the Indians as "a bunch of half-crazed dervishes," (p. 14) while Sergeant Turner finds the Indians "much more than savages." (p. 12) Though the Colonel entertains unexpected democratic attitudes by asking Khera to join his masters in drinking, yet he does not drink to the Indians' independence but to "The King and Mr. Churchill." (p. 12) The problem which started by the British occupation of India has not ended after India has got its independence, because its political, historical, social and psychological consequences are hard to remove :

Turner : Is it true, sir, they'll be able to come to England now, to live ?

Colonel : I believe Mr. Attlee is preparing legislation, now India is in the Commonwealth.

Rolfe : Do you approve of that, Colonel ?

Colonel (quite sharply) : Of course. It's an obligation. We are the mother country, after all.

Rolfe : I have some reservations. (p. 14)

Rolfe and Turner whose racial sentiments appear in this early scene, will, later on, support the Immigration Act and stand for racism. Rolfe's rigid views are aired in his talk to Khera : "Well, Mr. Khera, apparantly you've just become a British

citizen." (p. 14) Khera has already told the Colonel : "I would like to come to England very much." (p. 12) These three military men represent three orders in the British army which will be transformed into three class divisions in England, the high-middle class, the low-middle class, and the working class. John Bull observes : "These distinctions of rank are carefully stressed ... because, converted into class-terms, they will vitally affect the attitude of each character to subsequent events in England."<sup>16</sup> These men will go back to England to steer the play's action and to represent the colonial and fascist attitudes which will dominate the British society ever since. Khera will re-appear in England to stand for freedom and for the right of the Asians and the blacks. John Bull maintains : "With the exception of the Colonel, a great deal of the play will be concerned with the future activities of these men, and the way in which their lives become ideologically inter-linked."<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Swain comments on the importance of the first scene : "In this first scene. Edgar effectively introduces the emotions and conflicts that will run through the play."<sup>18</sup> The scene ends effectively with Khera's Latin words: "Civis - Britannicus - Sum," (p. 15) making a mock toast to the painting of the Indian Mutiny.

In the second scene the action is steered

to the present in Taddley, an industrial Midlands town in which the growing tendency towards fascism which is based on the racial and imperialistic attitudes established in the first scene, is represented by the rising power of the Nazi party Nation Forward. Colonel Chandler opens the scene with a verse monologue directly addressed to the audience :

In '48 came home.  
 Colonel Chandler. Monochrome.  
 Another England,  
 Rough and raw,  
 Not gentle, sentimental as before.  
 Became a politician, not to master but  
 to serve :  
 To keep a careful finger on the grassroots  
 Tory nerve ;  
 Like any born to riches, not to plunder  
 but to give :  
 Always a little liberal, a great conserva-  
 tive ...  
 Colonel Chandler, past his prime :  
 Dignified. Worthy. Out of time.  
 Colonel Chandler, oyster-eyed,  
 One fine summer morning died. (pp. 15-6)

His monologue shows his regret for the British Empire's decline. On his death, Crosby, his nephew who is a more liberal Tory, replaces him in the constituency and wins the nomination over Major Rolfe who is a rigid Tory. Crosby jokingly observes, "Old Tories never die, they just get redistributed." (p. 17)

The following scene shifts rapidly to the Labour Party where Robert Clifton who champions the workers as well as the Asians and the blacks, is encouraged by Paul, a young worker, to nominate himself for the election. This scene is juxtaposed with the previous scene which deals with the opposing party members. But the juxtaposition of the two scenes also suggests that the bent towards power is what motivates the election campaign of both parties. With the fourth scene of Act One, the action rapidly shifts to focus on Major Rolfe, a character from the India scene. Similar to the Colonel in scene two Rolfe opens this scene with a monologue directly addressed to the audience in which he expresses his view of contemporary England, lamenting its waning power, and of the future :

In '47. Came on home.  
 Major Rolfe. A face of stone.  
 Another England, seedy, drab,  
 Locked in the dreams of glories she  
 once had.  
 The major looks at England and bemoans  
 her tragic fate, ...  
 Major Rolfe, sees the light,  
 Calls for a counter from the Right:  
 Major Rolfe, starboard seer,  
 Loses, for they will not hear. (p. 23)

Dressed in a black overcoat, Rolfe with two other characters, Turner and Kershew whom we meet later on as supporters of rightist policies, celebrate

the memory of those who died for the sake of freedom, an ironical move if it is compared with Rolfe's racial and imperialistic views which are the roots of his capitalistic involvement as someone who belongs to "the lower-middle-class." (p. 27) This scene bears a false resemblance with the previous one which deals with the champion of freedom. Or, perhaps, the resemblance is real because Clifton will become a false supporter of freedom as Rolfe is in this scene.

The fifth scene of Act One opens with the third character from the India scene, the ex-Sergeant Turner who opens the scene with a monologue similar to those of the Colonel and the Major :

In '47. Came on home.  
Sergeant Turner, to a Midlands town.  
Another England, brash and bold,  
A new world, brave and bright and  
cold.  
The Sergeant looks at England, and  
it's changed before his eyes ;  
Old virtues, thrift and prudence, are  
increasingly despised ... .  
Sergeant Turner, NCO :  
Where's he going : Doesn't know. (p. 28)

His monologue, likewise, laments the disappearance of old England, and shows him to be mislocated in a changed world. Thus, coming home he opens a shop to sell antique things. This is a kind

of metaphore for his attachment to the good old days and the old ideals. His conservative views are also exposed as he hangs on the wall the "1970 Election Conservative Rarty Posters." (p. 28) He is glad that the Labour lost the 1970 election: "An end to six years of socialist misrule. At last, the little man will get his chance against the big battalions." (p.29) Ironically enough, soon after he has uttered these words, he is forcefully evicted from his small shop by the Metropolitan Investment Trust, a very powerful institution which does not care for the small investor. When Turner asks for reasons, the answer comes as follows : "Because, my love, destroying you will make someone somewhere some money. ... Cos we, make our money out of money ... And you, the little man, the honest trader, know your basic handicap ? you've suffering a gross deficiency of greed." (pp. 31-2) Turner ends the scene saying "Where do I go now." (p.32) The answer to his question occurs after two scenes from now when he gets involved with the Nation Forward Party and then he becomes the Party's candidate.

The last scene of the first act goes back to 20 April 1968 to show a secret meeting held by a group of people, Maxewll, Cleaver and Durmont, who all gather in an upstairs pub room and who seem to support freedom. But soon

Cleaver asks the group to raise their glasses and toast "the memory of the man whose birthday we have come together to celebrate." (p.33) The man is Adolf Hitler. Edgar tries to take us back in 1968 so as to show us the origin of Nation forward Party which entangled in its webs, the hero of the play, Turner, as well as other ordinary British people. Before the scene ends Khera enters. The stage directions read : "The scene freezes, and LIGHTS cross-cut to a spot on KHERA, at the side. He's...in his early forties ... He wears the protective clothing of a foundry worker." (p.38) Khera is the fourth character from the India scene to deliver a monologue introducing himself directly to the audience and expressing his views about the past and the present. Here Khera, whose liberal views are contrasted sharply with those of the fascists shown in the previous scene, hopes to put his foot down in England :

In '58. Came on home.  
 Gurjeet Singh Khera. To a Midlands town.  
 Another England, another nation,  
 Not England of imagination ...  
 Gurjeet Singh Khera,  
 Returns to haunt the empire's grave.(p.38)

The irony of the scene lies in that with the view of the prevalence of the racial and neo-fascist sentiments in England, the destruction of Khera's hopes of freedom will be foreseen. In England,

though he is no more a slave, yet he will be maltreated as an Asian. He will be persecuted by the same racial and colonial attitude which enslaved him thirty years ago in India. By this juxtaposition Khera is suggested to be entangled in the destructive webs of the racial and fascist sentiments seen in the ceremonies of Hitler's birthday. By the end of Khera's monologue, Act One ends after establishing the basis of England's rightist move from which Nation Forward Party springs. Elizabeth Swain comments on Act One : "By raising all the issues in the first act, setting forth key moments and events ... Edgar can minimize further exposition and maximize the complexities for an analysis of what led up to the social and political climate in Britain in 1976 ."19

The by-election campaign becomes central in Act Two. It links its eight scenes and interweaves with its other issues, especially those of the racial conflict and the effect of the 1971 Immigration Act. Elizabeth Swain again illuminates us here :

while the plot of Destiny is essentially about the efforts of three parties to organize an election campaign, it serves more as a spine which links the other issues of the play : discriminatory labor practices, union involvement



with politics, corporate involvement with politics, immigration policies and the rule of law, to mention the larger issues, all of which contribute to an explanation of the main issue- why Britain is moving politically to the right.<sup>20</sup>

In scene one of the second act, Khera is shown to be involved in a union fight against the owners of one of Taddley's local factories where he works. His words which he uttered in the previous scene about facing the British on their own ground seem to be ringing in his own ears and in ours. We see him here determined to pursue his fight against his exploiters by supporting a picket line so as to force Platt, his immediate employer and the owner of the Foundry Plant to stop his racial acts against the Asian workers. Khera addresses the audience saying at the end of the scene : "(out front). The Foundry industry. Long hours. Hot, dangerous conditions. Asians lowest paid, least chances of promotion, first to go." (p. 41)

Khera's closing words are juxtaposed with the events of the next scene, scene two of Act Two, one of the most powerful scenes of the play which takes place in 1976 and focuses on the forces which defeat Khera's aspirations for a free life. Such forces concentrate on the formation of the

Nazi Party, Nation Forward, which supports the Immigration Act and racial discrimination. Khera's picket line will be overthrown by it. In this scene the formation of this party is openly proclaimed by Maxwell, the Party's General Secretary, whom we met before in scene six of the first act celebrating Hitler's birthday : "People of Taddley. This is Nation Forward, the party which puts Britain first. Our nation is under threat ... Most of all, treacherous politicians have conspired to flood our country with the refuse of the slums Africa and Aisa. Vote for change." (p.49) Turner whose small business was overthrown in scene five of Act One is the same person who is now chairing Nation Forward Party and is finally becoming the Party's candidate, who believes that this party is "a truly patriotic organisation." (p.42) All the party's supporters are recognizable people from different other parties, Labour or Conservative, and they belong to the different classes in Britain. They parallel the three orders represented by the Colonel, the Major and the Sergeant in the India scene. These people voice their grievances and their dissatisfactions with their conditions. Their contradictory views are cleverly shown by Maxwell to be consistent. Then he makes them believe that Nation Forward Party can solve their problems and those of their country :

But more, much more, unites us than divides us ... . You can change your class and your creed. But you can't change the blood in your veins. ... But I'm afraid we've something else in common here. ... More seriously, we all of us observe a gradual decay, disintegration, in our fortunes and the fortunes of our nation. And perhaps there is a reason- that we have a common enemy. ... But there's one, small group of men and women who don't laugh. There is one, small, growing party which knows what is happening and is determined to reverse it. That is Nation Forward. And I hope, with all sincerity, that you will wish to join this party, join with us, and make our country great again. (pp. 46-7)

Stanley Weintraub comments on this scene: "Indeed, the play does demonstrate the way in which disparate grievances can be cobbled together into powerful force by a party that locates appropriate scapegoats and appeals to a variety of self-interests."<sup>21</sup> Edgar himself comments on this scene :

There is the meeting scene ... with all the archetypes of fascism who have nothing in common beyond despair- the unemployed worker, the old worker threatened by technological change, the middle-class woman with her savings being destroyed, the polytechnic lecturer, his lower middle-class property-oriented wife, who brings in the technical worker, and so on, all being brought together

by the philosophy of fascism, by the character of Maxwell, who takes all their different little worries and despairs and neatly knits them together into a conspiracy theory of history- wham, bang, fascism. ...

The element that you couldn't get from a pamphlet discussing the class nature of fascism is the actual emotional draw- the actual appeal to it, and the actual connection to oneself.<sup>22</sup>

Elizabeth Swain observes, "The remarkable thing about this scene is its familiarity. The people who opt for the fascist party are not monsters; they are former socialists as well as former Tories, middle class as well as working class, and Edgar makes them so close to ourselves that we are terrified."<sup>23</sup>

The strength with which Nation Forward has been started and supported is contrasted sharply with the weakness and disunity of the Labour Party represented in the following scene. Clifton, the Labour Party candidate and the supporter of the Asian workers, such as Khera and his companions, appears to be reluctant to back his supporters because he does not want "to swin against the tide." (p.51) The scene ends significantly by "Blackout. In the darkness, another loudspeaker message." (p.51) The message is delivered by Turner's voice which propgates the ideals of Nation

Forward : "People of Taddley. This is Nation Forward, the party which puts Britain first ... Vote for a change. Vote Nation Forward. Vote Dennis Turner." (p.51) The election campaign of this party is intensified. When the action shifts to the following scene, scene four of the second act, we see another aspect of this campaign represented by Turner's examining the election speech written for him by Maxwell. Then in scene six Turner is being drilled for the election speech and for answering key questions. The scene ends with Cleaver's words, "We've had a little purge," (p.68) justifying his act of firing Maxwell from the party, ending his membership in an attempt to protect the party from alien members. The intensity of Cleaver's words can be better grasped at the beginning of the next scene in which the action abruptly focuses on Turner as delivering his election speech, a technique which helps to shed light on the firm gripe which steers the party's policy. The stage directions read : "Immediately, a spot on Turner, in front of the banner. He is micked. His speech is cool, assured, professional. It echoes round the theatre." (p.68) The final scene of Act Two immediately follows Turner's speech and it deals with Rolfe's monologue addressed to the audience after he has buried the body of his **son** while fighting for the British army in Northern Ireland. The defeat of Rolfe, the great friend of Nation

Forward is set against the triumph of the Nazi party and its election campaign. Rolfe's son was fighting another imperialistic war in Ireland similar to that fought and lost by the British in India thirty years ago attended by Rolfe himself. Juxtaposed with the previous scene this scene implicitly suggests the defeat of fascists by fascists. Yet Rolfe will not learn as he ends the scene and his speech by "We need an iron dawn." (p.70)

As the second act shows the growing power of the fascist party and the deterioration of the Labour, the third act resolves the by-election campaign by showing the compromise done by the Conservative Party in favour of Nation Forward. The results of the election announce the victory of the Conservatives and the utter defeat of the Labour, while Nation Forward picked up 22 per cent of the vote which is considered a promising result for a future domination of that newly-formed party. Catherine Itzin says that the by-election has undergone "an alarming change in polling patterns in favour of the Nation Forward Party."<sup>24</sup> John Bull's comment on the by-election goes as follows : "In the event, Nation Forward's intervention into the strike and the campaign proves decisive. They take the votes off the Labour candidate and help elect a Tory MP. But ... this is only

a move to make their movement respectable."<sup>25</sup>  
 The workers are shown in utter defeat betrayed by their country and their representatives. The Nation Forward Party moves, after the results have been announced, towards right-wing policies which are anti-working-class tendencies. In the final scene of the play Turner is taken to meet Rolfe to ask for material support for the Party which has already been assisted by him especially after his son's death. To his astonishment, Turner discovers during this meeting that Rolfe, the great friend of the party, is the owner of the Metropolitan Investment Trust, the great firm which caused his ruin earlier. Turner's confusion is expressed in these words : "The people took my livelihood away. ... You may not notice it. I'm suffering a gross deficiency of greed." (p.96) Turner looks with great bewilderment at "the painting of the putting down of the Indian Mutiny." (p.91) which represents the imperialistic policy with which he identifies and which lets him down as it did others before him. He feels mystified and needs an explanation from Cleaver : "So tell me. Tell me. Tell me." (p.96) Then, according to the stage directions :

Suddenly, lights change. Cleaver and Turner lit from behind in silhouette. A VOICE is heard; gentle, quiet, insistent. It is the voice of ADDLF HITLER. (p.96)

Hitler's words show that Turner has been tricked only because he did not understand. The play might further such an understanding of the fascist policy :

Adolf Hitler: Only one thing could have stopped our Movement : if our adversaries had understood its principles, and had smashed, with the utmost brutality, the nucleus of our new Movement.

Slight pause.

Hitler. Nuremburg. Third of September, 1933.

Blackout. (p.97)

Elizabeth Swain perceptively comments on the final scene of the play :

Turner then seems to grasp at least some of the implications of the vast web of which he has become a part. Edgar gives dramatic intensity to the scene by the presence of the same painting of the Indian Mutiny that dominated the first scene of the play. He thus visually reinforces the idea that Turner's attitudes were formed by the colonial mentality, a mentality that has destroyed him and has caused bloodshed for centuries. Turner perhaps has a glimmer of recognition as he stands in silhouette, with the unreconstructable Cleaver, and the voice of Adolf Hitler is heard.<sup>26</sup>

Stanley Weintraub sees Turner as "a small shopkeeper attracted to the new party in what he conceives



as self-defense, only to discover that Right is not right but suicidal for his interests."<sup>27</sup> John Bull comments on Turner's final discovery :

What Turner is confronted with is not something that arises, almost accidentally, from a localised set of circumstances, as he at first wishes to believe, but can be logically connected with the mukier workings of the capitalist system that his display of the Conservative election-poster declares him to be a supporter of.<sup>28</sup>

As seen above, the play's episodic, fluid and cinematic structure based on a rapid scene change is instrumental to the assessment of people's connections and their different reactions to the same events. As the scenes are not chronologically or logically arranged, they can be seen in isolation and, at the same time, they help to form a complete pattern. Edgar explains : "It's an agitprop structure, in a funny kind of way—each scene makes its point. There is the Labour MP Who Sells Out. There is the central plot about the supporters of fascism being betrayed by fascism... There is the meeting scene ..."<sup>29</sup> John Bull observes : "Each scene stands alone, and at the same time contributes to an overall structure which forces an audience to weigh what it has discovered in one scene against the contra-

dictions of another."<sup>30</sup> This rapid change of scenes necessitates certain compression and condensation of the action. Edgar's technical devices such as, blackout, scene freezing, song, monologue and direct address to the audience, give him freedom, economy and concentration in dealing with his theme. This technique helps Edgar to insert important information in a rapid way which "could best serve his purpose, in this case that of describing and analyzing a frightening phenomenon of contemporary Britain."<sup>31</sup>

### III

Edgar's fluid and epic technique which depends on the episodic structure does not allow him to elaborate the characters' internal reactions to the different events with which they are entangled. The characters, accordingly, are there only to fulfil a social and public rather than individual role. Bull remarks "The use of epic-devices, in particular the continual breaks in the action, does, however, prevent such development from taking the edge off Edgar's insistence on a material and social explanation of behaviour."<sup>32</sup> Edgar prevents his audience from feeling pity for the

private grief of Major Rolfe who lost his son in Northern Ireland. Rolfe's monologue is made not to air private sentiments but to mark his shift from the Conservative Party into the extreme right:

You generals, you ministers, police-chiefs, you won't see, we are at war. In Belfast. Bradford. Bristol, Birmingham, the one we lost in Bombay thirty years ago, the one we're going to lose in Britain now. Unless you see in time. ...

He is crying.

The sun has set. And we should not remember. We should not look back, but should, instead, think only of the morning. (p. 70)

Elizabeth Swain asserts that Edgar focuses on the public aspect of Rolf's grief : "His son's death solidifies his move from right-wing Tory to active fascist, and Edgar sets forth the incident in such a way that the intense pain of his private loss is set against the public political situation."<sup>33</sup> Clifton, the Labour Party candidate is the only character in the play who is portrayed to have a wife, Sandy, and a baby-girl, Ruth. The only domestic setting in the play takes place in the sitting-room of the Turners when the Conservative Party candidate, Crosby visited them to discuss some party problems. Sandy, Clifton's wife is shown to be a political activist. Clifton introduces her to Crosby : "Sandy. Who works for the Thawston

Community Project and is, in her spare time, my wife." (p.73) Clifton's wife and child are used by him to screen his retreat and compromise of ideals :

Clifton (hands PAUL a note). You won't have seen this. Came through the window last night. Accompanied by a brick and a neat little pile of excreta.

Paul reads the note.

Paul : So you retreat ? Because of this ? You see what these bastards can do, and you retreat ?

Sandy : Ruth's eight months old, Paul. (p. 87)

Edgar's portrayal of Turner is also similar in that the focus is on the character's public role. When Turner's business was overthrown by an upper hand, Edgar did not let Turner indulge over his loss. Instead, he showed him joining the Nation Forward Party whose ideals go with his original colonial sentiments. Turner's political move which might be considered a retaliatory step leads him at the end of the play to a state of shock then to a dim understanding of the workings of the Nazi policy. Edgar observes : "The characters ... were chosen quite carefully to add up if not to a total then to at least a representative picture of the forces of fascism and their various opponents, and in a scene like the meeting scene early in

Act Two several of the characters were invented purely to contribute to the social-political mosaic."<sup>34</sup> However, Ronald Hayman thinks that Edgar pushes his technique of characterization too far :

In fact none of the private relationships is developed. ... Certainly, temperamental clashes at a picket line are as legitimate a subject for drama as temperamental clashes in the drawing-room or the bedroom, but the characterization in Destiny suffers because David Edgar is more concerned to deploy the results of research than to explore material in the process of writing. The action is too schematic to admit any investigation of individuality, while his only interest in story-telling is to illustrate his thesis.<sup>35</sup>

Thus Edgar's characters are portrayed to accommodate with a theatre for public life. Yet, though fictitious and drawn to fulfil a public role they become recognizable because they are seen against a recognizable and familiar social context. Edgar's move from agitprop technique to what he calls social realist technique relates to the objectives of his public theatre. He states his intentions in Destiny : "I realized that the only way to alert people was to do a play based on real fascist parties operating in Britain now. ... I was determined from the start to show how the British middle class was just susceptible to

fascism, potentially, as the German middle class had been in the 1930s."<sup>36</sup> The scene where Nation Forward Party was proclaimed portrays ordinary people being persuaded to join fascist parties. They are shown to have been tricked into the abyss of fascism. Edgar observes : "If Destiny has a virtue, it is that it is true. And that is always upsetting."<sup>37</sup> The people attended that party meeting belong to different other parties. Mrs. Howard says : "I have been a member of the conservative Party for 40 years." (p.44) If she shifts to another party, it is because she lost faith in her party's ideals : "I am afraid that the Party is not what once it was. It has become craven. Once it represented all the finest values of the middle class. Now gangrenous." (p.44) Another character, Liz, is ready to align herself with the Nazi party because of different reasons: "The union won't lift a finger. And another thing. It's folk like us. who work for Britain, who are suffering the most. ... So we can't sell. Or buy. So people get desperate. There seems no way." (p.45) A third character, Attwood, who is also dissatisfied though he belongs to the working-class, says "I'm in a union, and I've voted Labour all my life." (p. 45) What bothers Attwood as a worker is the economic conditions as well as the predomination of the Asian and black workers in the firm where he works: "I'll be quite frank about

the blacks, I hate 'em. ... Sooner or later, summat's got to be done." (p.46) Tony is a fourth discontented person in this meeting. He used to work for Turner in his antique shop with Paul, but each had attached himself to a different faction. Paul supported Clifton the Labour Party candidate; Tony thought of solving his problems differently by joining the Nation Forward Party. In his meeting with Paul, his old companion at the police station, Tony airs the party's jargon which shows the extent of his deception in his party's ideals:

And when we win, get rid of them, there'll be no need for conflict. Class war. ... Then capital and labour work together, in the interests of the nation. Putting Britain first. The nation, over all. ... 'Course, you can sneer. At race and blood. But everything you got, Paul, comes from that. Everything healthy, worthy, everything with any meaning, value, s'from the blood ... (p. 83)

Elizabeth Swain comments on Tony and other people like him : "Edgar shows how comforting the lies and jargon can be to the simple-thinking Tonys of the world, the appeal of the dogma to the working class as well as to the other classes, whose representatives appear in the Taddley Patriotic League meeting scene."<sup>38</sup>

Turner, as an ex-sergeant in the occupying British Army in India, is more susceptible to be invaded by the fascist policy. Elizabeth Swain suggests that Turner's colonialist sentiments are not born traits but ones which are implanted by "the British presence in India that creates the false barriers, ranks, and classes that encourage one group to dominate another and acquire racist views. Britain becomes a multiracial society as a result of its earlier colonial policies."<sup>39</sup> Major Rolfe is one more recognizable character who shifts to the Nazi policy. John Bull comments on Edgar's portrayal of the character of Rolfe : "Unlike the Colonel or the sergeant he is not of either the ruling or the working class. He is the representative of the petit-bourgeoisie, whose potential for involvement preoccupies Edgar considerably in Destiny."<sup>40</sup> Edgar's major characters, such as Turner, Major Rolfe, Crosby and Clifton, both conservative and labour, are shown to have sold out. The ones who stood by their ideals to the end are the Asians, Khera, Paul and Patel. Though Edgar treated this latter group of characters sympathetically, his focus centres on the former group. In Khera's words Edgar stresses the British racial attitudes which create fascism :

I come from Jullundur, the Punjab.  
 ... So, to England, land of tolerance  
 and decency, and found it hard to



understand. But last year, I went home, on holiday, to India. Saw, with new eyes, just what the English did. And then I understood. There is more British capital in India, today, than 30 years ago. ... It runs quite deep. Even the poor, white British, think that they, not just their masters, born to rule. And us, the blacks, the Irish, all of us- a lesser breed, without the Rule of Law. (p. 87)

Elizabeth Swain comments on Edgar's portrayal of Asian characters : "Edgar draws the character of Khera with warmth and compassion, evincing sympathy for him. Edgar's Asian characters in Baby Love, Our Own People, and Destiny represent some of the rare sensitive portrayals of Asians by British playwrights."<sup>41</sup> On his characterization in Destiny, Edgar comments :

I wanted to create characters that the audience could relate to and in a way that they could confront in themselves. It is facile to say that all the members of the National Front or the National Party wandor about in jackboots, siegheiling all the time, that they are self-evidently ghastly horrible people. It is not only facile, it is counter-productive to create monsters. ... I wanted to create believable people. Some of them are pleasant; some of them are unpleasant. All of them make terrible political, psychological and emotional mistakes. That's what the play is about.<sup>42</sup>

## IV

As a committed playwright, Edgar tries to get Destiny rooted in factual situations and topical material which he could achieve through laborious research. Steve Grant asserts : "One of the play's many strengths is its vast detail, the result of years of painstaking research into right-wing organizations."<sup>43</sup> Ronald Hayman comments on Edgar's technique in Destiny :

It is a journalistic play, a dramatization of material yielded by the kind of research that might have gone into the preparation of a television documentary, and in so far as it succeeds in the theatre, it succeeds by setting up in rivalry to television, at the same time as taking advantage of the sense of community that didactic plays can offer an audience of believers.<sup>44</sup>

Edgar comments on the factual aspect of his play thus : "Destiny is not an agitprop play: the accessibility of what it has to say relies not just on its argument, but also on large part on the recognizability of the situations it portrays."<sup>45</sup> Yet Edgar's historical and factual incidents are transformed into fiction. Edgar's Note on the play goes thus :

The constituency of Taddley, where

most of the play is set, is a fictional town on the west of Birmingham. ... The Nation Forward Party, The Taddley Patriotic League ... The Metropolitan Investment Trust are fictional organizations ... None of the characters seen in the play has ever existed. (p.7)

Thus Destiny combines fact and fiction to form what Edgar and others call "faction", and what Edgar believes to be a most suitable form for his public themes. This technique, in Edgar's words, is that of "taking a contemporary factual phenomenon ... making it into 'faction', based very closely and authentically on real subject matter."<sup>46</sup> On another occasion, Edgar describes this technique of combining facts and fiction thus: "It can, at the same time, present a political analysis and the real problems of living people; it can at once present the facts of a situation in an entertaining way and link those facts to the real aspirations and fears of flesh and blood characters."<sup>47</sup> Some documentary material are contained in the play such as Nehru's words which open the play and Hitler's words which close it. At the beginnings of Acts Two and Three, Edgar quoted lines from Hitler, Gregor Strasser, Joseph Goebbels, and Robert Moss which have a bearing on his theme. John Bull comments on this aspect of the play :

It is not an attempt to reproduce history as such, but involves the creation of a fictional set of characters to demonstrate the workings of the meticulously researched material.<sup>48</sup>

In his essay, "On Drama-Documentary," Edgar tries to show the value of using a blend of fact and fiction in drama to be able to say important things in "a uniquely authoritative and credible way."<sup>49</sup> To write plays on public themes, the playwright tries to give a picture which can be recognized and believed in by his audience. Edgar observes :

What I am saying is that dramatic fiction can uniquely illumine certain aspects of public life; and the dramatic power of drama-documentary lies in its capacity to show us not that certain events occurred (the headlines can do that) or even, perhaps, why they occurred (for such information we can go to the weekly magazines or the history books), but how they occurred: how recognizable human beings rule, fight, judge, meet, negotiate, suppress and overcome.<sup>50</sup>

Irving Wardle sees that Edgar succeeded in Destiny to reach an excellent blend between his factual and topical material, and his theatrical technique. Thus Wardle judges Destiny as :

a passionate well-informed inquiry into the sources of British fascism. ... I cannot remember any play that coupled so much urgent topical information with such dramatic force. ... In dramatic terms it is a transformation show, presenting the indoctrination process step by step.<sup>51</sup>

In his review of the play's television production, Dennis Potter praises Destiny as "a play which astonished me with its intelligence, density, sympathy and finally controlled anger."<sup>52</sup> Steve Grant, likewise, views the play favourably : "It is the first political play of its kind to come to terms with the attractions of right-wing politics as well as their more obvious shortcomings."<sup>53</sup> Edgar's objectives in Destiny as a social realist play is to help the audience to recognize themselves and their actions in the play. Elizabeth Swain explains:

Rather than rousing the audience to action, the play disturbs complacency, provoking self-examination. If, however, thought may be said to precede action, then Destiny may be seen as indirectly agitational, or perhaps, intellectually agitational, and an equally valid and more subtle approach to political play-writing.<sup>54</sup>

Edgar came to believe after deserting the agitprop form of playwrighting that the theatre is an important medium for effecting a long-term social and political

change. The joke, Edgar tells here, says much about his great faith in the effectiveness of the theatre's role in society :

You know the old joke about the man who was sentenced to 999 years and said to the judge. "I can't possibly serve all that" and the judge said, "Well do as much as you can." Well, one does as much as one can.<sup>55</sup>

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