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**A Sociopolitical Analysis of John Arden's *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance*: Futility of Being a Wacky Mutineer**

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**Abstract**

Futility of being a wacky mutineer is one of the significant matters used in Arden's *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance*. This mainly implied matter exploited by Arden to intentionally criticize the war-makers and at the same time to expose the mutineer's attempt in making change via infuriating the townsfolk to revolt against the inequitable authority. This study aims at visualizing the real confrontation and struggle between Musgrave and the representatives of the dominating regime. It is divided into two sections and a conclusion. Section one deals with John Arden, the playwright, who is constantly a political radical, cautious of authority and exceeding social institutions. In section two, the sociopolitical analysis of *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* is dedicated to explain how Arden is often viewed as one of so prominent playwrights who has created a theatrical rebellion in English drama.

**Keywords:** Arden, *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance*, wacky, Mutineer, Futility.

**John Arden: The Playwright**

John Arden (1930-2012) is the son of a factory manager, and one of the most noteworthy British playwrights who appears in the mid of the twentieth century. As Arden interested in writing for the stage, he creates mysterious and unique influence in the positions of modern prominent dramatist. His early literary life is framed and decorated with distinctive achievements in different fields, such as; dramas, essays, and novels. Celebrity and prominence have accompanied him as a member of the new generation of English writers aided by George Devine at London Royal Court in the 1950s. Indeed, he always "exceeded the limits of 'kitchen-sink drama'". His quest for a popular theatre led him to experiment with a variety of dramatic structures and styles. He was influenced by Brecht for inspiration" (Brewer, 153). Essentially, the term kitchen-sink drama is a British cultural movement that emerged in late 1950s and early 1960s in theatre, art, novels, film, in which the main characters usually would be viewed as angry young men who were disappointed by their present social order. This term is commonly used to be

accepted in England in the 1950ies. His play, *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* is built upon angry young soldiers who struggle against the dreadful and horrible circumstances they are left with.

For Arden, drama is an art of a common essence, and as a result he believes that it is “a public art and thus should appeal to more than a minority if it is to remain healthy but finds that this must be tempered by a recognition of public taste as corrupt” (Rebellato, 112). To create a sense of pleasure and delight in attending theatre, Arden argues that the theatre should activate the viewer's mental contentment by creating a copy of ordinary people and the possibilities of the individual spirit and understanding, which he relates to community's collective renovation (Brewer,157). In this regard, Arden has been considered a paragon of a new generation of playwrights “launched at the Royal Court: provocative, argumentative, brusque, and Anglo-Brechtian” (Sanders,620). Undeniably, the British dramatist, Arden proves a typical and an exceptional voice in exhibiting social and political issues. Arden succeeds in motivating the audience to pursue him through dividing his plays into two plots: a main plot and a subplot. The subplot which is often concerned with inferior characters tended to mirror the main plot. In this way, he makes the roles of the minor and major characters more noticeable and simultaneously indispensable.

In 1960, Arden married the Irish actress Margareta D'Arcy, and immediately the couple began writing together to produce plays for community theatre and plays for radio. This type of collaboration is characterized by displaying much more effective political and social issues. With the works of Arden and D'Arcy, the early 1960s community theatre came out. They used to portray and reveal the situations of the society: “to the shape of the fifteenth-century church, to the need to collage rather than to design costumes, to a non-professional system of casting, to the naturalness of the inexperienced actors” (Kershaw,114). In cooperation, they thrive to invigorate the old story, to illustrate the familiar as strange, and to turn the story into a controlling comment on the existing sociopolitical circumstances.

Arden is always aware of authority and exceeding social institutions. Once in 1966, he was questioned whether he found “himself a political or sociological writer, he responded that it was not possible not to be a political playwright because any play that deals with people in a society must necessarily be a political one” (Brewer,156). It is extensively discerned that Arden's theatre is based on contradictions and the clash of opposites to express the ideas despite the consequences. Thus, many critics used to have judgment made for them objected that they found Arden's style unintelligible (Rabey,64). His collaboration with D'Arcy gives the spectators a

chance to appreciate how Arden's ideas and views have developed through the course of his literary life. No doubt, the encouragement of D'Arcy is so evident especially when she advocates Arden to exploit the language of political and religious dialogue to become more apparently controversial. Positively, D'Arcy contributes in suggesting and outlining a lot of Arden's literary works.

***Serjeant Musgrave's Dance: Futility of Being a Wacky Mutineer***

To define the term 'mutiny', one may find a variety of readings which can be actually named according to its form and strength. In his *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*, A. S. Hornby has summarized its meaning as “the act of refusing to obey the orders of somebody in authority, especially by soldiers or sailors”, thus the word mutineer refers to “a person who takes part in a mutiny” (1007). Arden's masterpiece, *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* (1959) is a realist drama that mirrors the difficult task of deserters. It revolves around the mutineer Musgrave and his fellow-soldiers who have all deserted from a colonial war. They have brought the corpse of their comrade back to his home town and already swore to take revenge. They have determined to extend the symptoms of evils and horrors of war on the townsfolk passing through killing twenty-five of them (Rebellato,17). Being a realist playwright, Arden has built his play upon an incident that “took place in Cyprus in 1958, when terrorists shot a soldier's wife and the military responded with random killings” (Brewer,160). Therefore, one may find no difficulty to be acquainted with Arden's portrayal of the authentic drama, because it is tightly well-established in the extremes and unwelcome legacy of British colonial history. To produce a sense of plausibility, Arden first starts to investigate the discrepancy between the state power and the enthusiastic reformer through exhibiting *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance*. The divergence between the persistent authorities and radical forces is common to the western society as Arden argues. Accordingly, he points out that awareness or responsiveness enables a man to avoid the imminent struggle. In Arden's *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance*, the unequivocal concentration on the political and social uses of religion is typically recurring.

To accomplish his aim in writing plays, Arden is somehow thrift and careful in using characters to stay away from deviating the viewers' thinking. Consequently, he has built his three-acts play on employing a small number of characters. Moreover, the use of simple and sometimes a colloquial language is an indication of dealing with commonly actual people. Edward Elbert states that in *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance*, Arden has portrayed very real people perplexed in a difficult situation and looking for principles to direct them (593). The principal character no doubt is Musgrave who tries to hearten his

comrades and alleviate their tension. Hence, he says: “We’re all all right. Don’t worry.” (13). Musgrave reaches the mining town by barge just before the canal is snowed and cut off communication with the external world. This town lives a very chaotic climate because of the harsh argument between the owners and the poor miners. Since they are somehow naive, the miners imagine that Musgrave’s soldiers come to end their strike, despite Musgrave’s reassurances that his intended duty is recruitment. He argues that “it’s not material. We have our duty. A soldier’s duty is a soldier’s life.” (14). The soldiers that Musgrave usually speaks with are Hurst, Attercliffe, and Sparky.

Arden’s *Serjeant Musgrave’s Dance* is the most celebrated and effective play which addresses “anti-militaristic theme with a combination of Brechtian exposition and music-hall routines (dance, song, and monologue)” (Sanders,620). Sparky is one of Musgrave’s soldiers who conceals his suspicion behind flow of songs to infuriate his comrades. He sings:

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

In the beginning, the soldiers, look restless for such apparent justifications of Musgrave, as if they have some confidential and asymmetrical functions. Most of Arden’s plays revolve around the scapegoats of unashamed rebels by the forces of well-mannered dishonesty which assert the right of social order (Rabey,66).

As a keen playwright, Arden has coincided the soldiers’ arrival to the town with the moments of confrontation between the striking colliers and the town authorities. The characters in this play are characterized according to their attitudes and duties. For instance, Musgrave stands for the revolutionary echo. The ancient force determined for continued existence has been incarnated in the character of Bargee. The Parson works for the church sake and the orthodoxy authorized by the state. The Mayor as a mine owner with the Parson and Constable are the central representatives of the mining town. Though they have not invited Musgrave, these three men are wrongly satisfied that he comes to offer support. In their opinion, he is qualified to keep order, and persuade some of the striker-troublemakers to join the military forces. Mayor tries to change Musgrave’s mind that he is so welcomed:

**Mayor:** Serjeant, we’re very glad to have you. I speak for the council,  
I speak for the magistrates. Now listen: there’s loyal hearts

And true here, and we’re every man-jack of as keen to see our  
Best lads flock to the colours. Isn’t that so, Parson?

**Parson:** Ha-h'm- with great pride, yes.

**Musgrave:** That's most handsome, sir (23).

Certainly, the soldiers' arrival causes a sort of uncertainty and suspicion to the extent that even the authoritative persons believe that the soldiers' task is nothing but recruitment. They are seen by the local authorities and miners as explicit or implicit strike-breakers (Rabey,65). It is a smart scheme outlined by the playwright to create a sense of suspense and to sting the audience's thinking for suspecting the soldiers' real mission.

To confirm his authority and power on his group of soldiers, Musgrave sends them to survey the town, and to meet at cemetery. While the soldiers start to dispute, Musgrave threatens to use his force and legality particularly on Hurst. Escaping for murdering an officer and living in a fear of death, Hurst should show entire obedience to his commander. Being an unhesitant mutineer, Musgrave expects that his fellows must listen to his orders:

**Hurst:***(breaking out suddenly)* Appropriate? Serjeant, now we've come with you so far. And every day we're in great danger. We're on the run, in red uniforms, in a black-and-white coalfield; and it's cold; and the money's running out that you stole from the company office; and we don't know who's heard of us or how much they've heard. ...

**Musgrave:** *(savagely)* the only right you have is a rope around your throat and six foot to drop from. On the run? Stolen money? I'm talking of a murdered officer, shot down in a street fight, shot down in one night's work. They put that to the rebels, but I know you were the man. We deserted, but you killed

**Hurst:** I'd a good reason. ...

**Musgrave:** I know you had a reason, else I'd not have left you alive to come with us. ...

Believing in completing his secret mission, will motivate and inspire Musgrave to dominate his soldiers' acts and conducts. The military discipline is important to establish strong army. In doing so, Musgrave states his radical duty to signify the English theatre "at its profoundly radical: it cuts all ways, and through physical, linguistic, and spatial poetry, rather than by striving to privilege a single argument in the standard patterns of identification and acceptance" (Rabey,66).

The idea of revenge for his comrade's death, Billy Hicks, that Musgrave believes to be a sort of an assignment from God, is the actual purpose of his mission. To accomplish this retribution properly as he argues, twenty-five important individuals from the town must be killed. Billy Hicks is a soldier who has been killed without any reason just because he is serving in the army. Such brutal murder in an

unidentified British colony arouses argument and fury against the townsfolk. The soldiers have differently reacted to their comrade's death, Attercliffe is not ready to kill anybody; Sparky endeavours to leave the soldiers; and Hurst is prepared to kill without hesitation. Hence, Musgrave's mission is going to be so complicated since he cannot find a way to control his soldiers' reactions. Thus, Musgrave makes every effort to assert that "we are here with a word. That's all. That's particular. Let the word dance. That's all that's material, this day and for the next. What happens afterwards, the Lord God will provide" (36). Unequivocally, Musgrave is a wacky challenger to remove the recognized authority. His enthusiasm, however, darkens his consciousness as a human being to recognize the expected damages of his action. For him, the distribution of his own message is vital in meaning. Fundamentally, his basic aim is to convince the townsfolk that war is immoral, and it is truly what revolves in Musgrave's mentality as the God's word. Consequently, Musgrave turns out to be Arden's mouthpiece to lament the British theatre which lacks a collective social purpose. Repeatedly, Arden calls for "a theatre that would bring people together for a secular Eucharist so that they left the building feeling they were a united society not just a collection of odds and sods" (Brewer,153). Like many dutiful predictive, Musgrave is religiously narrow-minded, and he unsuccessfully misjudges the shock of his violent scheme that leads to disconnection or separation. Because of his ridiculous stubbornness, thinking of lucid retreat never visits his mind.

For the enthusiastic dramatist like Arden, the theatre should be the factory and incarnation of thoughts. Sometimes, it is necessary for the character to be given a chance to demonstrate his/her ideas about certain issues. Such ideas may add a new way and surprising device for the playwright to transmit his message either explicitly or implicitly. The most influential message that the dramatist should confirm is to display virtues and alert against vicious and inhuman acts. One of Musgrave's soldiers states that "All wars is sin, Serjeant..."(33) and the answer immediately comes when Musgrave asserts that "We've come to this town to work that guilt back to where it began"(34). The commander and his soldiers do agree on the nasty consequence of the war which is detested and rejected by people. Musgrave has realized the soldiers' suffering and agony but the mission he endures must be completed. By exploiting suitable and more influential language, Arden exposes the soldiers' hardships to let the spectators feel and live the action. In fact, Arden makes an effort to convey a message to the audience through presenting life as it is. Invariably, through time, "Pinter, Arden, Howard Barker and [...] have contributed to the formal advance of the British theatre by creating

new languages for the stories they are concerned to tell” (Goodman&Gay,127). However, to portray the natural identity of the British theatre, Arden investigates both the optimistic and pessimistic features of the English military life. Surely, exhibiting military, political, and religious issues within single specific literary work reveals the playwright’s genuine position among the other renowned writers.

To make an impressive literary work, Arden succeeds in dealing with real human beings descending from everyday life. And also to avoid a boring time, it is necessary to feel and find the real presence of a woman in a modern drama. Annie, a playful lady who works in a bar is capable of haunting men. Not only the soldiers are characterized as the victims of the wartime but even the women and Annie is the best example. As a result, she has lost her reputation and she lives her time as whore. She comes to Hurst and says “here I come. Hello. I’m cold. I’m a blue ghost come to haunt you. Come on, boy, warm me up. You’ll not catch cold of me.” But Hurst as one of Musgrave’s anarchic soldiers is busy with how to be protected since he has already killed an officer. He replies “No... I daresay not...”(58). The character who falls victim to her net is Sparky because he agrees upon her suggestion of such dishonest act. Annie usually visits the soldiers at night and she lures Sparky to escape with her. It is so difficult for a soldier to resist his lust especially when he is unable to appreciate the other’s concealed intention. In fact, one cannot realize and recognize the inner intentions and feelings of other persons; but he can deduce what they are practicing by what one can see and hear (Samovar & et al,17). Throughout the dialogue among the characters the real identity of Annie is exposed. She is Hicks’s beloved while she works as the barmaid in Mrs. Hitchcock’s bar. For the first time the spectator knows that she is pregnant, but Hicks joins the army before his child’s birth. Unfortunately, the child lives for a short time and then dies and Hicks is simultaneously murdered. Despite her bad situation, she offers soldiers warmth and compassion and sells her body to acquire unfair living as a deprived lady.

In the light of this developing action, the frightened person who distrusts his potentiality, needs conversation with others to find enjoyment, warmth, friendship, and perhaps escape. In short, communication is one of the main traditions in which one may accomplish a social part within himself. This convergence or union with others motivates the individual to experience a sense of enclosure, love, and even control (Samovar & et al, 15). Sparky’s plan to flee with Annie causes his unintentional, brutal death, anticipating the play’s serious end. Sparky’s death causes suspicion and hesitation among the remaining soldiers. They suspect one another:

**Hurst:** He's dead. He's dead. I didn't do it. Not me. No.

**Attercliffe:** Dead?

**Hurst:** of course he's dead. He's stuck in the gut. That's you.

Your hand. You killed him.

**Attercliffe:** I can't have.

**Hurst:** You did.

**Attercliffe:** (*stupidly*) I've got the bayonet.

**Hurst:** Aye, and you've killed him.

**Attercliffe:** O Holy God (68).

While Sparky is dressing to escape with Annie, Hurst disrupts, takes hold of Sparky's clothes, and blames him of running away. A brawl occurs, Attercliffe interferes, Hurst snatches Sparky's bayonet and in a sudden fight Sparky is killed, maybe accidentally.

Despite the ambiguous actions in which the soldiers have lost their lives, this play is somehow accepted by the audience. Albert Hunt confirms that *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* is normally accepted as John Arden's masterpiece [...] to destabilize "conventional responses to the theatre, he argues that Arden is making demands on his audience by grouping his style in English ballad tradition" (53). Most of the soldiers express their disappointment and anguish through singing ballad to affirm their political plight in which they are left. Arden's plays combine verse and songs with [colloquial](#) language in a daringly dramatic style and occupy harsh argument intentionally ignored unsettled.

Arden has succeeded in bringing the principal characters in specific meeting and it is dramatically considered the climax. The recruiting scene is going to be an occasion for all to unfold the truth. At the 'recruiting' meeting, Musgrave dances and chants as the skeleton of his comrade is lifted in the air. Obsessed with an intensive resentment, Musgrave intimidates and threatens to kill twenty-five prominent citizens as retribution. Meanwhile, Musgrave's revenge process has been aborted by the dragoon's arrival who re-establishes order cruelly, killing Hurst, and everybody takes part in a triumphant dance. The townspeople are rescued from the imminent massacre by "the cavalry, who represent however the interests of the Mayor, and Constable to the exclusion of those of any other characters" (Rabey,65). At the end, only Musgrave and Attercliffe stay in a prison putting to the death sentence. It is an anticipated end of an arrogant and a wacky mutineer who tries to change the regular system according to his enthusiasm. The extravagant self-confidence motivated by religious sense causes the tragic end: "one man, and for him five. Therefore, for five of them we multiply out, and find it five-and- twenty. "... so, as I understand Logic and Logic to me is the mechanism of God- that means that today there's twenty-five persons



will have to be” (91). Musgrave is portrayed as a dangerous human being whose logic and insistence that five times as many English persons should be killed to avenge the act of violence, is deliberately foolish. Instead of thinking how to set up peace and love to produce a sense of quietness, Musgrave has created chaotic and disordered ambiance in his town.

Regardless of Arden’s own apparent element of peace, *Serjeant Musgrave’s Dance* can simply present a meaning that such an ideal is unattainable to continue. Absolutely, it is difficult to observe the play’s closing image, “comparing Attercliffe and Musgrave’s hanged bodies with the growth of an orchard, as much more than a powerful but ultimately stultifying theatrical metaphor” (Rebellato,17). To win the battle, Musgrave has exploited the conflict between the miners and the authoritative owners, and logically expected that the miners must enrol with the rebellious soldiers but his efforts are turned to be futile. So, death becomes inevitable and he cannot defend himself since he has been exposed as the enemy of townsfolk. *Serjeant Musgrave’s Dance*, in which mutineer soldiers join those who would be appropriately separate from war destruction, are viewed in a dance of death (Rabey,23). Ironically, instead of enjoying their illusionary triumph, Musgrave and Attercliffe are forced to dance for their death. As a final point, the mutiny has been thwarted because it is not built upon a well-balanced course of action.

### **Conclusion**

Invariably, through history, numerous damages and fatalities would be increased during wartimes. Under the pressure of war, the participated soldiers are extremely humiliated and dehumanized when they are forced to be firewood for battles only to aid the wrong decisions set by the rulers. Deliberately, Arden has determined to saturate himself with the peculiar and extraordinary understanding of war in order that it could purify itself into drama. He is frequently regarded as one of so famous playwrights who has created a theatrical rebellion in English drama. Tynan is a recognized critic of his age asserts that he is a keen follower of the theatrical revolt led by Arden, Osborne and Wesker (Luckhurst,157). Apparently, this play is a soundless scream of anger and resentment against the war-makers who have damaged the placid sense of the citizens by dehumanizing, mechanizing, and turning them into blindly obedient cattle.

Though he is a head of the soldiers’ group, Musgrave’s experience in avoiding the perplexed and risky situations is not obtainable. In this concern, Arden implicitly proposes that not every mutineer could accomplish his revolutionary target unless he realizes the proper place and time that assist him. As he has been saturated with the idea of revenge for his dead comrade, Musgrave is prepared

to kill twenty-five to upset the authority into upheaval. In such probable disordered and chaotic situations, he believes that he could find the townsfolk's approval and support against the present regime to be memorably winning mutineer. It comes into sight that Musgrave does not have a misanthropic spirit, but he decides to avenge for his dead comrade to commemorate their true friendship and soldierly. Moreover, he believes that his enthusiasm enables him to encourage the striking miners to rise up against the regime's policy of imperialism.

Truculently, Musgrave sidesteps the imminent risk to confirm that he is capable of being a victorious mutineer. Though his attempt is a failure as he does not know how to ease tension, the play ends with a glimpse of hope that a change may come to brighten the way for the townsfolk to identify the imperfection and injustice of their authority. Usually, the enthusiastic dramatist aims at glorifying the patriotic qualities and leading the spectators to scorn unlawful activities. Undoubtedly, impartiality is one of Arden's characteristics that motivates him to give the viewers and critics a free will in evaluating his play. Therefore, he never imposes his personal views of being with or against Musgrave and his small band of soldiers. The importance of Arden's dramaturgy lies in his tolerance to give his characters a free will in designing their future.

Although Musgrave is considered a wacky mutineer who is ready to kill more innocent citizens, he is still recognized as a thoughtful man. In the supposed democratic state, such wacky human being should not be rejected and discarded from society but to reassess him as a common citizen even if he was already mistaken. When the wacky person is socially rejected and politically marginalized, he only thinks of challenging revenge. In view of that, the mentality of vengeance cannot build a state, whereas that of liberality helps to create nations.

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عبثية الثائر الاحمق: تحليل اجتماعي سياسي لمسرحية اردنز (رقصة سرجنت موسغريف)

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### المستخلص

من القضايا المهمة التي تعرضها مسرحية اردنز (رقصة سرجنت موسغريف) هي عبثية أن تكون ثائرا أحمقا. استغل أردن هذه المسألة الضمنية بشكل أساسي ومتعمد لانتقاد صناع الحرب وعرض محاولة الثائر في البحث عن التغيير عبر استفزاز سكان المدينة بالتمرد على السلطة الجائرة. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تصوير المواجهة الحقيقية والصراع بين موسغريف وممثلي النظام ألمهيمن على السلطة. وقد تم تقسيمها إلى مبحثين وخاتمة. يتناول المبحث الأول جون أردن ، الكاتب المسرحي ، الذي كان راديكالياً سياسياً وحرّاً من السلطة ومن تجاوز المؤسسات الاجتماعية. أما في المبحث الثاني فقد تم تكريس التحليل الاجتماعي السياسي لهذه المسرحية لبيان كيف ينظر إلى أردن على أنه أحد كتاب المسرح البارزين الذي ابتكر تمرداً مسرحياً في الدراما الانجليزية.