

# SIMON STEPHENS' VIEW ON THE CONCEPT OF AN INDIVIDUAL IS A CONCEPT OF AN INDIVIDUAL EMBEDDED WITHIN SOCIETY THAT REVEALED THROUGH HIS SELECTED PLAYS

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## ABSTRACT

Simon Stephens focuses on a number of themes in his plays which frequently deal with the theme of broken or dysfunctional families. Though he talks about violence, brutality and teenage nihilism he always wants to reiterate the point that individuals necessarily arrive at their beliefs through the heritage of their community, but this does not imply their beliefs are given by their community: the fact that they start out from within a given social context does not establish they cannot then adjust this context. "If the family set-up sometimes interrogated fearlessly, its absence is mourned," says Stephens in the introduction to Plays: 3(xviii). The aim of the present paper is to analyse how Simon stresses his view that the concept of an individual is a concept of an individual embedded in the society. The paper concentrates the relationship of individual within society with reference to the plays such as Herons and Wastwater of Simon.

Key words: Individual, Society, Simon Stephens, Herons, Wastwater.

### **Introduction:**

Man is a social animal and will find it hard to thrive in this modern world without one another. Hence, compassion and moral consciousness are the most important traits every social animal should possess for the world to function peacefully. This has been the essence of Simon Stephens' plays and majority of the contemporary plays as well. Stephens in his plays portrays that development of human mind and self can be achieved only by living as a group. Society shapes our attitudes, beliefs, morals, ideals and thereby shaping an individual's personality. With time, man tends to grow with the society, develops himself by socializing, thus bettering himself everyday on a regular basis. From birth to death individual acquires different social qualities by social interaction with his fellow beings which moulds his personality. Individual mind without society remains undeveloped at infant stage. The cultural heritage determines man's personality by moulding his attitudes, beliefs, morals and ideals. With the help of social heritage man's in born potentialities are unfolded. Thus, from the above discussion we conclude that Man is a social

animal. His nature and necessities makes him a social being. He also depends on society to be a human being. He acquires personality within society. There exists a very close relationship between individual and society like that of cells and body.

### **Individual and individual within society with reference to Herons and Wastwater:**

Herons, Simon Stephens introduces a shy teenager who has been on the wrong side of bullying and heartaches most part of his life. Billy has had a traumatic childhood, thanks to his irresponsible parents and rude peers. The actions of his parents and friends open up an interesting discussion. Should an individual base his/her action on a set of ideologies proclaimed by the society or is one allowed to roll over another without showing signs of empathy? The former leads to compassion and love and the latter hatred.

Herons breaks your distance, your safety in the audience and it brings the scenes of teasing home. The violence towards Billy that follows is unnecessary in more ways than one. There's an argument for violence in the theatre, for graphic content, so convincing it makes you uncomfortable. But all his ambiguity, his surrealism, his intent to shock and characters bizarrely easy access to firearms in twenty first century Britain, all becomes frustrating, because Stephens really doesn't need it (Riot in the cheap seats, 2016).

However in this play, Simon constantly has Billy on the receiving end of bullying which sheds light on the important question- Is an individual part of the society or are they allowed to act in a way to part the society?. The following conversation between Billy and Adele shows how humans' actions have changed the way they look at the society.

**Adele: I think it's almost funny sometimes. I've seen people, people I know take speed, pills, draw, gas, booze, Charlie, glue, smack. I've seen people smoking smack outside my flat, Billy, on our estate.**

**Right in front of the Old Bill.**

**Billy: So what are you telling me this for?**

**Adele: (moving towards him) Sometimes at night I still get frightened. Of the streets near where I live. Of the gangs there. The junkies. The scumfuckers. The scuzzbags. The perverts.**

This conversation again reinstates the general belief that an individual should be aware of his actions as they will have a considerable impact on the lives of others. Thus an individual should be aware that he forms the society and should be careful about his actions.

Billington thinks it is remarkable that "While graphically acknowledging the nihilistic cruelty of east end school kids, it is also filled with a sense of life's miraculous potential. It deals with the damaged characters yet is imbued with a poetic lyricism" (Rev: Herons 664)

Again, an individual who acts must be capable of holding reasons for doing so which make sense to them, and reasons can make sense only in the context of a set of beliefs, so an individual who acts must hold a set

of beliefs. The idea that we cannot conceive of an individual holding a set of beliefs except in terms of their doing so against a social background is much more controversial. Nonetheless, it follows inexorably from an acceptance of semantic holism; that is, the claim we can ascribe truth-conditions to individual sentences only if we locate them in a wider web of theories. Although semantic holism is a premise of our argument, this is not the place to defend it at any length because doing so would require a major detour from our main theme. Instead, it must suffice to note that the vast majority of philosophers now accept holism.

**Aaron: You know nature, Billy?**

**Billy: Do I know nature?**

**Aaron: I hate it.**

**Billy: I know that.**

**Aaron: I rape it.**

**Billy: You said.**

**Aaron: I laugh at it. I piss on it. I think it's fucking funny.**

**Darren: It makes him chuckle. Giggle.**

**Aaron: And I think you and your dad are fucked in the head.**

**Darren: But we like ya.**

**Aaron: We do.**

**Darren: (offers Billy a blast on the joint, Billy ignores him)**

**'Cause you're a funny boy.**

**Aaron: Nature boy!**

**Darren: It's lovely**

**Aaron: And we like your dad.**

**Darren: In our own little way.**

**Aaron: He's all right.**

**Darren: (treading the joint out) He is.**



**Aaron: For a pervert.**

**Billy: Aaron.**

**Aaron: Billy.**

**Billy: I hope you fucking choke on your ecstasy tablets the next time you take them. I hope they stick in your throat and tear up your insides and burn up the sides of your rectum when you shit.**

It is here that Billy loses his cool and finally retaliates back at the bullying boys. The major reason being, he found their theories, their ideas absurd and against moral conduct. It is pretty evident that Billy found their rude nature odd and their ideas are definitely irrelevant and wayward to the social structure that he has been aware of.

The concepts imply individuals always form their beliefs, and so perform their actions, under the sway of particular social structures. Thus, one cannot make sense of a realm of pure reason, or a space behind a veil of ignorance, where individuals arrive inexorably at such and such beliefs because they are liberated from the superstitions foisted on them by society, or the biases created by knowledge of their particular social contexts. Individuals cannot adopt beliefs through their individual reasoning alone outside of the allegedly corrupting effects of society.

The concept of holism is far from seen in characters of *Wastwater*. Simon portrays extra marital affair, sexual betrayal and unprofessional business deals. The story revolves around Heathrow Airport. Here, the individuals in every scenario, tells you that they have ideologies that care less about the societal norms.

Lee Anderson states that ‘*Wastwater*’, the title of Simon Stephens’ new play for the Royal Court, refers to the largest valley of water in England. Further still, audiences might be pardoned for struggling to comprehend its relevance to a play located on the outskirts of Heathrow Airport’s Terminal 5. However, having had time to digest this mysterious and disturbing work, it becomes a fitting metaphor for the fractured relationships that Stephens makes us encounter (Rev: *Wastwater*, 2011).

In a scene, Lisa explains her affair what she has went through in life. She talks about her experience of acting in porn movies with a tinge of anxiety hoping, her affair Mark would not judge her.

**Lisa: ... He did a funny little cheeky grin and he said, ‘It’s porno’. He asked me how I felt about that. I asked him what it would involve doing and he said, ‘Well, what do you think?’ And you know me. You know what I’m like. So I decided to say OK. But I draw the line. There are some things I won’t do. I said, ‘I won’t do anal and I won’t do animals and I won’t do children, is that OK?’ And he said that yes, it was OK. And so we did, actually. You know? I really liked him and I still do. I still really like him. I don’t see him anymore but if I saw him I wouldn’t have anything to say against him. I know that sounds a bit odd but I do think at heart he’s a good person...**

**Has that come as a surprise to you?**

**Mark: It has a little.**

**Lisa: I thought you needed to know.**

The urge to be transparent and honest is seen in Lisa. It is pretty evident that she is in good terms with herself as she is totally fine in revealing her past. Simon discloses the frank nature of Lisa and how the couple is broad minded, not being judgmental about past traumas or events. Lisa and Mark however are married to different people.

The sense of calmness and that prevailed in thin air whenever they spoke showed that they both have no guilt in having an affair with each other. Lisa then begins explaining Mark about her sexual fantasies, her desires. Her passion towards him is seen in the following conversation.

**Lisa: I think I'd like to blindfold you and tie your hands up so that you're not allowed to touch me no matter how much you want to. And you can't see me.**

**He nods.**

**This is the kind of thing I've been thinking about today. Is that a bit shocking?**

**Mark: No, it's good. I like it.**

**Lisa: One of the other things I've been thinking about, one of the things I wanted to do tonight, was I wanted you to hit me. How would you feel about that?**

**Mark: To hit you?**

**Lisa: nods.**

**Lisa: Do you think you could? Some people can do it and some people find it too difficult.**

**Do you think you could do it or would it be a bit tricky?**

Simon makes his readers re-think the passion, the depth, its meaning. How Lisa explains her fantasies and sexual desires explains her love towards Mark. However it also explains how she is unhappy or discontent with her husband, such characters raise eyebrows because their ideologies do not fit with the actual, social norms of the world.

Simon emphasizes that it is frowned upon by people in this world if individuals do not act on beliefs that have been adopted under the influence of a social context. Let us describe the belief that we can conceive

of individuals existing, reasoning, and acting, outside particular social contexts as a belief in autonomy. We have found a belief in autonomy to be mistaken. Individuals are not autonomous beings capable of governing their own lives unaffected by external social forces. Of course, they might be able to obey self-imposed dictates of reason, but the reason by which they decide to adopt the dictates they do necessarily will be a particular reason influenced by a particular social background, not a pure or universal reason. Our concept of an individual is a concept of an individual embedded within society.

### Conclusion:

However, none of this suggests the individual is an illusion, or a mere function of a social structure; a rejection of autonomy does not entail a rejection of agency understood as the ability of people to adopt beliefs, and to decide to act, for reasons of their own. The individuals always reach their beliefs against a social background, they still can have reasons of their own (reasons deriving from their set of beliefs) for adopting beliefs that go beyond, and so transform, this background. Individuals necessarily arrive at their beliefs through the heritage of their community, but this does not imply their beliefs are given by their community: the fact that they start out from within a given social context does not establish they cannot then adjust this context. Social contexts must be as much a product of individuals as individuals are of social contexts.

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