



Social Criticism and Class War in the play of John Osborne's Look Back in Anger

Rashmi Rani Sahu
Research Scholar in English
Berhampur University, Ganjam, Odisha

Abstract

World War II destroyed the rational and moral foundations of human society which in turn produced a prevalent sense of utter meaninglessness and instability of human existence. This title attempts to look into the various issues relating to the social, economic and metaphysical life in 1950s England, explored by the three dramatists Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter and John Osborne. Their choice of themes such as the absurdist and existential issues and the prevailing socio-economic discontentment, as well as the structure, tone and language of the plays effectively comment on these concerns. Kitchen sink realism (or kitchen sink drama) is a term coined to describe a British cultural movement that developed in the late 1950s and early 1960s in theatre, art, novels, film, and television plays, whose protagonists usually could be described as "angry young men" who were disillusioned with modern society. It used a style of social realism, which depicted the domestic situations of working class Britons, living in cramped rented accommodation and spending their off-hours drinking in grimy pubs, to explore controversial social and political issues ranging from abortion to homelessness. The harsh, realistic style contrasted sharply with the escapism of the previous generation's so-called "well-made plays".

Key Words: Absurdist, Existential, modern, Social Realism.

Narration

Look Back in Anger (1956) is commonly credited with being the play in which Osborne expressed a sense of frustration and anger at the depressing circumstances of post-war Britain. Jimmy Porter is regarded as an embodiment of the frustrations of a particular age and class especially the generation of young men who have been expecting to leave behind their lower-class origins by using higher education. Jimmy is educated beyond his social roots; however, he cannot get what he expects from his education. Despite his university degree he has worked as an advertising salesman, a neophyte journalist, and a vacuum-cleaner salesman. Then he starts to run a sweet stall for a living which is

also not a proper job for a graduate man. According to Berkowitz "inability to fulfil the anticipations is a frustration" (McCarthy 16). Jimmy should have been working in a job suitable for his university education. It can be said that Jimmy is not working in a proper job due to his working-class origins. His university degree does not make him a member of a higher class. Carl Bode suggests that, "Jimmy knows that he is the displaced intellectual and that surely embitters him" (331). Because he is aware of the fact that he cannot change his social status only by a university degree however hard he tries. Therefore, as Bode claims Jimmy is "a man who has tried and failed to become middle-class".



According to the frustration-aggression hypothesis Jimmy's not having a suitable job despite his university degree can be considered a "frustration produced instigation." Jimmy is frustrated due to the fact that his educational background does not fulfil his anticipations. Therefore, it can be counted as one of the reasons for Jimmy's rage. "His outbreaks of anger derive from this failure to find fulfilment" as Simon Trussler asserts. Throughout the play Jimmy rails about politics, religion and other social institutions. (Osborne26) Jimmy feels betrayed by the previous generation because his generation is experiencing the disappointment of World War II. However, Jimmy is looking for some enthusiasm instead of exhaustion. Because he had a father who believed that there were still, even after the slaughter of the first World War, causes good enough to fight for and collective actions worthy of individual support.

The astonishingly rapid spread, in the last two or three years, of the application of so-called social standards in literary criticism, and particularly of so-called Marxian standards, makes it desirable that these standards should be submitted to a critical examination. In undertaking such an examination, one is confronted at the very beginning by a formidable difficulty. One feels that few of the writers whose theories are being examined will trouble to weigh on their merits any of the specific objections offered. For most of the nouveau-Marxists know all the answers in advance. They know that any critic who questions any item in the Marxian ideology is a "bourgeois" critic, and that his objections are "bourgeois" criticisms, and from that terrible and crushing adjective there is no appeal. For the

www.ijar.org.in

bourgeois critic, if I understand the nouveau-Marxists rightly, has less free will than a parrot. He is a mere phonograph, who can only repeat the phrases and opinions with which he has been stuffed from his reading of bourgeois literature and his contacts with bourgeois science and bourgeois art. All these make up bourgeois culture, which is a mere class culture, i.e., an elaborate and colossal system of apologetics; worse, an instrument for class dominance and class oppression. The bourgeois critic, in brief, is a mere automaton, incapable of surmounting or of escaping from the bourgeois ideology in which he is imprisoned; and the poor fool's delusion that he is capable of seeing any problem with relative objectivity and disinterestedness is simply one more evidence that he cannot pierce beyond the walls of his ideological cell.

The subject matter of twentieth-century English theatre until 1956 had been polite, perhaps witty, and even elegant and glittering in the use of language; however, it did not speak to the concerns of the nation, either young or old. It was a theatre of diversion, a theatre careful not to upset the illusions of its middle-class audience, a theatre that had lost all relevance to life as it was in fact being lived in post-World War II England. John Osborne changed that. As Kenneth Tynan said in the Observer on December 19, 1959: "Good taste, reticence and middle-class understatement were convicted of hypocrisy and jettisoned on the spot." They were not jettisoned in polite, or even comedic, political or social analysis; they were jettisoned by an articulate, educated, furious young man who pointed out what his contemporary world was really like. It was not the world of egalitarianism and idealism that had been envisioned by the socialist



intellectuals. It was a dreary world in which, as Jimmy says, "There aren't any good, brave causes left." (Taylor36).

In spite of the broadening of opportunities for university education, the old power structure based on "the old boy" network of school and family connections were still very much in place. The old power structure was cynical and bent on its own perpetuation. The Church of England was as much a part of the Establishment as the politicians and also seemed out of touch with the everyday realities of the people. For Jimmy, and for Osborne, the answers provided by the Church were a simple bromide that prevented people from looking at their lives and their society honestly. The "Bishop of Bromley" who is quoted by Jimmy may be a fictional person, but his call for Christians to help develop the H-Bomb was not fictional. John Osborne found a form that captured the unformed mood and discontent of the audience in 1956 England and gave it voice. The theatre must bring that reality to life in a memorable way. Jimmy Porter is a magnificent character, and the power of his invective is certainly memorable.

John Osborne said many times that his aim was not to analyze and write about social ills but rather to make people feel. Jimmy Porter is not a political activist: he is a man living day-to-day in a world in which feelings and imaginative response to others has been deadened by convention. Jimmy's attacks are not against abstract ideas. He realizes what this world of dead ideas and moribund custom is doing to him and to those he loves. It is his desire to awaken them to feelings, to being truly and vibrantly alive, that drives Jimmy Porter. *Look Back in Anger* is a deeply felt drama of personal relationships, and it is because

of that personal element that the play remains not only valid but also vivid to audiences today.

Jimmy's main conflict is with Alison. While the marriage is a misalliance, it is not just that of a Colonel's daughter marrying the rough-hewn commoner; it is the misalliance of someone who is alive and suffering to one who shuts off all suffering and sensitivity to the suffering of others to avoid the pain of life. They have been married for three years and their own routine has become deadening. Jimmy's first direct attack on Alison comes barely a minute into the play when he says, "She hasn't had a thought in years! Have you?" Shortly after, he says, "All this time I have been married to this woman, this monument of non-attachment," and calls her "The Lady Pusillanimous." (Worth,46) Alison's cool remoteness extends even to their lovemaking. Jimmy says, "Do you know I have never known the great pleasure of lovemaking when I didn't desire it myself. She has the passion of a python." He wants to awaken her to life, with all its pain. That his passion and despair lead him to excess is undeniable: he wishes her to have a child and to have that child die. He says, "If only I could watch you face that. I wonder if you might even become a recognizable human being yourself." He later says he wants to watch her grovel in the mud. "I want to stand up in your tears, and splash about in them, and sing."

To be alive is to feel pain. Certainly, the notion that suffering validates human existence is an idea that runs through world drama from the time of Sophocles. Moreover, Jimmy recognizes that Alison's lack of emotional commitment to anything is draining him of his own zest



for life. He tells of Alison's mother doing all she could to prevent the marriage, "All so that I shouldn't carry off her daughter on that old charger of mine, all tricked out and caparisoned in discredited passions and ideals! The old grey mare actually once led the charge against the old order well; she certainly ain't what she used to be. It was all she could do to carry me, but your weight was too much for her. She just dropped dead on the way." Jimmy is fighting for his love and for his own inner life. He needs to break down Alison's neutrality.

It was Jimmy's vibrant life that attracted Alison to him in the first place. In Act II, scene 1, she describes to Helena the time she first met Jimmy: "Everything about him seemed to burn, his face, the edges of his hair glistened and seemed to spring off his head, and his eyes were so blue and filled with the sun." In Act II, scene 2, she also shows insight when she tells her father why she married Jimmy: "I'd lived a happy, uncomplicated life, and suddenly, this spiritual barbarian throws down the gauntlet at me. Perhaps only another woman could understand what a challenge like that means."

Alison does suffer the loss of her unborn child and she does return to Jimmy richer in the humility and pain of living. At the end of the play they have entered into their game of "bears and squirrels," which Alison explained earlier was a place where "we could become little furry creatures with little furry brains. Full of dumb, uncomplicated affection for each other. A silly symphony for people who couldn't bear the pain of being human beings any longer." It seems doubtful that such a withdrawal from the world is likely to last, and it is likely that Osborne recognized the irony of the ending of the

play when he wrote it. Jimmy's anger is deep and it is not new or brought on by current circumstances, either in his domestic life or society at large (Yerebakan,66).

At the age of ten, Jimmy watched his idealistic father dying for twelve months, and "I was the only one who cared!" He says, "You see, I learnt at an early age what it was to be angry angry and helpless. And I can never forget it." Jimmy's source of pain and anger seem to come from the same source as that of John Osborne who, at an early age, watched his own father die of tuberculosis. "Good plays change their meaning with time," said critic Michael Belington in the Guardian after seeing the 1989 revival of *Look Back in Anger*. It is a measure of its worth that even forty-two years after it.

Work cited: McCarthy, Mary. "A New Word." John Osborne *Look Back in Anger*. Ed. John Russell Taylor. London: Macmillan, 1968.

Osborne, John. *Dejavu. Look Back in Anger and Other Plays*. London, Boston: Faber and Faber, 1993.

Taylor, John Russell. John Osborne *Look Back in Anger*. London: Macmillan, 1968.

Worth, Katharine J. "The Angry Young Man." John Osborne *Look Back in Anger*. Ed. John Russell Taylor. London: Macmillan, 1968.

Yerebakan, İbrahim. "Osborne's Female Portraits in *Look Back in Anger*." Hacettepe University Journal of English Literature and British Culture. No.6, PP.37-48, 1997.