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Polarizing Past and Present: A Critical Discourse of Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*

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Abstract

John Osborne's epoch-making play *Look Back in Anger* gives vent to the vitriolic anger of the protagonist Jimmy Porter – 'The Angry Young Man' – who is supposed to be the spokesman of the dramatist. The essence and the quintessence of this apparently cantankerous play lies in the title that magnificently encapsulates the exasperation of a frustrated youth and at the same time contradicts the past and the present, the hope and the hopelessness, glory and disillusion. A deeper analysis of this arresting play reveals that Jimmy's anger has a reason and a result, an origin and an end. If the cause of this anger is the bleakness of the present set up, the consequence is obviously the past. Whereas the first part of the title stresses the protagonist's harking back to the past through the avenue of his memory, the second part delineates his discontentment with the society. Jimmy's present is besmeared with muddy events and therefore he cannot but moan and bewail.

The main objective of this study is to buttress the post-war anti-hero's present dissatisfaction which is deeply rooted in the past and to mirror the disjunction between the past and the present.

Keywords

Past; Present; Post-War Disenchantment; Anger; Memory.

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A key figure in post-war British drama, John Osborne is a gem in the casket of Twentieth Century British drama. With the publication of the epoch-making play *Look Back in Anger*, John Osborne earned name and fame as a major dramatist of this period. A 'new movement', 'a new kind of drama' (Rees 189), a golden millennium started in British drama when the play was performed at the Royal Court Theatre in London on 8th May, 1956 by the English Stage Company. The play is an angry play written by an 'Angry Young Man' in angry times and deals with the vitriolic anger of a protagonist named Jimmy Porter. The essence and the quintessence of this apparently enigmatic and riddling play lies in the title that artistically represents the 'anger' of the frustrated protagonist and skilfully contradicts the past and the present, glory and disillusion, idealism and faithlessness. Jimmy's anger may seem to some to be utterly pointless and baseless. But a close reading of this striking play makes it clear that his anger has a reason and a result, an origin and an end. If the cause of this anger is the present, the consequence is obviously the past. The purpose of this present paper is to trace and buttress the post-war anti-hero's present dissatisfaction which is deeply rooted in the past.

The title of the play has two parts – one is 'looking back', and the other, 'anger'. The first part emphasizes the protagonist's harking back to the past through the avenue of his memory and the second part reiterates his anger or disenchantment with society:

The phrase 'in anger' establishes that the anger is an emotion felt in the present times and is the reason for 'looking back'; the play is taking stock of contemporary times (in England) and attempting to determine what has led to this anger. Thus, this is a play about both the past and the present of England. ("Annotations", *Look Back in Anger* 104)

Actually, the post-war disillusionment and discontentment led to a group of dramatists like Kingsley Amis, John Wain, Colin Wilson and John Osborne to capture the angst and agony of the educated yet underprivileged young men in the contemporary society. Jimmy Porter, like his creator Osborne, is an output of his time when a new world picture is coming into focus. A staunch and strong idealist like Jimmy was aghast with the then scenario and situation. Being an idealist, he raises his voice against the ills and evils of the world. He is caught between the rainbow days of by-gone years and the promise of a bright future. But his present is besmeared with the muddy events and therefore he cannot but moan and bewail, complain and cry. If Yank in the Fifth Avenue Society in Eugene O' Neill's *The Hairy Ape* finds it incompatible and incommensurable to cope with its people in New York, Jimmy Porter in Osborne's play finds himself entrapped in a valueless world. As Katherine J. Worth rightly observes:

Jimmy's anger has deep roots. He is one 'to whom the miseries of the world are misery, and will not let him rest'. He is capable of vicarious suffering, of living in other people's lives. (qtd. in *Casebook* 104)

He looks back and finds that though people belonging to earlier generations had enjoyed life, things have changed drastically. Significantly, it is this change that has brought a change in the character of Jimmy.

To Jimmy, past is the storehouse of all that is positive and regenerative, good and abiding. It is only in the light of the past that Jimmy could evaluate

the present which, he discovers rather ruefully, lacking in truth, sympathy, belief and idealism. As soon as the play opens, we see Jimmy grudging against the prevailing monotony and boredom of Sundays. The sense of being pent up or cooped up is characteristic of Sundays. He finds Sundays always disgusting and depressing as he cannot come out of the stipulated routine – reading papers, drinking tea, ironing clothes. He laments the slipping away of youth which is characterised by vivacity, boldness, energy, effervescence etc. Church-going provides no comfort; no satisfaction to him and the sounds of the church bells just irritate him. He finds his friend Cliff and his wife Alison submerged in the whirlpool of slothfulness. They are both devoid of ordinary human enthusiasm that Jimmy desperately craves for:

Oh heavens, how I long for a little ordinary human enthusiasm – that’s all. I want to hear a warm, thrilling voice cry out Hallelujah! (He bangs his breast theatrically.) Hallelujah! I’m alive! I’ve an idea. Why don’t we have a little game? Let’s pretend that we’re human beings, and that we’re actually alive. Just for a while. [...] Let’s pretend we’re human. [...] Oh, brother, it’s such a long time since I was with anyone who got enthusiastic about anything. (*Look Back in Anger* 8-9)

Being desperate, Jimmy searches for some meaning in his life. He makes adverse comments on his father-in-law. He opines that Alison’s father must have been highly pleased in imperialist India on home-made cakes, bright ideas, bright uniforms, high summer, crisp linen, small volumes of poetry, the smell of starch and the long days in the sun. It was indeed a romantic life and therefore people like Alison’s father regret the passing away of those auspicious days. He keeps casting his glances back to the “Edwardian twilight from his comfortable, disenfranchised wilderness” (*Look Back in Anger* 9). The kind of life that the ‘old Edwardian brigade’ enjoyed is now lost, and therefore, it appears to be phoney. Jimmy himself laments the squandering away of the

precious moments of his life. Jimmy desires to go back to the days of the distant past, thereby imbibing the spirit of Ulysses to “drink/ Life to the lees” (Tennyson). Jimmy likes Alison’s friend and his former mistress Madeline because they give him some edge and drive. He admits that the company of Madeline was like an ‘adventure’. But at present he is deprived of her sweet company. Rather, he has to mix up with the malicious Nigel, who has a bitter relationship with his brother-in-law. Jimmy’s wife is described as a ‘monument of non-attachment’ and Lady Pusillanimous lacking in fortitude and firmness of mind. An artist by heart, the only solace that he gets is by listening to the folk music of Vaughan Willams. It is remarkable to note that it is not only Jimmy who is bored, but his wife also finds herself in a state of entrapment. The failure in their conjugal relationship is brought forward by Jimmy’s sarcastic comment on Alison’s nature. The nostalgic Jimmy recalls his dear and near ones, especially Hugh’s mother who initiated him into the job as a seller of sweets. He further laments that there are no good, brave causes left in the world as a result of which people belonging to his generation are not able to sacrifice their lives for good causes anymore. Everything has just begun to lose its significance in the present claustrophobic situation. Jimmy, thus, becomes the spokesman for the post-war generation which found nothing right going with the world.

Jimmy is an apostle of suffering and struggle. He has watched his father dying for twelve months. It was only at the age of ten that he had to go through this horrifying and harrowing experience. He admits that he was the only one to look after his sick father. His father unloaded all that was left of his life to a boy of lesser experience. Later on, these feelings shaped his life as he confesses to Helena, Alison’s friend:

[...] I learnt at an early age what it was to be angry – angry and helpless. And I can never forget it. [...] I knew more about – love ...

betrayal ... and death, when I was ten years old than you will probably ever know all your life. (*Look Back in Anger* 59)

Jimmy is angry because he finds people like Alison's parents – those upper class people are antagonistic towards him. He was aware of the fact that in order to prevent Alison's marriage with long haired ruffian like him, Alison's mother locked her up in their sophisticated house. She would not even hesitate to cheat and threaten her would-be son-in-law. The principal reason of her crusade against Jimmy is his lower-class background. Jimmy recounts that he was as harsh as a night in a 'Bombay brothel' and as rude as a sailor's arm. An educated man that Jimmy is, he understands that it is because of his lower status that he is looked down upon. John Elsom in *Post-war British Theatre* points out:

Jimmy hungers for power from the position of social inferiority, with the sick, back-of-the throat taste of continual defeat. His education (at a redbrick university) has left him with a Hunger for Culture, but with an uncertainty about values. Only the safest classics are good enough for him. He is loaded down with longings and aspirations totally at odds with his circumstances in life. [...] Jimmy's frustrations turn into self-loathing and are then re-directed outwards, into aggression against Alison. (*Post-war British Theatre* 72)

He is thwarted and frustrated on all sides. He expresses his grievance against his wife for not having sent any flowers to the funeral of Hugh's dead mother Mrs. Tanner. The angry protagonist grudges that in this world the wrong people are going hungry, the wrong people are being loved and most pathetically, the wrong people are to embrace death. It is because of these reasons he is so agonized and exasperated with the society.

It is not only Jimmy who suffers from the recollection of past events, but his wife Alison and his father-in-law Colonel Redfern also experience the same

sense of loss. After her marriage with Jimmy, Alison was separated from her kind of people. She had to spend some nightmarish nights with her husband and his friend Hugh. She recounts the shameful conduct of Jimmy and his friend Hugh. She further tells her friend Helena that after the arrival of her family from India, everything looked out of order. Alison met Jimmy at a party. At that time, Jimmy looked like a knight of the ancient days bent on winning his lady. Colonel Redfern, Alison's father, somewhat understands the reason of his son-in-law's extreme fury. He regrets at having opposed Alison's marriage with Jimmy. Upon learning that he is seen as a pathetic figure by his son-in-law, Colonel goes on to elucidate the reason of his despondency. During his stay in India, Colonel received fame and respect. He used to feel very self-important as the commander of the Maharajah's army. But his return from India has made him sorrowful. He longs for going back to those happy days in India. Rightly does Alison comment – "You're hurt because everything is changed. Jimmy is hurt because everything is the same." (*Look Back in Anger* 70)

If the characters look forward to the days of antiquity, they can only attempt at turning their backs to the present. The present is suffocating and nauseating to them. He is shocked at the declaration of the Bishop, the messiah of European civilization, who appeals to his followers to help in the manufacture of the Hydrogen Bomb. He is thoroughly wonder-struck at the sinister proclamation of the Bishop who is thought to be the torch-bearer of peace and prosperity, wisdom and knowledge. Jimmy understands that church is a place where there is no love, no compassion and no enlightenment. Further, the Bishop's hostile attitude towards the working-class is annoying to Jimmy – "This idea has been persistently and wickedly fostered by – the working classes" (*Look Back in Anger* 6)! It is this prejudice that led Alison's mother to neglect Jimmy as her son-in-law and to oppose him in all possible ways. Jimmy also finds that his life partner does not comprehend his woes and

worries. Even if the duo – the husband and the wife – play ‘bears and squirrels’ in order to avoid the daily drudgery, they discover to their utter astonishment that they have lost their original glamour and candour. In order ‘to escape from the pain of being alive’ Jimmy plays on his trumpet and even decides to write a poem which would be recollected in ‘fire’ and ‘blood’, rather than ‘tranquillity’.

Thus, the play is a fertile fusion of the past and the present, the hope and the hopelessness, the dream and the reality. Whereas the past is the repository of all that that is consecrated and holy, the present is muddled with sordid and soporific events. The title indicates a reassessment of the past in the light of the dullness of the dark present. Jimmy looks back only to find that the actual world around him is too complex, too commonplace, too complicated and too cruel for him to live with. Jimmy’s anger is a positive reaction against the meaninglessness and the sameness of the present set-up. George E. Wellwarth pertinently observes in *John Osborne: ‘Angry Young Man’?* –

Jimmy Porter ... was thought to symbolize the fury of the young post-war generation that felt itself betrayed, sold out, and irrevocably ruined by its elders. The older generation had made a thorough mess of things, and there was nothing the new generation could do except withdraw ... and indulge in the perverse and vicarious pleasure of nursing its resentment. (qtd. in *Casebook* 118)

As he finds himself unable to bridge between the glorious past and the bleak present, his expectations and his achievement, he can do naught but rave and rant, scream and bawl.

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