



## THEME OF 'ALIENATION' AS PROJECTED THROUGH THE CHARACTER – PORTRAYAL OF JIMMY PORTER IN JOHN OSBORNE'S *LOOK BACK IN ANGER*: AN APPRAISAL

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### Abstract

This article, at the outset, lays focus on the theme of alienation, internal conflict and hostility experienced by Jimmy Porter in John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* by examining how the character, Jimmy is furious with life, friends and his wife, alienating himself from the society, religion and women. It concludes, by stating that of all the modern dramatists, John Osborne has been gifted with the credit of dramatizing the insecurity and alienation felt by the younger generation by effectively picturing the loneliness of the central character Jimmy Porter in *Look Back in Anger*.

**Keywords:** *Look Back in Anger*, John Osborne, alienation, disillusionment, mechanization, disintegration, modern society

What is generally held is that the drama, more than the other arts, is most directly influenced by the spirit of the age and the modern dramas are nothing but the cultural product of a new pattern of society that emerged in the wake of the World War – II, which reduced Britain from the position of a great imperial power to that of a second class power. This is evidently pointed out in the lines that follow:

*"In Hungary; the people rebelled against their Russian – imposed Government and Russia put down the revolt in a good old – fashioned imperialist way by sending in tanks, while the rest of the world looked on and did nothing. In the Mediterranean, the Egyptian Government announced that it was taking over the Suez Canal, up to then owned and*



excellently, of not only dealing with the deepest anxieties and frustrations of mankind in their dramatic creations but also dramatising the complexities and failures of modern civilization leading to desolation, moral squalor, social emptiness resulting in sense of inadequacy and alienation felt and experienced by modern man at all levels possible.

The subject of man's alienation – from his fellow human beings, from the social order and from his own nature – provides one of the few thematic links connecting the post – 1930 playwrights. Alienation becomes a subject of central importance in the plays of the modern dramatists like Osborne and Pinter, in whose plays; the concept of alienation is used to explain ethnic prejudices, mental illness, class consciousness, industrial conflict, political apathy and extremism. Osborne is said to have set an example for other dramatists in his effective handling of the theme alienation. No doubt, the theme of alienation, unlike its treatment of it as the greatest modern predicament in the plays of Pinter and as a necessary result of all the capitalist system, in the plays of Wesker, achieves its magical effect only in the plays of John Osborne who considers alienation as an essential part of man's make – up. Ronald Hayman holds:

*"The theme of alienation .... has been very important in Osborne's work right from the beginning, and it has been even more dominant in his later plays and adaptations"*  
(P7)

In his plays, Osborne shows how an economic and social system hostile to man breaks down the individual and how alienated man is in the modern city. The harsh and inhuman post – industrial society annihilates and destroys the individual. The strain of modern living – with material expansion and moral contraction – often tends to deepen social, cultural and religious alienation into existential alienation of varying degrees of intensity.

Born in 1929 in a London suburb, Osborne is said to have received a bitter education 'unhappy for most of the time' both at school and St. Michael's College. It is said that from his early childhood, the concept of rootlessness of modern man got deep – rooted in his mind, which he got reflected in his plays. He has to his credit publication of such notable plays as 1. *Look Back in Anger* (1956), 2. *The Entertainer* (1957), 3. *Epitaph for George Dillon* (1958), 4. *The World of Paul Slickey* (1959), 5. *A Subject of Scandal and a few others like A Bond Honoured* (1960) and *A Sense of Detachment*. Having a talent for dissent, Osborne apparently has a gift for getting people angry, so angry that one theatre man threatened to shoot him. *"He is alone; the man who made the breakthrough has no 'school', no followers. He is alone because he wants to be alone, probably because he has to be"* (Wager 75).

Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* is a three – act play of fairly conventional structure in which the character of Jimmy Porter, impotent and unhappy but fiercely critical in temperament holds the bold. The protagonist is the young graduate of British University, running sweet stall to make a living, away from the comforts of the Establishment. He is introduced as:

*“a disconcerting mixture of sincerity and cheerful malice, of tenderness and freebooting cruelty, restless, importunate full of pride, a combination which alienates the sensitive and insensitive alike. Blistering honesty of the apparent honesty, like his, makes few friends. To many, he may seem sensitive to the point of vulgarity. To others, he is simply a loud – mouth. To be as vehement as he is, is to be almost non – committal”*

(Trussler 6)

Jimmy Porter has married above himself Alisom, out of spite against middle – class people and he can never forgive his wife's middle – class origin. He is furious with life and his wife. He spits venom against everything and everybody. He abuses his wife and friends for having *“no beliefs, no convictions and no enthusiasm”*. Alison is pregnant but she is too scared to reveal her pregnancy to Jimmy. When her actress friend Helena Charles as an outsider intervenes the domestic life of the couple, Jimmy quite naturally increases the abuse and insults the wife. Alison is unable to stand it and Helen sends for Alison's father who takes her away, in the absence of Jimmy. When Jimmy returns to the flat, desolate after the death of his friend's mother, he raves at the behaviour of Alice but soon reconciles himself to the sensual pleasures afforded by Helena. In the end, after the miscarriage of the child, Alison returns. Helen leaves the place and the husband and the wife are united playing the fantasy game of bears and squirrels. Alienation becomes the root cause of 'anger' in the play *Look Back in Anger*. Jimmy Porter feels himself alienated from the society, the religion, women and himself. Harry Blamires writes:

*“The play is a diagnostic projection of alienation in the figure of Jimmy Porter, a young man whose restless sense of estrangement from the post – war social framework – itself a disintegrating relic of*

*supposedly stabler and sunnier past – expresses  
itself in vengeful torture of his wife and neurotic  
self – laceration”*

(P211)

In the words of John Russell Taylor,

*“Jimmy Porter is the self – flagellating solitary in  
In self – inflicted exile from the world, drawing  
Strength from his own weakness and joy from  
his own misery”*

(P77)

Jimmy is alienated from the society; he is isolated from his fellow beings; he has lost faith in religion; he feels himself an outsider even in marital relationship. First, in Jimmy Porter, there is social alienation. The men of the 1930's had proved themselves in the Spanish Civil War; the man of 1940's had defeated Hitler in the Second World War; in the 1950's in a world cynically divided between the Super Power and immobilized by fear of atomic war, there were no “*brave causes left*” in which young men might fight to prove themselves. The young people of 1950's were found living dreary meaningless lives; neither work nor home brought them happiness. Everything was almost stifling and unstable and the war brought into social life a sort of dreariness and sordidness. The younger generation had a baffled sense of purposelessness, a feeling that it had no roots in the past and no hope for the future leading to a sense of alienation in all walks of life.

In the 1950's, the two major political events –Suez and Hungary–left the younger generation embittered and disillusioned about the possibilities of individual political action within existing political institutions. The sense of futility came to an individual, for the vast and awesome welfare State Machinery seemed to bulldoze everyone to non-entity. *Look Back in Anger* is nothing but a study of the psychology of a modern romantic:

*“.... who behind all his roughness and rudery  
is perpetually building idealised images of  
people and things, which they are unable to  
live upto and which then turn to bitterness  
within him And his situation is made worse*

*by the fact that, in the present-day world,  
there is no cause to which he can give himself  
whole heartedly, no centre on which he can  
concentrate his adolescent dreams"*

(Hartley 54)

Jimmy cries in despair:

*"I suppose people like me aren't supposed to be  
very patriotic"*

(LBA 17)

one of the fruits of the Welfare State was steep rise in unemployment problem among teen-agers. Having received education from the 'White-tile' University Jimmy has to support himself by peddling candy in the streets, *"an extraordinary thing for an educated young man to be occupying himself with"* says Colonel Redfern. *"He tried so many things- journalism, advertising, even vacuum cleaners for a few weeks"* (LBA 64).

Quite naturally, Jimmy feels himself to be unjustly crushed down in the rotten society with no visible hope of ever getting up again. Like an angry and fierceful knight, *"he went into battle with his axe swinging round his head-frail and so full of fire"* (LBA 45). He is angry because he is materially unsuccessful Jimmy is intelligent, sensitive, energetic and enthusiastic with a liking to share his energy and enthusiasm with the society. But in reality, the society is as stagnant and as class-dominated as ever. In the class-conscious society, the working-class people are ignored and insulted. In his despair, he resents his wife Alison who comes from upper-class family and despises her parents and her brother. There is gratuitous cruelty in his attacks on Alison's mother:

*"My God, the worms will need a good dose of  
Salts the day they get through her"*

(LBA 53)

He is also grateful to Hugh's mum who lives off stage serving as a proletarian substitute for the mother from whom Jimmy felt himself estranged;

*"Jimmy seems to adore her principally because  
she's been poor almost all her life, and she's  
frankly ignorant"*

(P46)

She has the magnanimity to allow him to “buy the sweet-stall of hers” in his own time. These social factors-political set up, education, unemployment problem, working-class people’s condition-make him a social anarchist in a Welfare State. In an age of increasing materialism, there is slow disintegration of religious values. Jimmy Porter, as the typical spokesman of the post-war youth in England, finds himself estranged from religion. The ringing of church-bells annoys him because he is opposed to formal religion and its ritual. He says: “*Oh, hell! Now the bloody bells have started*”. He mocks at the Bishop of Bromley proclaiming it a Christian duty “*to assist in the manufacture of the H-Bomb*”. His rage mounts high, when he learns that under Helena’s influence, Alison is going to church: “*Have you gone out of your mind or something*”. He is critical of “*grotesque and evil practices going on in the midlands*” and “*midnight invocations to the Coptic Goddess of fertility*”. In the past, in religion, the person aware of his own sin feels alienated from the presence of God. But in the falsity of modern society, with no sin, man feels isolated from religion. Next, his alienation to a certain extent is the natural outgrowth of his psychic state. As a “*lonely bewildered little boy often*”, he had listened to the feverish talks of his dying father who returned from the war in Spain. All he could feel was “*the despair and the bitterness, the sweet, sickly smell of a dying man*”. He learnt at an early age “*What it was to be angry-angry and helpless*”. His suffering is profoundly solitary experience and Jimmy knows it and says to Alison:

*“...the heaviest, strongest creatures in the world  
Seem to be the loneliest. Like the old bear, following  
his own breath in the dark forest. There’s no warm  
pack, no herd to comfort him. That voice that cries  
out doesn’t have to be a weakling’s”*

(LBA 94)

Jimmy wants others to partake his suffering. But his wife is highly ironical about him: “*Don’t take his suffering away from him. He’d be lost without it*” (LBA 54). His mistress Helena also withdraws from him incapable of taking part “*in all this suffering*”. The lack of communication normally alienates one person from his other fellow beings. In this play, it is not lack of communication; but lack of response from others which makes him rage at the society and alienated to a great extent. Above all, his own married life does not comfort him but aggravates his alienation.

Jimmy Porter is a completely isolated person whose profoundest, quickest, most natural instinct is mistrust. He feels a sort of ‘isolation’ from his wife and suspects her without any mutual understanding:

*“Living night and day with another human being  
has made me predatory and suspicious... I want to  
to know if I'm being betrayed”*

(LBA 36)

In spite of his 'alienation', there is a tinge of human affection in his character. He loves Alison so much that *“I still can't stop my sweat breaking out when I see you doing-something as ordinary as leaning over an ironing board”* (P33). In the end after a miscarriage when Alison comes back in tears, he doesn't exactly *“relish the idea of anyone being ill or in pain”*. As a tender husband, he cradles and gently soothes her. In the play, Helena's estimate of Jimmy is apt to describe his character: *“He was born out of his time”*. There is no place for the energetic youths in the society of despair and disillusion. The sense of futility comes to an individual who is frustrated and humiliated in the society. Naturally, he becomes a solitary man in the midst of other people, including his own dear and near ones. In spite of the contact he makes with Cliff, Alison and Helena, Jimmy Porter is presented as being very much alone in his suffering.

To conclude, of all the modern dramatists, Osborne has been gifted with the credit of dramatising the insecurity and alienation felt by the younger generation in the fifties. He is seen effectively picturing the loneliness of the central characters, distrusted, misunderstood and ultimately betrayed by those around them. 'Modern drama' is mostly the study of individuals, alienated from the social order, from his fellows and from his own self. In keeping with that trend, Osborne has penned the play *Look back in Anger* which deals with the alienation of the three characters – Jimmy Porter, Archie Rice and George Dillon – of which the alienation of Jimmy reigns supreme both within and outside.

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