

## CHAPTER II

A CRITICAL NOTE ON LOOK BACK IN ANGER

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#### 1. Introduction

Look Back in Anger is a play in three acts written by John Osborne. It was published in 1957. The play presents a group of people who live in a Midland town in the mid-1950s. Jimmy Porter, the central character of this play, is an ex-undergraduate. He has married Alison who is a woman from a class higher than his own. Jimmy and Alison share their flat with Cliff, a young, uneducated friend of Jimmy. Cliff helps Jimmy to run a sweet-stall, the business set up for him by the mother of a friend of his, Hugh Tanner.

The play is occupied mostly by the long tirades of abuse which Jimmy aims at his society, its absence of values and its hypocrisy. Much of this abuse spills over on his friend Cliff and his wife Alison in the form of pinching and bitterly humorous attacks. Jimmy blames Alison for her origins. Her origins engender a kind of hatred in him. He also feels for her and gets attracted towards her. The fact is that he cannot find to get reconciled between both hatred and love for her.

The arrival of Alison's friend Helena in the second Act is significant. Helena helps Alison to leave Jimmy and go with her father. Except Jimmy, Helena and Cliff know that Alison is bearing the child of Jimmy. Before Alison returns home in the third Act

with her father, she has lost her baby and Jimmy has a brief, unsatisfactory affair with Helena. Alison returns, broken and in pain, as Jimmy had hoped she would. At this time Helena leaves to allow the couple to take up the threads of a relationship that can survive only by a process of fantasising against the dreadful reality of their situation. At the close of the play Jimmy and Alison are left clinging together in tender and resigned despair.

## 2..The Significance of Look Back in Anger

In May 1956 John Osborne's Look Back in Anger marked the real break-through of the new drama into the British theatre. This break-through was of the younger generation and it signalled the emergence of a theatre on the British stage which was free from the demure and somewhat stifling literary atmosphere of the drama of the immediate post-war years. This play represented a revolution in the content of a play. English people were unfamiliar with what appeared in Look Back in Anger. Lawrence Kitchin reports, there were "speeches denouncing the British military caste; there was an ironing board on stage; and there was the hero, a university graduate working in a sweet-stall in a provincial market". Frederick Lumley's words are also significant in this connection: "In Britain John Osborne has stormed the polite theatre of the drawing-room; he has kicked over the whole clap-trap of conventional values; the long slumber is over".(p. 219) Commenting on the success of the play Frederick Lumley further writes, "Even if Look Back in Anger

was not the best play of the decade, it can be called the most important, for whatever may be the short-comings of Osborne, a play which establishes a new intellectual climate, a return to a directness of language long absent, can have an important influence on the future" (p. 222).

### 3. Social Background for Look Back in Anger

The English society by 1956 can be said to have divided into two worlds. This was the natural result of the impact of World War II. This war was of particular significance for Britain as the turning point from the great Imperial power to the nation that had lost an Empire and not found a role. This dramatic turn of events in the fortunes of a nation will cause a chasm between those who can't believe that anything has changed, and continue to act as if nothing had changed, and those, generally the younger generation, who not only recognise change, but welcome it. There were also political changes in England by 1956. "Conservative Party under Winston Churchill made it clear that the British Empire did not end and Clement Attlee's Labour Party which was never able to gain power in the pre-war years, gained power in 1945 and represented the victory of the younger intelligentsia supporting the traditional working-class vote" (Banham, 1969). To many people war was a battle against Fascism and an opportunity for reform and re-assessment. Banham writes, war "destroyed many of the illusions of the infallibility of the ruling classes and of natural right to rule that birth and

breeding might assume. The Second World War was fought by common men, and after the war these men forced a rule of common men". (p. 14) The people began to lose belief in natural leadership. They cried for equality in education and employment. The Labour Government enjoyed the support of not only the working class, but also of the middle class and the young. People demanded a new order of society. This new order in the society was both inconceivable and undesirable to the older generation. Banham's words are significant in this connection: "An older generation, who had seen the war as a battle for a return to old standards, was often savagely divided from the younger generation, who saw it as an opportunity for new. A society that rejected tradition, and found the class both laughable and abhorrent, built its world alongside another society that found its stability and sanity only in a comfortable perpetuation of these very things. Both sides had their strongholds. The one could nationalise industry, give away colonies, create opportunities for free education to the highest levels expanding en route, universities and colleges that were open on grounds of merit alone. But the other could hang on to what it had in a stubborn exercise in self-perpetuation of the top jobs, could still use its residual wealth and political and social power to maintain its exclusiveness, and could still insinuate its standards into the morality of the society. Osborne writes from the experiences and the frustrations of the new generations".(p. 15)

#### 4. The Setting of Look Back in Anger

The setting of the play Look Back in Anger is a theatrical

revolution in itself. The play is set in Jimmy Porter's one-room flat in a large Midland town. The significance of the setting of this play is best expressed in the following words of Barham (1969): "The audience was invited to look into a world that was singularly sordid but very real. Gas stove, chest of drawers littered with clothing, books etc., light from a skylight, the hero slouched in a old arm-chair reading a paper, the heroine ironing in the middle of the room dressed in one of her husband's old shirts". (p. 12) To most people this setting was a challenge to their sensitivity and stomach. To some it was an experience of breathing fresh air and to some it was an inexcusable release of a most unwelcome stench. The whole action of the play has the setting of Jimmy's one-room flat. The play has only five characters: Jimmy, Cliff and Colonel Redfren (Allison's father) are the men characters; Alison and Helena are the woman characters.

##### 5. Jimmy Porter: a character-sketch

John Osborne describes Jimmy in the opening stage directions (p. 9-10) as follows: "... we find that Jimmy is a tall, thin young man about twenty-five, wearing a very worn tweed jacket and flannels. Clouds of smoke fill the room from the pipe he is smoking. He is a disconcerting mixture of sincerity and cheerful malice, of tenderness and free booting cruelty, restless, importunate, full of pride, a combination which alienates the sensitive and insensitive alike. Blistering honesty, or apparent honesty, like his, makes few friends. To many

he may seem sensitive to the point of vulgarity. To others, he is simply a loudmouth. To be as vehement as he is is to be almost non-committal." Jimmy Porter is the central and leading character of the play. Examining Jimmy's role in relation to the whole play Alan Carter (1969) remarks, "It is the ability of Jimmy to express himself which saves the play from being parochial, for the social reference of the play is very limited, almost provincial" (p. 52). The title of the play has also a reference to the character of Jimmy. Simon Trussler (1969) observes, "He (Jimmy) looks back in anger only because he looks back in nostalgia: and his compulsive verbosity is a protective device, an armoury of words with which an easily-wounded man defends himself against those who best recognize his vulnerability" (p. 11). The roots of Jimmy's impotent anger lie in the past - in his father's premature, lingering death, over which he stood youthful witness, and in his need to expiate by means of a self-imposed proleterianism his mother's inadequate middle-class compromises. Commenting on Jimmy's verbosity Simon Trussler (1969) writes, "He uses his facility with words to nurture an ebullient image which his disillusion is constantly threatening to deflate: and the hovering boredom of an English Sunday afternoon spurs him in his first orgy of wife-baiting" (p. 10). His attitude towards Alison is made clear in the following words of S.A. Weiss in an article for the Educational Theatre Journal (1960): "Jimmy prosecutes ... war against her (Alison) with all the fury of his passion, pain and pride, his hate and hurt. He wants her to surrender after

suffering and humiliation". Jimmy seems to dominate Alison, and other characters. This view can be supported by Alan Carter's (1969) following words, "It is in Jimmy's character and in his words that the power of the play lies. Other characters have but "fill-in" dialogue, only Jimmy is allowed to explore the field of ideas" (p. 53).

The force of Jimmy's speeches is apparent throughout the play. The speeches are rhythmic and full of emotions. Jimmy has made use of questions now and then. Andrew Kennedy (1975) observes, "By contrast, the manic intensity of Jimmy Porter's speech is communicated as much through the rhythm as through the emotional hyperboles. The histrionic posture is embodied in the whole movement of the speech: its rapid changes in pace, from declamatory self-reportage to the reiterated questions - with their nervous, percussive beat - to that crescendo of self-excitation in the closing harange" (p. 209). Frederick Lumley's (1967) words are also significant to reveal the egoistic character of Jimmy Porter: "Here we have an egoistical battering-ram, an enigmatic character who however much he has to offer, is constantly misunderstood. He will deliberately set out to shock, he has the utmost contempt for bourgeois values, his favourite words are "phoney" and "wet". A portrait of a character of contradictions, a complex mixed-up mind, full of fire and fury and not simply the louse he might appear - at least superficially" (pp. 222-223). Jimmy's strength and weakness are observed by Kenneth Tynan in *The Observer* on 13 May as follows: "What with



his flair for introspection, his gift for ribald parody, his excoriating candour, his contempt for 'phoneyess', his weakness for soliloquy and his desperate conviction that the time is out of joint, Jimmy Porter is the completest young pup since Hamlet, Prince of Denmark ... Jimmy is simply and abundantly alive; ..." (J.L. Styan 1981: 153).

Osborne's hero Jimmy Porter was different from the recognised stage hero of the period. He was educated - but in all the wrong places. Oxford and Cambridge were the universities where the heroes Jimmy replaced took education. Jimmy's situation is worse because his education does not place him in a life suitable for his talents. Being educated he makes his living by selling sweets in a stall in a local market. In this connection Barham (1969) writes, "To some Jimmy Porter seemed a rebel, but what Osborne is really showing is a misfit, and a misfit whose experiences could be widely shared. Jimmy is intelligent, sensitive, energetic, and willing to offer passion, enthusiasm, and energy to society. But he finds that no one wants what he has to offer; the changing society in which he believes is, in reality, as stagnant and as class-dominated as ever, and what Jimmy offers is not merely rebuffed, it is ignored. Jimmy's anger, his bitterness, his hysteria, and his cruelty, are cries from the heart for recognition, and nothing more" (p. 16).

Jimmy Porter is consciously aware of Alison's middle-class upbringing. He feels a simulated hate for her parents and brother and the world they represent. Pointing out the paradox

in Jimmy's character Barham (1969) writes, "There is probably an element of natural paradox ... in that Jimmy attacks Alison for being what she is, and yet wishes that he could treat her as her upbringing might lead her to expect. Her presence is a constant reproach to him, and her toleration of him seems rather like slumming, rather like the patronage with which society has given him a white-tile education, pretensions to usefulness, and then denied him an effective role, reserving that for its natural aristocrats. So Jimmy's life is a constant attack on Alison, and continual whine about lack of understanding (including some plunges into very sentimental moments of self-pity)" (p. 16). After Alison leaves him, Jimmy lives with Helena till Alison returns in the last act. This change does not mean anything to Jimmy. He always feels that he is living in a world of enemies which does not suit him at all. His general enemies are those he sees as smug, privileged, and worsely those who are successful. Alison's brother Nigel is such an enemy. Jimmy attacks the Conservative Party, its candidates and supporters, politicians in general, the regular army and its officer cops, and the public schools.

Jimmy's long tirades of abuse are what make the play interesting. He wants to be heard. Barham (1969) observes the need of Jimmy to be heard by others as follows: "Jimmy's demand to be heard is a reflexion of his desire to be needed. There are two episodes in the play when Jimmy relates or experiences that desire, and both are concerned with death. He tells of the death

of his father, insisting that he was the only person who cared, and reliving the horror of sitting with the dying man who had no one else for company except the "lonely, bewildered little boy", who "learnt at an early age what it was to be angry - angry and helpless". Later he was to undergo the same horror when he is called to the deathbed of a friend's (Hugh's) mother - a woman whom he loved as a mother - and has to "watch someone I love very much going through the sordid process of dying". Whenever he is needed it seems to be in circumstances of death and failure, and Jimmy begins to think himself incapable of associating with success and blames a vicious world for his predicament" (p. 21).

Many people felt pity for Jimmy Porter. The reasons for this lie in his character. He states himself as an "objectionable youngman". He is being treated with love even though he abuses his wife and his friends. Barham (1969) supports this, "He abuses his friends, insults his wife, attacks her parents, sulks, broods and engages in the most awful self-pity. And yet he is loved, by Alison, by Helena and by Cliff" (p. 21). Barham further writes, "Jimmy is not a coherent individual, nor a consistent one, but he does at least have the virtue of standing up and shouting, and it is this gesture of defiance, coupled with an essential decency, that Cliff and Alison can recognise, that has made Jimmy Porter something of a folk hero of our time. His shortcomings make him all the more credible" (p. 22). The speeches of Jimmy seem to be monologues. He gives vent to his feelings of hatred against Alison, her brother

Nigel, her parents, and against the world around him. Barham (1969) remarks Jimmy's speech as follows: "His speech is always lucid and seemingly effortless, though as it is mainly a one-way conversation it has a ring of hollowness in it" (p. 20).

To conclude, let's observe what Griffiths says about Jimmy in York Notes on Look Back in Anger: "Jimmy Porter has the quintessential modern mind, sharp and sentimental, witty and maudlin by turns, a wheel spinning fruitlessly in the mud, flinging it purposelessly in the face of anyone who comes near and then crying out in terror at the thought of being left alone in the dark". (p. 57)