

Depiction of Class and Education in John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*

Dr. Rajeshkumar Ishwarbhai Patel

Assistant Professor

Smt. M. C. Desai Arts and Commerce College, Prantij, Gujarat, India

Abstract: Playwright and actor John James Osborne was an English screenwriter and playwright who was recognised for his engaging writing and critical attitude against existing social and political standards. *Look Back in Anger*, his hit play from 1956, changed face of British theatre forever. Osborne has written screenplays for theatre, cinema, and television with variety of genres as well as themes during the course of his 40-year career. He had a wealthy as well as ostentatious personal life. Even while he's known for his political activism and the brutality in his rhetoric, he's also known for the violence he inflicts on his own family comprising kids and spouse. John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* is an landmark in English drama that signalled start of a new phase in the history of modern British theater. Its theme of a young man railing against the petty hypocrisies and social injustice of his age and the powerful language that it employed made it one of the most controversial plays of the mid-twentieth century.

Keywords: Industrialization, Education, Class, John Osborn.

I. INTRODUCTION

Anger is a difficult emotion to deal with. It has been the subject of numerous books and articles, workshops, seminars and psychoanalysis for many years and yet we seem no nearer to understanding it than our forefathers did. In this paper I will look at John Osborn's play *Look Back in Anger* and try to show that it can help us to understand something about anger by showing us how destructive it can be when we allow it to take control of our lives.

Look Back in Anger was first published in England in 1956, after the end of World War II. The British Mass Education Act was passed in 1944, making secondary education free for every citizen of the nation. This implies that whole new segments of British society may now write regarding their life. One of such is John Osborne. Anger and new perspective were brought to the stage by his play in a British theatrical culture that had been courteous and affluent before his arrival. A sign of this new class's mobility, and of new world it has spawned, may be seen throughout play. Jimmy Porter is an angry young man who is frustrated with the way society functions around him. He dreams of living life on his own terms but when he realizes that it will not be possible, he lashes out at everyone around him including his wife.

Jimmy Porter's character embodies all that was wrong with England before the advent of rock and roll music in Europe. He feels suffocated by his circumstances yet lacks the courage to take action to change it for himself. This kind of frustration was not uncommon among people who grew up during this time period and we can see similar attitudes among many characters in contemporary literature such as Holden Caulfield by J D Salinger's *Catcher In The Rye*.

Look Back in Anger is a play that focuses on marital struggles as well as life of educated and intelligent yet disgruntled working-class young guy named Jimmy Porter also his upper class spouse. Liu has the same ability but is half dead Alison. Supporting characters include Cliff Lewis, a kind-hearted Welsh tenant trying to keep the peace; and Helena Charles, Alison's snobby best friend.

The play focuses on themes such as the growing disillusionment with traditional British society following World War II, the developing class divide, and changing sexual mores.

Look Back in Anger premiered in Royal Court Theatre in London in 8 May 1956, Tony Richardson directed it, featuring Kenneth Haigh as Jimmy Porter, Mary Ure as Alison Porter, Alan Bates as Cliff Lewis, and Joan Plowright for Helena Charles. It has been said that *Look Back in Anger* "remains one of the defining works of post-war British theatre".

II. CLASS STRUGGLE AND EDUCATION

One of the play's central themes is that of class conflict or class awareness. A member of upper class is target of Jimmy's wrath while his wife belongs to that class. He has a perpetual war on his hands against upper class and considers his spouse like an "hostage". The underprivileged British kids react to Welfare state's structure and spirit through Jimmy. As an act of retribution against upper middle class, he bullies his wife. A purgatory of misery and humiliation is what he demands in order for the "hostess," as he deems it, to accept his class culture. Jimmy considers himself as representative of "working class." He vows war upon upper middle class on behalf of working class people. Alison's mother, who signifies upper middle class, is object of his vengeance. He seemed to have great joy in using roughest words imaginable to insult Alison's mother. For purpose of humiliating Alison, Jimmy and Hugh conduct raids on the homes of her close friends and family members. He is inspiring in his attack on his wife's family, and Helena too becomes the target of his vicious attack some time. His grudges against the upper class comes from his feeling of being deprived of a suitable job in spite of being highly educated. The intellectual genius in him rebels against what he feels in a social injustice.

The play *Look Back In Anger* (1956) is first of series of plays that deal with the theme of class struggle within marriage. The main character in the play, Jimmy Porter is a university graduate who has set up a sweet stall in a market place. His wife, Alison is from the upper middle class and their marriage is on the rocks. Jimmy Porter attacks his wife's class, education and upbringing. He also attacks her inability to be emotional, her lack of response and her politeness which he sees as a form of hypocrisy. He feels that she has not been able to provide him with emotional warmth and love.

In this play John Osborne for the first time introduces the theme of class struggle which was to become a dominant theme in many of his later plays. In this play Jimmy Porter's aggression towards his wife is an indication of his anger against his own lower middle-class background. His resentment against his wife's upper middle-class background is an expression of his anger against those who have prevented him from moving upward socially.

The play *Look Back in Anger* by John Osborne, has been first performed into 1956. It's set in 1950s and gives an insight into the lives of people who had been too young to fight in World War II and are at an age where they have to settle down and find work.

The main characters of the play include Jimmy Porter, a university graduate who has been reduced to running a sweet shop, his wife Alison Porter, quiet timid lady having middle class background, also Helena Charles, a friend of Alison's.

The major characters in *Look Back in Anger* are, in one way or another, all outsiders. This is not to say, however, that they are alike. They all come from different classes and the conflict of class is a central theme of the play. For example, Jimmy's resentment against the upper class is expressed in his derogatory remarks about Alison's father. Jimmy and Cliff have very different attitudes towards education and education leads to better jobs and higher incomes for Cliff, while it leaves Jimmy with a lowly job as an assistant stage manager.

All the characters are educated to some degree. The extent of education helps determine their social standing and also influences their attitudes towards one another. There is an important distinction between the university-educated Cliff and the self-educated and self-made Jimmy who left school at fifteen to become a butcher's delivery boy. Their attitudes towards Alison are also affected by her education; Cliff admires her for being "refined" while Jimmy thinks she is "inhibited".

Jimmy's distrust of education may be partly explained by his own experience at grammar school where he was "the slum kid on scholarship". However, it also seems likely that Jimmy resents Cliff because of his superior education even though he himself has been educated only to a lower middle-

In retrospect, the class and educational issues were of course central to John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*. Play was born into an era of social change, when the grammar school system was expanding, a new meritocracy was emerging and people expected their children to do better than they had done.

The social-class issues in *Look Back in Anger* all stem from the characters' education. Jimmy and Alison are both from middle-class families, and Jimmy, as a result of his college education, is expected to have a degree of sophistication, an appreciation for the finer things in life, and a vocabulary larger than that of Cliff. Cliff's education was spent learning how to be a mechanic; he learned how to use his hands and had little time for book learning.

Jimmy's education has taught him about tragedy, and he views himself as an existential hero, always ready to throw himself into the fray. He rejects all forms of dishonesty, even if it would help him get along better with people. His frustration with his inability to communicate is heightened by his middle-class expectations of communication skills. Jimmy believes that Alison should be able to read his mind because they are both educated people.

The most obvious way in which class is viewed into *Look Back in Anger* is through character of Cliff. Cliff communicates more honestly than anyone else in the play; he is honest about what he wants, what he feels, and how hard he works at making ends meet. Cliff has no expectations; he knows what it means to do without and appreciates what little he has been able

III. CONCLUSION

Into the play *Look Back in Anger*, distresses, anger, as well as despair of working class are portrayed, and at same time show conflict between the lower as well as upper classes. Into post-war era, after the Second World War, there was prodigious transformation into social values in England. Working class has the opportunity to learn, but they are not respected, their opinions are ignored. So this problem, which culminated in the post-World War II British society, was highlighted by Jimmy Porter in Osborne's play.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Osborne, John. *Look Back in Anger*. Faber publishers, 1957.
- [2]. Bond, P. (1999). *Look Back in Anger* by John Osborne. World Socialist Web Site. R
- [3]. Goldstone, H. (1982). *Coping with Vulnerability: The Achievement of John Osborne*, U P of America, Washington, 215-216
- [4]. Demastes, W. W. (1997). "Osborne on the Fault Line: Jimmy Porter on the Postmodern Verge", John Osborne: A Casebook, (Ed: P. D. Denison), Garland P, New York, 61-70.
- [5]. Evans, Gareth Lloyd. *The Language of Modern Drama*. Emerald Publishers, 1977