



Realism in the Selected Plays of John Osborne and Arnold Wesker: A Study

Dr T Eswar Rao,
Asst. professor
P G Dept of English
Berhampur University, Bhanja Bihar
Ganjam, ODISHA, 760007

Abstract

The literary works of the twentieth century, especially the works of the 1950's, have a very distinctive and peculiar characteristic which presents the aftermath of the two destructive world wars through the writings of the authors. These literary works hold the post-war scenario of the world which is full of uncertainty and bafflement. The social and political alteration that England was waiting for is truly represented in the post-war literary works authored by various dramatists, novelists and other literary figures. The post world war dramas, the dramas of 1950s and 1960s are famous for their realistic depiction. The new wave dramatists were a group of young dramatists who were rebellious in nature. They had a feeling of intense anger and disliking for society and its upper-class people which had made them rebellious and protest against the upper-class. John Osborne and Arnold Wesker are considered as the pioneers of this new wave group. Both of the playwrights are widely acknowledged as kitchen sink realists as most of their plays deal with the genre of Kitchen Sink Realism.. The aim of this paper is to bring out the social, political, cultural, economic and religious problems and issues of the then British society as depicted by the playwrights in their respective plays. It also focuses on the class distinction between the upper-class and the lower-class where the capitalists exploit the working-class, both socially and economically. The playwrights,. These anger and frustrations are nothing but the outbursts of their personal hatredness which they have presented in a comprehensible manner.

Key Words: capitalists, comprehensible, frustration, post-war, Realism.

Narration

John Osborne's masterpiece *Look Back in Anger* (1956) has two different parts and two different meanings, the first one stresses upon 'looking back' and the second one creates the sense of anger that has taken place in the present times and is the motive of 'looking back'. Thus the entire play largely deals with the present as well as past times of England. As the play deals with Kitchen Sink Realism the dramatist has tried to

present the situations of commonplace discourse to make the readers astonished with the straightforwardness of the play. The play is set in a one-room attic flat in England, a particular place where the living, sleeping and cooking areas are in the same room and it is the evidence of the social status of the characters of the drama that belong to the lower-working class. The kitchen seems like a public forum, a place of discussions and debate



which is seems to be dominated by male characters like Jimmy and Cliff.

The term Kitchen Sink Drama is like a mirror of the British society. It reveals the happenings of the society to a larger extent. Most of the British theatres favoured the classical dramas or Victorian plays and comedies before the production of Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, a play that is characterized by domestic realism. The Victorian dramas deal with the conventional themes emphasizing on the upper ruling class of the late 19th and the early 20th century. Osborne's drama delineated the living styles and raw feelings of the working class. This kind of theatres which were emphasizing on the domestic lifestyle of the ordinary working class people were named as "Kitchen Sink". This Kitchen Sink drama is a genre that tries to represent the lives of upper class British people in such a way that reflects the drama of the ruling class.

In *Look Back in Anger*, Jimmy Porter represents the whole generation of "Angry Young Men" by the contemporary social conditions and surroundings. In the view of many critics, the genre of realism was in lack of imagination during the mid-twentieth century in the plays of dramatist like G.B. Shaw but it was John Osborne who brought back this imagination to the realistic dramas through his sense of anger, frustration and the effect of alienation of working class by the upper class British people which appeared after the Second World War. The people who were the most affected during this period are the labour class who were struggling for their socio-political rights against the higher class people. They were deprived of equality both socially and politically and caught between social homogenization and corrupt politics. The characters of Jimmy

Porter and Cliff are the shining examples of lower middle class people who are found to be in such a society. Both Jimmy and Cliff are from working class background whereas Allison, the female protagonist as well as Jimmy's wife is an upper middle class lady who is the cause of Jimmy's frustration and anger. The distinction of social class between Alison and Jimmy is the result of Jimmy's dissatisfaction. Jimmy's mind-set presents him as a rebellious character in the drama. Throughout the entire drama he is found to make accused to the upper class people of the society like Alison and Helena for his alienation and offences. The only cause which makes Jimmy a worthless person in that contemporary society is the class distinction for which he goes on hating the friends and relatives of his mother in the same way how he hates her family. Jimmy holds a university degree but still works as a worker in a sweet-stall. He also hates Mrs. Red fern, Alison's mother who is a class-conscious lady. In every respect she prevents Alison from her marriage with Jimmy because he belongs to the lower-middle class family. Jimmy has a special liking for Cliff in his heart as Cliff says, "I am common"

Although Jimmy belongs to the working-class background, he thinks himself superior and brainy in comparison to his wife Alison. It is his education that gives him priority in the society. He is educationally better than Cliff and Alison; however, he is unable to find a job despite being a learned person. He chooses anger to express his feeling of strong dislike about the society and its upper class inhabitants. Throughout the drama anger is just an alternative which is caused by his feelings of frustration and it is only through his anger that he



shows his agony and attacks on the prejudiced society and its inhabitants.

In this drama we find Jimmy suffering from an intense feeling of being unloved but he suffers from class distinction even to a larger extent. He is a character filled with self-pity. He is completely confined with his personal ideas and severely criticizes anything which is against his subject. Alison thinks it would be better to share the subject of her conception with someone she is comfortable with rather than with someone she is not comfortable at all. So she shares the news of her carrying stage with Cliff, whom she considers to be an affectionate friend, rather than her husband which presents a clear picture of the psychological isolation that is the result of hostility and faithlessness.

Jimmy feels himself in secured with women. He verbally attacks Alison for the extreme intensity of her sexual desires but simultaneously he had the same sexual desire. Jimmy is like a victimizer who seems to be the victim in this play. According to Dorothy Dinnerstein, males are "more afraid of the intense sexual desire than females." In the view of many critics, although Jimmy is exactly not a misogynist because he is very much caring in the case of Mrs. Tanner, the mother of Hugh and even for Madeline, his girlfriend but in many cases he is uncomfortable with females. This hatred feeling that Jimmy has for women might be the reason of his anger which is the result of his mother's carelessness attitude towards his bedridden father. As this play largely deals with social realism we find the suffering of working class people through the character of Jimmy who represents the whole angry young men and their intense anger as well. Jimmy has been suffering from the pain of mental anguish

since his childhood which has made him available nothing than despair. He is grown up in a tough circumstance. He had a painful experience of his childhood which is caused by the war. If we will judge this statement from a greater depth then we can notice the impact of his father's death on him, he was a victim of his own parents' marriage in which there was no peace and he was the silent and helpless observer of his father's death. He was born and brought up in such circumstances which can easily make us understand that he was suffering from psychological pains.

There is a peculiar sexual crisis in *Look Back in Anger* and Osborne seems somewhat confused in his stance on alternative sexuality. The Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, under which Wilde was convicted, which punished public or private sexual relations between two males as 'gross indecency', was still in force. Possibly, that too worked as a deterrent for Jimmy and did not allow him to 'come out' (Naz,66).

The post-colony brought with it a world of new problems. It was a new world order and equality was the call of the day. There was the perennial fear of a nuclear holocaust. Strategic ties were being forged the world over. And voices of resentment were being heard from different parts of the world. The problem with gender and race also started surfacing in a big way. But Jimmy's anger was not addressed towards any of these problems. What seems most interesting is that to a large extent there is hardly any difference between a Colonel Redfern and a Jimmy Porter. While Colonel Redfern came to a country very different from the one he had left and was resigned to fate more than anything else, Porter was equally compelled to come to terms



with the loss of the empire and its eventual disempowerment.

John Osborne, writing about unemployment, alternative sexuality and alternative politics, and even more so about contemporary 'reality', was markedly different from his predecessors. Interestingly, though, Osborne in no way tried to experiment with the form of the play. *Look Back in Anger* was conventional in its form though quite revolutionary in spirit. Jimmy Porter like the rest of the younger educated lot, feels cheated. And this dissatisfaction ignites Jimmy's anger. Nothing really happens for Jimmy. Deep down, in spite of all his derision for Colonel Redfern, Jimmy longs for a life that he had lived and the times that he lived in. Therein lies the paradox of Jimmy's character. He considers himself the working-class man who believes in social equality.

For Jimmy Porter, Alison is simply a trophy he had won- the victory of a working-class man over the bourgeoisie. It is rather difficult to comprehend whether love was ever the foundation of their relationship. Jimmy views her as a feather in his cap and keeps no stone unturned to make it clear to his audience. One should not also forget that John Osborne wrote the play while he was nursing heartbreak and, there was no natural filtering of real life into his work of fiction. The similarities between Alison and Pamela, his ex-wife, are not incidental.

According to many critics, *Look Back in Anger* is a play intended to reflect the post-war situations of the then British society. Basically we find two major themes in the play. The first one explores the theme of the relationship between man and the society and the second one is between man and woman, and both the themes are juxtaposed with

brilliant craftsmanship. Jimmy does not get certainty, neither outside nor inside him and this uncertainty throws him into a delusional as well as disturbed state (Ray,24).

The end of the Second World War did not bring peace rather it brought a more destructive nuclear age. The changes it brought with its end were the moral degradation and the corrupt mind-set of the people seemed to be even more harmful than the heartbreaking effects of the war. The sense of purposelessness was seen in the new generation where there was no hope for a better future. The moral degradation and the corrupt socio-political mind-sets of the upper class people made the younger generation protest against them. Osborne had realised all these problems by coming across the post-war circumstances that helped him a lot in depicting the mood of the young generation. The drama has achieved success in making a far down understanding of intricacy of the life of human beings. The title of the drama determines the hidden theme. The sacrifices remained futile that justifies the title as the young lower-middle class people were looking back in anger. Jimmy was completely unable to live in such a society for which he made him alienated and isolated. Without any doubt and hesitation one can call the drama *Look Back in Anger* a milestone in the history of the twentieth century English drama (Zaman,53).

The history of modern English drama can't move forward without considering the significant contribution of Arnold Wesker, who like John Osborne, has made a profound impact on the twentieth century British theatres through his dramas. Like John Osborne's plays, Wesker's plays were also found to be dealing with the socio-cultural



problems of the then British working class people. He too had a struggling career throughout his entire life, be it his writing career or his career of remaining engaged with various unofficial jobs, he had been suffering in the capitalist society. His play *The Kitchen* is a partly autobiographical drama that largely deals with the social conflicts that existed between the working-class and the bourgeoisie, the former indicates to the suppressed class while the later was in power. In this drama Wesker criticizes on the working class people who were considered to be worthless humans during that period and were living mechanical lives (Jadhav, 36).

As the whole play revolves around the kitchen of the restaurant Tivoil where the workers don't even take a pause to have interaction with one another it results in the communication gap among them. Their work is the only thing that matters to them. Every worker knew it before about Winnie's pregnancy but as no one stopped her from working her miscarriage took place, rather she was removed from the job in front of all other workers that gestures at the harshness of the modern civilization. Likewise, if we will take the case of the burning face of Hans into consideration then we will find that everyone was okay with this incident taking it as a very casual matter. The willingness of a person to be sympathetic towards somebody else was getting diversified which is the evidence of ruthlessness of the modern society (Goyal, 26).

In this play we find that the characters are not satisfied with their jobs as well as their lives. The only reason why they don't left their jobs is that it is profitable. The characters seem to be frustrated and they show their wistfulness regarding the periods for how

long they work there and the condition under which they work. A few of them are also dissatisfied with their complicated relationships which shows that their feelings are temporary and their frustrations are being expressed within a very short period of time. The drama gives a clearer picture of the post-war British society and how the characters are traversing the voyage of modern life under psychological dilemma. The central character of the drama, Peter, is a shining example of a dissatisfied character in this drama. He is a hot-tempered person who is always found to be involved in different quarrels. He has an affair with the waitress Monique whom he does not want even to talk to the customers due to his jealous attitude which he has for her (Wesker, 76).

Paul is another cook like Peter who states the fact about Peter's involvement in arguments which proves Peter as a character fond of conflicts. Dimitri's question to Peter regarding their dreams makes Peter reminded of his proposal because this was actually his idea of dreaming and sharing. Peter leaves the kitchen when Monique gets into it and soon after his leaving the other members discuss about his personality. According to some critics this conversation among the characters about the personality of Peter is suggestive of the distinction between class. In the opinion of the renowned critic Roland Hayman, "the verminous behaviour of Peter and the sudden changes of his mood are the results of frustration and pressure situations which he is undergoing." The employees of the restaurant also have bad opinions about the owner of the restaurant, Mr. Marango. The reasons behind their bad opinions about Mr. Marango are class distinction and the physical exploitation



as they do not get the proper amount of money as their salary.

The Kitchen is thematically similar to Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine* which shows man being tortured in a brutal manner in the industrial society. In both these plays we find humans in an oppressive society. In *The Kitchen*, we find Peter protesting against the proprietor of the restaurant and the mechanical pattern of life as well. He is considered as a rebellious character as well as a victim by many critics. In this drama we see the exploitation of the working class people through the Marxist point of view. The workers go on working the whole day and night but they are deprived of their actual payment which is the main cause of their anger and frustration. This play carries Wesker's personal experience as an individual belonging to the post-war British society which makes it a realistic drama to some more extent.

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