

Politics Literature Interface in John Osborne's Look Back In Anger

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Every work of art has both a timeless, universal significance and at the same time bears relevance to the times in which it is produced. Though literature of every period directly or indirectly gives an effective picture of the contemporary times-its political, social and cultural changes-all these patterns are dealt not in isolation but a complete climate of ideas impinges upon the writer, shapes his sensibility and stirs his imagination to create something new. This consciousness of social and political situation is acute in the writers of 50's and 60's. Larkin, Amis, Wain and Osborne are the writers who fully captured and presented in their works the milieu of the 50's in its varied forms and shades. A.E. Dyson¹ very well judges that the electric tension of the Royal Court in 1956 was due to the political fever of that extraordinary year- Hungary, Suez, the campaign against capital punishment and the rise of campaign for nuclear disarmament. *Look Back In Anger* is one of the most powerful and authentic expression of the mood of the fifties generated by rapid and radical developments taking place both at home and at abroad. But before an analysis of how and with what effects it is expressed in the play, it is necessary to make a brief survey of the political situation of Britain which had been crystallizing for years.

For two centuries, England had been a major power- a world power, with the financial, industrial, colonial and naval strength that made such a status possible. Though England had wider responsibilities than most countries of Europe, she had always been a European power. When the challenge came in form of conflict with the greatest continental powers of the time - first with France, and then, twice with Germany, England emerged victorious and stronger in all these situations. Since the beginning of the twentieth century that lofty position had slowly been crumbling steadily. It had been eaten into first by the rise of industrial Germany and America in the later 19th century, and then by the human and material cost of the First World War. The rise of the Communist Russia and the economic strain of the Second World War further accelerated the downfall of England. There was a growing feeling of nationalism throughout the world, and the increasing conviction of the British that they had no moral ground for denying self-government to their colonial people. With her empire transformed into a weak and divided Commonwealth, she could not compete with Russia and America.

Besides this the year 1956 was rather rich in causes for agitation as well as for disillusionment. In Hungary, the local communists rebelled against their Russian-imposed communist 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. Consequently, the dreams of the young idealists of establishing a Socialist administration with the help of communist Russia for the welfare of the working class was completely shattered. Denis Richards and Anthony Quick aptly say, "The broad sympathy of the Russian people was looked down with an eye of suspicion."² The western powers, who also swore by democracy, also behaved in a no different way. The 'Cold War', the bloodless war by America to contain Communist Russia within the territories was constantly going on.

There was a wide spread feeling among the young idealists that instead of joining the either wing, Britain should try to constitute a 'third force' to mediate between the opposing giants - Russia and America by means of a 'moral influence'. In a surprising attempt to revive nineteenth century gunboat-diplomacy, Britain and France sent in troops to protect their interests in the Suez area as Britain was not strong enough 'to go it alone', thus proving that it had to accept the back seat in the conduct of world affairs. In his play *The Entertainer*, the enemy is identified with the 'men of Suez' and the right wing generally. Archie's daughter goes to the Trafalgar Square protest meeting against Suez and breaks her engagement. Archie's fading personal fortunes are identified with the fading of the Empire. His present hollowness echoes the present hollowness of the Empire idea, and the proposed retreat to Canada signifies the shift of power. Characters like Archie aptly comments on the deteriorating condition of the Empire. Osborne's painful consciousness of England is powerfully expressed in his **A Letter to My Fellow Countrymen** (1961), when he says, "Till then" damn you England you're rotting now, and quite soon you'll disappear. My hate will outrun you yet, if only for a few seconds. I wish it could be eternal."

Besides these rapid and challenging changes in the role and status of Britain in the community of nations, British people witnessed some radical changes in the domestic politics of their country which ultimately resulted in a mood of disenchantment with politics as an instrument of betterment in the over all system and structure of their society. With the victory of Labour Party in 1945, fresh hopes for a socialist utopia not dominated by class system and class culture, but fixing its values in tune with the spiritual and material needs of the entire population were established. A.D. Choudhri says in this context, "The nationalisation of industries, dismantling of the colonial Empire, opportunities of free education upto the

highest levels, free health allowances were only one side of the picture. On the other side there could be seen neglect of the old and sick, insufficient assistance in the form of social insurance, an arbitrary educational system barring a large

number of young children in schools from higher studies and condemning them to a life of drudgery and mediocrity, political and social power still wielded by the upper aristocratic class and top jobs still occupied by this class." Moreover, shifting of power from Labour Party to Conservative Party brought no changes in the social set up. Dyson very well sums up the whole situation and says, "In fact, two major parties in Britain seemed to be gradually moving together. And whatever the practical advantages of this situation, it had the result of disillusioning many who had formerly been active in politics and believed that political activity held the solution for the world's ills."

The society was divided against itself because political parties in their manifestoes promised to reject traditional class advantages and yet in practice perpetuated the values of an outdated social structure. The young idealists, who had formerly been active in politics, discovered that they had been cheated, given false hopes and found themselves entangled in the vicious circle of the industrial society with distinct preferences for aristocratic class. In his A letter to My Fellow Countrymen (1961), Osborne depicts the wide-spread hatred against the political authorities. He says, "There is murder in my brain, and I carry a knife in my heart for everyone of you"

This fore-going analysis of some of the aspects and events of political life clearly proves that the whole period was characterized by sweeping and significant political developments. Their influence on the life of individual in society of that period was, therefore, bound to be of far reaching consequences. The state of confusion and contradictions between the professed aims and actualities further deepened tensions and conflicts in the minds of British people. The failure of promises and expectations held out to the young by political parties and programmes resulted in their disintoxication with the whole system. Sometimes it degenerated into mere cynicism, but very often it drew violent protests from the generation which believed that it had been swindled by the political masters and their system Osborne seems to be sensitive to all the important political events of his time and his response to them appears to be representative of the whole generation to their political set up. In **Look Back in Anger**, the presumptuousness, snobbishness, insensitivity and hypocrisy of the ruling, urban and capitalist aristocratic class. The class of the ruling elite is represented by Nigel, the brother of Alison. He is a man who belongs to the upper middle class and has been educated in public schools and white-tile university. The morality he has imbibed is that of the public schools and white-tile university. The morality he has imbibed is that of the public schools and his knowledge of life is drawn merely from books and not from direct exposure to the realities of everyday life. his knowledge of life remains hazy and ironically he is the representative in the

capitalist democratic set up of those people about who he knows nothing. Jimmy says, "And nothing more vague about Nigel than his knowledge. His knowledge of life and ordinary human beings is so hazy, he really deserves some sort of decoration for it." England prided itself on the belief that her government was of the people, for the people and by the people. But in actual practice the power was centered only in the hands of the aristocratic and upper middle class people who claimed to be the only competent class to govern a country like England. The young generation of Jimmy, which had acquired education and which had now become conscious of their rights and had started demanding equality with the upper class people, snook at the members of this so called superior class of Nigel. They treat the aristocratic class of the politicians with scant respect which is clear from Jimmy's frequent and angry tirades against Nigel and the class he represents. In a capitalist democracy, press and Church often act as the accomplices of the political coterie. In **Look Back In Anger**, Osborne exposes how Church conspires with the politicians to perpetuate status quo and thwart economic, social and political changes in the real sense of the term. The Bishop of Bromley is a victim of class prejudice and he goes even to the extent of giving a call to subscribe for the manufacture of H-Bomb. The functioning of the Church as an instrument of the political system disenchants people like Jimmy and he cannot therefore, even stand the ringing of Church bells. The unholy nexus between the church and politic extends even to press. Posh-papers, magazines and other means of publication were in the hands of industrial magnets and they used press to tighten their grip on power and thus, to advance their own political and monetary ends. The fact that press appears in the play as a part of the total politic-religious machinery controlled by the capitalist class becomes evident from the abundance of foreign reviews in the papers, which reveals the snobbish and sophisticated tastes of the public school educated upper class people. Moreover it carries appeals by the people like the Bishop strengthen the hands of the politicians which is another evidence of press being used as an instrument to further the interest of a particular group or class. That is why people like Jimmy react strongly, sometimes violently, against the posh-papers and find nothing of their interest in magazines and newspapers. The dehumanising impact of the politics upon society was deep. People became disenchanted with the functioning of British democratic system. Democracy proved to be nothing but merely a game of compromises. In every field of life, priorities were still given to upper class people. Infact feeling of class consciousness was deeply ingrained in the imaginative and mental make up of the people that only a perfect functioning of democratic set-up could break it leading to the establishment of real 'Welfare state'. The functioning of the vast but corrupt machinery of the Welfare state destroyed the identity of those who didn't conform to its prescript9ions of success. The intellectuals of the lower middle class were the worst victims of the malfunctioning of democratic set up. The 'Welfare state which professes to provide equal opportunities to all, infact, tended to perpetuate discrimination. For example, Jimmy, a university graduate, has to earn his living by selling 'candy' which he could easily have done without any university degree.

Complexities and presence of life for the man in the street went on mounting. Commoners like Jimmy had to live in a single room flat in the squalor-ridden areas of Midland. They are out of proper, jobs and have to live in conditions of poverty. The social mobility is made impossible by the high-brow resistance of the upper class people. All of these factors combine to produce a state of tensions affecting the psychological and moral life of the individuals and even their marital relationships. The pay in this way dramatizes forcefully the shattering of the illusion of England and social order, people like Jimmy feel as if they are entrapped animals struggling to get free but not knowing how, Osborne depicts the despair of the deprived generation of Britain unable to adjust themselves to the fast changing materialistic society. Jimmy's criticism of society is not motivated merely by selfish anger consequent upon his worldly failure. A.D. Choudhry says, "He bears a grudge against the world for treating him badly; but assuredly, it is not a selfish anger, his object of anger goes beyond the question of his own happiness or frustration, and embraces larger issues. He is angry and irreverent not because he is materially unsuccessful."⁹ His anger is the outward expression of his concern for the oppressed. He has painfully realized the injustice of the world and he cries out: "The injustice of this is almost perfect! The wrong people going hungry, the wrong people being loved, the wrong people dying."¹⁰ In such a political state characterised by paradoxes and contradictions, the youngmen like Jimmy feel perplexed not knowing what to do. Dwindling of England from status of an imperial power is too much for Colonel Red fern to understand and accept but for Jimmy, the problem is that there has been no significant change in the desired direction. The same elite group of affluent people rules England and they perpetuate the same old practice and system which gives this coterie a privileged position in the social and political set-up. Commenting on Jimmy's dilemma, Alison says, "Jimmy is hurt because everything is the same. And neither of you can face it. Something's gone wrong somewhere, hasn't it?"¹¹ on the other hand, Alison tells her father that he is hurt because everything has changed. Colonel Red fern finds himself unable to adjust to the changing conditions of the establishment. He is the typical representative of the whole older generation which once has enjoyed the privilege of being the citizens of a nation as the greatest imperial power. So it is not only the younger generation which is gripped by a mood of disappointment and anger, the older generation, too, feels dissatisfied with the state of affairs though for different reasons. Finding themselves unable to adjust to the present situation, they indulge in an imaginative escape to the Edwardian world. Being oblivious of the contemporary situation, he lies in a world well lost to posterity; but it is a very much positive world in which things were settled in their place. Colonel Red fern admits, "Perhaps I am a-what was it? An old plant left over from the Edwardian wilderness. . . . I did not see much of my own country until we all came back in '47."¹² Infact, both the generations i.e. the older and the younger are unable to adjust themselves to the highly materialistic motives of a fast-changing society. A kind of language and feelings are foreign to the successful and their strange loneliness is unappreciated. Jimmy is like Hamlet who finds the world out of joint.

The intensity of his concern does not lead him to undertake any positive action to ameliorate the lot of the oppressed. Like Hamlet, he is paralysed by his excessive brooding over the presence of hypocrisy in the political system, but unlike him he can not do anything at any stage. The contradiction in the personality of Jimmy is his rejection of the values of his society and his inability to do anything positive about it. He cannot create a little world of his own choice. All he is left with is brutal anger which eats into the vitals of his own being. Helena rightly points out: "There is no place for people like that any longer in sex, or politics, or anything that's why he is so futile. . . . He does'nt known where he is, or where he is, or where he's going. He'll never do anything, and he' 11 never amount to anything."¹³ Thus **Look Back in Anger** presents a picture of the contemporary political situation in England and abroad and shows how it influenced deeply both the older and the younger generation of the fifties. The tension generated by failure of the 'Welfare State', failure of democracy, and different political parties to live up to the expectations of the young generation finds a very powerful and authentic expression in **Look Back in Anger**. The disillusionment of young with politics as a panacea to cure all ills has been presented as one of the major factors responsible for the mood of anger and frustration which seems to prevail all over this epoch-making play.