

Social Injustice causes Frustration in a postmodern era in the Context of John Osborn's play, *Look Back in Anger*

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Abstract: *The current study explores social injustice reflected in John Osborne's play, Look Back in Anger (1956). John Osborn (1929-1994) is considered to be one of the striking postmodern playwrights. Osborn shrewdly reflects contemporary society in his literary works. His play, Look Back in Anger, is an exact depiction of postwar English society, with all its anxiety and uneasiness. The framework for the current study is a theory presented by Thomas W Simon in his book Democracy and Social Injustice: Law, Politics, and Philosophy (1995). Thomas W. Simon asserts that democratic theory shall deal with the social inequalities inflicted upon disadvantaged groups. By shifting theoretical sights from justice to injustice, Simon reshapes the nature of democracy and provides a totally new perspective on social problems. He unfolds the causes and effects of injustice, victims' responses to injustice, and historical theories of disadvantage, revealing that those theories have important repercussions for the current policy. The play depicts the social imbalance, lack of understanding, injustice and desperation of post-war English society.*

Key Words: Alienation, Anger, Anxiety, Social Injustice, Identity

Introduction

John Osborne (1929-1994) is considered to be one of the prominent English playwrights of English literature. He mirrors the Post-War English society in his plays. Osborn comes across many hardships in his life. He lost his father at an early age; he adored his father more than his mother. Osborn is always judgmental about the increasing feminism in his society; due to his stance about women and English culture, he is labelled a

misogynist by many critics. The play, *Look Back in Anger* reflects not only his society but it also represents his personal life. Osborne's own wife wasn't loyal to him; therefore, his opinion about women is not positive. He disregards his mother due to her indifferent nature. Osborne looked for true love throughout his life but he never succeeded. His married life was quite unhappy; that is why he divorced his wives, he partially succeeded ultimately when he married his last wife.

Review of the Related Literature

World War II makes a dramatic change in the attitude and approach of modern English men. They don't believe in the previous established norms and culture. Religious institutions lose their importance in people's minds because they are sceptical about them. People of England are totally disturbed physically and mentally due to the uncertain situation all around. Part Sandip Balu states about Osborne in this regard; He has successfully portrayed the mood of despair, anger and frustration of the post-war generation in England (Balu, 2014, p.13). John Osborne realistically depicts the anxiety and frustration of English people in his plays. His play *Look Back in Anger* presents a picture of educated young men through the character of Jimmy Porter. People in England are frustrated due to the existing institutions, aristocracy, churchmen and politicians. There is no specific motive in modern men's lives. English society is socially disintegrated because of the different classes. The lower class feels uncertain and insecure. Osborne exposes the trivial nature of aristocracy, politicians and clergymen, who are less concerned with the genuine issues of the English people. Simon asserts that people are placed in a specific group not because of their choice. Still, it is society that places them in a specific category (*Democracy and social injustice*, 1995), and that is how marginalization takes place. English society is polarized due to the injustice which takes place in everyday life of a common man. The working class is bound to live in unchanged pathetic conditions. After World War II people of England are given new hopes and dimensions. The Conservative Party gave way to The Labor party in 1945. They planned to change the way of governing system in that Britain would be a classless state. Politicians gave splendid hopes to the English people for a better life and social justice, but with the passage of time, people realized that they are deceived with false promises. Poor people are

deprived of their fundamental rights. Unemployment is the major issue which increases day by day. After getting the degrees from universities, the younger generation is unable to find an appropriate job. Jimmy Porter is compelled to do the job below his level and qualification, which leads him to frustration and disillusionment. B. Sangamitra asserts about the Post- War working class of English society; they felt that they had been cheated and given false hopes and found themselves as members trapped into a frame of class and hierarchy (Sangamitra, 2015, p.13). the lower class of the society is alienated and detached, due to the exploiting and neglecting nature of the ruling class. Jimmy is highly educated and deserved to be given a chance to make his future bright, but because of his lower class, he is deprived of better opportunities. The highly privileged jobs are given to the children of the upper class of English society. the working class is destined to live in deplorable condition. The social values and previous English culture are deteriorated by a constant run for individual success and personal benefits. Osborne makes his society and its values as major themes for his new drama. Social injustice is something which one can come across all over the world; therefore, his themes have a universal appeal also. B. Sangamitra says in this regard; that Jimmi Porter spoke for a large British population experiencing alienation from a society in which he was denied (Sangamitra, 2015, p.14). Highly educated people struggle for good positions, while the socially privileged members of English society easily get high profile jobs. Osborne shrewdly observes the discrimination on the basis of class, race and religion in English society, and he uses them as materials for his new drama. The new form of drama emerges right from the minds of postwar English people; therefore, Osborne's play, *Look Back in Anger* gets eminence in the English literary circle. Osborne has full command over the happenings of his

contemporary society because he not only mirrors the society but also echoes his own life. The play is autobiographical to a great extent. Jimmy Porter is the representation of Osborne's own life, while Alison is the depiction of his wife, Pamela Lane. Osborne expresses the bad experiences of his own life through *Look Back in Anger*, which is almost the story of every lower-class man in his contemporary society. Lane belonged to the upper class of English society; she was materialist in her approach to life and relationships, she never genuinely loved her husband because of her class distinction. The unhappy married life alienates Osborne from his own family and society. He expresses his anger and frustration toward English society in his literary contributions. B. Sangamitra says in this respect; there is no distinction between Osborne and Jimmy Porter in many aspects. They belong to the same background and fight for the class divisions of the English society (Sangamitra, 2015, p.15). Mankind loses values, feelings and emotional attachment towards each other's, based solely on humanity. The prevailing capitalist system eliminates humanity from human beings gradually across the world. The only things that matter for postmodern society is wealth and material prosperity. In the play, Jimmy runs a sweet-stall, which is a protest against the established norms, and he is an echo of the exploitation of the highly educated working class. Being a straightforward person, Alison's father doesn't know about the reason for Jimmy's selection of the ordinary profession, but Jimmy constantly tries to reflect his working class. Alison stands in the battlefield against her husband, and the battlefield is Jimmy's flat. Jimmy hates her only because of her upper-class family background. Osborne reflects the alienation, and insecurity of the lower class due to the exploitation of the upper class. Social injustice and disintegration lead Jimmy Porter to frustration and despair. Patil state about

Osborne's characters; the sense of rootlessness, loneliness and isolation can be seen in his characters (Patil, 2011, p.1). Jimmy is highly educated and competent enough to be appointed on some respected position, but he belongs to the lower class of English society; his class is an obstacle in his way to excel socially and financially. Society follows the traditional and hierarchical system for the higher positions. The upper class enjoys a well-privileged life. The renowned educational institutions provide good opportunities for better education to the upper class only, while the working class and less privileged members of the English society are deprived of their basic rights and opportunities to make their lives prosperous. The setting of the play depicts the deplorable plight of the working class of English society. The setting is one room flat with a single bed, three chairs which are quite old and a dining table which is also not in good condition. The life of a common man is quite different from the upper class of post-war English society. Jimmy Porter is sketched to reflect the frustrated and disappointed youth of the postmodern generation. Ms. Shradhanjali and Mr. Parveen Saiwal state in their research article about the character of Jimmy; Jimmy's character is mirrored in accordance with the young people in Britain who suffer from the disappointment of the hopes which they cherished and nursed in the years following the end of world war II ([Shradhanjali, Saiwal, 2017, p.1263](#)). The hope for success in future and a better lifestyle turns to a nightmare gradually, and the working class feels the vacuum immensely, between the classes and socially distinguished individuals. Osborne touches upon the harsh reality of his people not only in *Look Back in Anger* but also in his other literary works. In the play, Jimmy Porter is socially isolated, and he is sceptical about his role in society. He is anxious about his identity and integrity. Jimmy is not only against the social system of his society, but he is also questioning religion. He feels

frustrated the moment he gets to know that his wife Alison is going to church. The role that he wanted to play among his people, is not given to him; therefore, he rebels against everything around him. Jimmy doesn't know the very purpose of his life. After getting higher education, he is supposed to do some sophisticated job, but contrary to his position, he runs a candy stall. He exactly represents the so-called developed and prosperous English society, in which social position, wealth, rank and file are more important than a human being. People try to succeed, no matter how they get to the top. The working class would always be in the same condition, even if they are intelligent like Jimmy. Falak Naz and Anila Jamil state about Jimmy's condition; He is from the working class, and has a "University Education", but he has to work at a shop of sweet. This helplessness makes him angry (Naz, Jamil, 2015, p. 22). The post-war generation is totally perplexed over the very motive of their lives.

Social injustice, discrimination, and the lack of a chance to have a respected place in society are the major reason to trigger one's anger. The anger is adopted not only as material but it becomes a style also, in Osborne's plays. People get angry when they are unable to get the expected result of their effort. Constant failure leads to the excess of anger. *Look Back in Anger* reflects the anger of every individual across the world. The working class of English society, is desperate and angry with the society and social system of the country. They are unable to get the expected outcome of their constant struggle. F. Afolayan says about anger; Anger is a philosophical and sociological problem, an emotion (thus psychological) that can be triggered by social imbalance such as anger at racism or sexism (Afolayan, 2012, p.124). Jimmy's anger is triggered by social injustice, lack of communication, unemployment and self-centred English post-war society. Osborne is well acquainted with the

relationships of his contemporary society. He had many bad experiences in his relationship with the people around him. The upper class of English society cares about their social status and higher position. In the play, Jimmy hates Alison's mother due to her upper class and attitude towards the rest of the world. Osborne adopts an unconventional way of composing his literary works. His plays are also a kind of revolt against the traditional way of British theatre. His style is not properly disciplined and according to the rules because he reflects the society as it is. Osborne exposes the triviality and indifferent behavior of English society in his own style. He doesn't follow the traditional way of drama. Barker says that the character of Jimmy; it was "intense, angry, feverish and undisciplined (Barker, 1956, *Daily Express*, Naz, Jamil, 2015, p.21).", Osborne uses his plays as a tool to express the existing injustice, imbalance, alienation and anxiety of his country. The characters are taken from his surrounding, whom one can come across in his daily life. They talk in their natural style, in which they express their stance towards life and society. Jimmy Porter is sarcastic due to the excessive feelings of an identity crisis. He is unable to determine his life in a precise direction; Falak Naz and Anila Jamil say in their article about Jimmy Porter; This character shows his all offenses and alienation for the high class of society. Throughout the play, we find him fighting against the sense of alienation and identity crisis (Naz, Jamil, 2015, p.20). Society doesn't recognize Jimmy as respected as compared to the upper class. Moreover, he is deprived of his basic rights, which reinforces his rudeness and anger. His aimless position among his people makes him uneasy and desperate. Every norm, religious doctrine and institution seem superficial to him. Life of the working class is aimless and without any proper objective, according to the play, *Look Back in Anger*. The futility of the post-war intelligent generation is also because of the

major contribution that they are deprived of. The intelligent and educated men are not placed on such positions where they can play their role for the betterment of the nation. They are frustrated and alienated because of the rotten political and religious systems. Decisions based on merit are rare; those who are capable of changing the system are deprived of decision-making power. Inas A. Hassan and Cairns state their standpoint in this regard; Indeed, this prevailing futility is undeniable because those 'alienated' intellectuals were neither economically oppressed nor exploited; rather, they experienced a frustration born of a lack of challenge, recognition, and honor (Cairns 203, [Hassan, 2003, p.32](#)). The highly privileged people of English society are not basically able to make sure equality, social justice and national integration in the country. Jimmy Porter could have contributed a lot, since he is an intelligent and educated person, but he lives just like an idler, he runs a candy stall for a living, which doesn't suit his personality and background. A lack of proper direction and objective drags Jimmy towards a mental disorder. He feels inferior to the upper class though he is a highly educated young man of English society, this kind of inferiority complex leads the working class to frustration and detachment from the rest of the society. the split between people and families in post-war English society is due to those people who foster classes among the countrymen. Osborne lashes over the evil of social injustice in his society, and he exposes the shortcomings of his society through his literary contributions with the intention of the betterment of his country. In order to reflect his contemporary society exactly, he uses an unconventional style. He discarded the traditional style of the drama of middle-class characters. The characters in his plays speak exactly according to their placement. Even the traditional realistic plays are no more interesting for the post-war audience.

They want to see the characters close to them in their everyday life; Raymond Williams says about Osborne's style; it is the beginning of a revolt against orthodox middle-class drama" because he is of the view that "what passes for realistic drama is in fact telling lies (Williams, 27 *Theatrical and Unreal*, Tecimer, 2005 p.4). Osborne's other contemporary playwrights also mirror the same predicament of post-war society. Emine Tecimer asserts in this regard; Alongside John Osborne, Arnold Wesker, Harold Pinter, and John Arden were given as the key figures of the 'angry young men.' In spite of that, Osborne resisted allegiance to any group including the angry young men movement ([Tecimer, 2005, p.6](#)). John Osborne doesn't join any movement, including Angry young men' yet the term is quite appropriate for his dramas. He is unable to decide, what to do with his life, and where to turn for his ultimate goal. Osborne's uses a bold and blunt way of expression through his characters, which is unconventional and unique in English drama. before Osborne, there are many playwrights who compose plays with a common man as a hero, but what makes Osborne different is that he explores the working class of English society. Tennessee Williams' *A Street Car Named Desire* (1947) is a praiseworthy contribution in this respect, but it isn't about English people.

Research Methodology

The study is qualitative in nature; the work of John Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, is opted through sampling technique, which is purposive in nature. Secondly, after the selection of the research study, the researcher included relevant secondary sources, such as research articles, newspapers, books, dissertations and other print and electronic media. The framework for the current study is the theory presented by Thomas W Simon in his book *Democracy and Social Injustice: Law, Politics, and Philosophy* (1995). To achieve the targeted

objective, the researcher studied the play in detail and examined various aspects of the play to unfold the elements of social injustice. The researcher emphasized the elements of social injustice in Osborne's writings, specifically in his play, *Look Back in Anger*. Unlike many other theorists and writers, Simon precisely explained all of the groups created in society; people get frustrated and angry with society when they are placed in a group with a negative identity (*Democracy and social injustice, 1995*). The researcher aimed to examine these elements in *Look Back in Anger*.

Analysis

Osborne uses everyday language with its natural bluntness, which is something new in English theatre. When the play, *Look Back in Anger* is premiered for the first time, many critics immediately recognized it as a revolt against the English establishment. The term Angry young men was coined by a Royal Court publicist, and it became a movement of the dramatists who have the themes of anger, frustration, alienation and disillusionment common in their plays. Anger and frustration can be explored in the very discussion of Jimmy Porter and Alison when Jimmy says, "If you could have a child, and it would die...if only I could watch you face that (*Look Back in Anger, 37*)". Almost all of the protagonists in Osborne's writings are a misfit in the existing norms of society. his heroes are common people of his society, who possess all the traits and lapses of a common man, and a common educated English man are angry; therefore, his play, *Look Back in Anger* is highly fascinated for the postmodern English audience. He is an antihero in his approach because a traditional hero may not reflect his contemporary society. Right from the beginning of the play, Osborne sketches the one room flat of Jimmy, which is in shabby condition; here is the setting of the play; a one-room flat in a large Midland Town... a large attic room... the furniture

kept in the room is simple, and old. Up R is a double bed, ... a shelf for books. Down R. Below the bed is a heavy chest of drawers, covered completely with books, neckties and odds and ends... quite small wardrobe.... two deep old leather armchairs (*Look Back in Anger, .9*). The furniture in the room is not in a good condition, which echoes the deplorable life of the working class of English society. Jimmy Porter represents his countrymen who desperately search for love, compassion, sympathy, equality and humanity. Jimmy's failure, despite his constant struggle to find his mind matching people, makes him more and more aggressive and bewildered. Jimmy expresses his uneasiness towards the social norms of society which causes a vacuum and striking gap in the people of his society. "One day, when I'm no longer spending my days running a sweet-stall, I may write a book about us all. ...It'll be recollected in fire, and blood. My blood (*Look Back in Anger, 54*)."

Discussion

It can be asserted in the light of the above research study that John Osborne's play, *Look Back in Anger*, deals with the uneasiness of postmodern society. Being an English man, Osborn is quite aware of the lapses of his people. He echoes English society with all its traits and shortcoming. The capitalistic approach of the statesmen in England prevail in frustration and despair among the working class. *Look Back in Anger* precisely mirrors the issue of discrimination in English society. The constant negligence of the state makes the vacuum between the upper and working class more and more dominating. The setting of the play indicates the dilapidated condition of the working class in English society. Emimi Tecimer says; It is obvious that Osborne makes use of a realist and naturalist setting in his drama, *Looks Back in Anger* to reinforce his standpoint which is to present the living circumstances of the post-war generation, especially the younger

generation of working and lower-middle class origins (Tecimer, 2005, p.5). After the success of *Look Back in Anger*, English theatre encourages other young playwrights to contribute in the themes which are mostly taken from their contemporary society. Tecimer states in this regard; after the success of the play, theatre companies began to provide platforms for a succession of new playwrights such as Shelagh Delaney, John Arden, Arnold Wesker, Harold Pinter, and John Mortimer (Tecimer, 2005, p.5). Interestingly, all of these playwrights belong to the working class origin; therefore they are well-aware of the issues of their people. In their dramas, they present a real picture of the lower class of their society. Unemployment has always been a hindrance in the progress of working class. If an intelligent young man like Jimmy Porter, is unable to place himself on a right position, he would follow a wrong direction because his talent is neglected by society. Only social justice can make sure the unity, equality, love and respect for each other in any society, in the play, Jimmy is angry with the condition of his life, and he considers the upper class of his society responsible for the unbearable circumstances of the working class. John Osborne is quite successful in depicting a precise picture of his country. Without any kind of fabrication, he exposes the triviality of English society in his plays. The working class suffers from an identity crisis because they are not given the importance which they deserve. Jimmy is perplexed over his being a part of English society. He is lost, and unable to make his way towards a clear destination. 20th century witnessed drastic changes in every walk of life. Religious, cultural, economic and social perspectives of life, take a new turn after World War II. Playwrights of

the time collected all of these changes in their literary contribution in order to expose the harsh reality under the pretext of development of science and technology.

Science brings destructions along with comforts and progress of human being. Arnold Wesker (1932-2016) and Harold Pinter (1930-2008) are Osborne's contemporary dramatists. They are also known for depicting the shabby condition of the working class of English society in their dramas. Ms Shradhanjali and Ms Parveen Saiwal states regarding modern changes; social, political, and various other changes after the world war brought uncertainty, temper, and frustration in youth. Twentieth century writers collected all the points together and created a unified picture of Britain in their plays (Shradanjali, Saiwal, 2017. P.1262). Arnold Wesker's *Chicken soup with Barley* and Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* are also noteworthy in the context of modern realism. Wesker and Pinter deal with the social injustice and insecurity of a common man. Common people live purposeless life in a capitalist society. They are uncertain about their future because the upper class doesn't consider their genuine problems. Despite their pivotal role in society, the working class isn't given importance by the statesmen which lead them to inferiority complex, frustration and disillusionment. All of Osborne's plays is an account of his contemporary society, but *Look Back in Anger* is a unique social document of post-modern English society. the play touches upon every aspect of English society. The elements of social injustice, frustration, anger, anxiety, uncertainty, and disillusionment are painstakingly depicted by Osborne in *Look Back in Anger*.

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