



Exploring Masculinity and Femininity in the Husband-Wife Dynamics of *Look Back in Anger*

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Abstract— This paper explores the complex dynamics of male-female relationship within the framework of masculinity and femininity as presented in John Osborne's path breaking drama *Look Back in Anger*. The purpose of this study is to illuminate how the author uses gender roles to create and deconstruct the relationships at the heart of the story by looking closely at the characters and their interactions. The purpose of this article is to explore how the character follows or subverts established gender norms, which in turn affects their marriage and the overall flow of the play. This paper does this using an interdisciplinary approach based on literature, gender studies and theatre analysis. It focuses on two main characters, Jimmy and Alison, who struggle with the changing nature of cultural expectations and gender roles in post-war England.



Keywords— Masculinity, Femininity, World War, England, Patriarchy, John Osborne

I. INTRODUCTION

Look Back in Anger is one of the finest plays of the 20th century. John Osborne revolutionized the English theatre. This piece of art allowed the audience to look at the play with a fresh perspective. This play may be categorized as the second Renaissance; this drama portrays reality and British hope for a new courageous world after World War 2. This drama was ranked fourth in the list of the most notable English dramas of the 20th century; it also became the symbol of the angry generation. It gives a realistic portrayal about the politics of England.

Osborne writes on alternative politics, alternative sexuality, marital problems, class clash and unemployment. This play is revolutionary in spirit but conventional in style. Osborne tries to write a drama that offers the audience and readers a glimpse into everyday life. This play dealt with the frustration and anger of the lower middle class. *Look back in Anger* is one of the most popular Kitchen Sink dramas, first performed in 1956 and revolves around a sense of loss. When Churchill regained power in 1951, the post-war Labour government's welfare state measures and England's economy recovery were continued. *Look back in Anger* is

occasionally regarded as a working class drama; therefore, the hazy line between the lower middle class and the working class is significant. The play may be viewed as the expression of wrath or discontent among the working class. Despite efforts to create a welfare state that is classless, the class system has remained largely unchanged as the mixed economy has taken hold. This had caused outrage at the persistence of a class-based power structure. The drama depicts the young; that's the reason it became a cult play. Emphasis on sexual relationship is one of the major highlights of the play.

The play revolves around Jimmy and his relationship with his wife Alison and the emotional complexities among them. The hatred towards women is demonstrated in the speech and actions of Jimmy. Jimmy treats women as commodities to fulfil his sexual desires; the women characters of the play become the target of his anger. The Play is set in a one-room flat in Midlands town. It gained immediate success for its unfiltered portrayal of the frustration of the younger generation of the 20th century. Through this drama, Osborne introduced the phenomenon of the 'Angry Young Man'. During the 20th century, English

men were more or less colonized. There was a role reversal in the world of politics, and Jimmy presented himself as the spokesperson for the entire nation. Michael Foucault believes that power produces knowledge, and contrarily, knowledge induces the effects of power. Jimmy shows Foucaultian principle in the play. This feeling of their lessening importance compared to their early supremacy also resulted in a sense of anguish, which gets visible in the speech of Colonel Redfern, who says “The England I remembered was the one I left in 1914” (Osborne 70) in this statement, there is a feeling of loss. *Look back in Anger* portrays several issues. The first film adaptation of the play was by Osborne's own production company, Woodfall. The film sets the setting against a broader cultural backdrop, combining the modern and the old, jazz clubs and street markets, hedgehogs, immigrants, and more. The drama was televised on 28th November on ITV Granada. First television writers describe Jimmy as a mixture of sincerity and cheerfulness.

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

This play begins with the removal of a corrupt structure of over affluent England moguls and brings the young lower middle class into new mode of playwriting. This play shows soul of the society; Jimmy's dialogue works as an epigraph and gives general priorities towards present and past. Journalist Kenneth Alison's 1958 work, *The Angry Decade*, shows an urgent eagerness to demand a clear identity for an era before it reaches its end. He argued that the decade was very rich and enthusiastic in a neurotic and superficial sense. John Osborne describes the decade as “the far and spineless fifties “by 1954. This Play works as a slow revolution among the audience of England.

The London theatre of the mid-1950s can be described as negotiating a less showy but still decisive reassessment of aesthetic practices inspired by the formal experiments of Beckett, Brecht and Ionesco. This play shows that the play's hero can be decade defining. Jimmy's frustration followed by anger is the feeling of English men after World War 2. Good days never came. The *Look Back in Anger* myth is heavily influenced by Kenneth Tynan's criticism of *The Voice of the Youth*, which was published in the *Sunday observer* five days after the opening night. Tynan's performance used ventriloquism, which gave Jimmy a progressive viewpoint on numerous contentious modern problems that are never specifically addressed in the drama. Alison believes that Jimmy and Colonel Redfern are both hurt due to the situation of London. She tells her father “You're hurt because everything is changed, Jimmy is hurt because everything is same” (Osborne 70) and both are unable to come to terms with reality. Jimmy rises as the

signifier of the human condition. He comes out as a perfect example, when educated and capable person suffers from unemployment and frustration.

Banerjee states that the action of Jimmy and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* are similar, whose actions and feelings are not always understandable. *Hamlet* and Jimmy both hate women. *Hamlet* says “frailty, thy name is woman!” (Shakespeare 15). Perhaps because of the identity crisis Jimmy shows anger against society. In the book '*On Directing*' Harold Clurman tried to make a link between nation and Jimmy. Jimmy is complicated at first for an outsider to understand, but for an English man, Jimmy is in the air, as the Englishmen feels.

Homi Bhabha inspects the relation between Nation and Narrative of the text. It seems like language and anger are the only weapons Jimmy has in the war of apathy. Osborne tends to push his agenda; perhaps his male anxiety and sense of personal injustice overcame his progressive thinking. The deliberate distortion of the female voice in his play provides an outlet for his deliberate contempt for both his mother and grandmother, as well as his fearful upbringing after the loss of his father. Osborne wrote the drama while he was dealing with the heart break. There is natural effect of real life in the drama. Also we can trace the similar traits between Alison and Pamela, his ex-wife. Jimmy is presented as Osborne's Prufrock.

We are the Hollow men

We are the stuffed men

Leaning together

Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!

Our dried voices: when

We whisper together

Are quiet and meaningless (Eliot, 1 — 7)

War imposed a destructive and miserable condition in England; these lines share a sense of destiny and destruction. Jimmy presents himself as Osborne's mouthpiece. Alan Carter states “It seems that Osborne had ripped out an inner part of himself and tossed it bleeding onto the stage” (Wathore, 5).

III. MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY

Literature and Masculinity move parallel; literature can show the aspects of male chauvinism that might not be visible in daily life. Psychotherapist Joseph Pleck explains that, at the time, there was no systematic description of the male sex role identity paradigm. In his book “*The Myth of Masculinity*,” sex role identification was thought “necessary for good psychological adjustment

because of an inner psychological need for it." (Pleck 79) Since a man can be judged proper for his sex with masculine qualities at one end and feminine traits at the other, sexual orientation is viewed as a disruption. Sex role identity is a learned behaviour, not a God-given one. Sex roles are defined by society and norms. Antony Easthope writes that "Social change is necessary, and a precondition of such change is an attempt to understand masculinity, to make it visible." (Reeser 6) Jimmy shows natural traits of masculinity; he shouts at Alison and treats her as a commodity.

In the essay "Critical Cross Dressing Male feminists and the woman of the Year" Elaine Showalter asks if male feminism is "a form of critical cross – dressing, a fashion risk of the 1980s that is both radical chic and powerplay." (Reeser 7) During the 1980s, attention shifted to the Muscular and Moral loci of setting up the identity. Paintings by Lady Elizabeth Butler reinforce the definition of masculinity and marital self-sacrifice. "The Great Adventure: Male Desire and the Coming of World War 1" by Michael C. C Adams tries to recreate the virtuous trend made on war in the expression "a natural and high expression of social values." Adam focuses on Male insight into war because males were the leading figures. Look back in Anger, which not only focuses on Jimmy's Perception of war but also poverty, unemployment, frustration so on and so forth. Jimmy states, "We get our cooking from Paris, our politics from Moscow" (Osborne 11) and he also says, "It's pretty dreary living in the American age unless you are an American." (11) Play is based on Jimmy's frustration after World War 2. Adam pays attention to class understandings of the desirability of war for middle class. Patriarchy asserts that men are superior to women. As the head of the house, men dominate both women and other men. Shulamith Firestone believes patriarchy is a trap for oppression of women.

Charles Darwin's theory of human evolution develops a sociobiological view that male dominance is a natural characteristic of human life during the time when humans were hunters and food gatherers. Aristotle, the Greek Philosopher, depicts female race inferior in all regards; he writes "The relation of male to female is by nature a relation of superior to inferior and ruler to ruled." (Aristotle 232) Sally Robinson explains in 'Theorizing Masculinities' that gender stereotype and power dynamics influence the behaviour and identity of men. Jimmy presents himself as authoritative in front of Alison. He tells her, even in little things, "Well, she can talk, can't she? Or does white woman's burden make it impossible to think?" (3) Walby Forthright states that Patriarchy is "System of social structure and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women". Women are forced to accept societal

feminine qualities. Simon de Beauvoir says "One is not born a woman but becomes one," (Beauvoir 14) Patriarchy centres on idea of domination, manipulation and oppression of the female. Female identity is societal constructed: "Sex roles are operationally defined by sex role stereotype and norms." "Femininity and Masculinity are used as a weapon to establish patriarchy. Butler's Gender Trouble Work explores ideas of gender identity and gender production. She argues that identities are flexible and that even gender is not a fixed category, rejecting gender universalism and essentialism. He also creates the concept of performativity. Butler shows how gender formation occurs regardless of sex. He disputed masculinity and femininity, arguing that they were socially constructed norms of behaviour. Most people assume that feminism is only about females trying to be equal to men. Males always wanted to dominate, and they wanted women to follow them.

Osborne writes "A refined sort of butcher, a woman is." (Osborne 11) When drama was produced at that time, the female movement started. This play can be seen as drama against growing women Movement. Jimmy Porter shares misogynistic ideas, and he hates women. In many cultures people continue to believe that God has made females subordinate to men. 'Feminist Theory : From Margin to Center' focuses on a liberating vision of feminist transformation. In their awareness campaigns, revolutionary feminists emphasized the need to understand patriarchy as a dominant system. Women were aware of the ways they were persecuted, oppressed and dominated by men, as sexism and male dominance were reflected in everyday life. Women were empowered to resist patriarchal forces by raising awareness. According to Sigmund Freud, a person's childhood sexuality is inextricably linked to his identity. Psychoanalytic feminists, on the other hand, argue that sexuality is not a biological problem, but rather the result of a child's relationships with their parents and other members of the outside world. According to this theory, the "lack" experienced by a woman may not be always a problem of the male organ, but it symbolizes impotence. A person can therefore be born either male or female, but his masculinity or femininity is determined by the cultural environment in which he lives.

IV. HUSBAND -WIFE RELATION

Jimmy is the protagonist of the play; the target of his anger is the women characters of the play. Alison is presented not as an individual but as an indicative of the entire elite class, not just of women but of upper-class women. He critiques all the women in the world except his ex-girlfriend Madeline. He enjoys spending time with Madeline on bus. Spending time with Madeline was like

embarking on a voyage for the protagonist. In short, he felt the joy of Ulysses, when he was in the company of Madeline. Jimmy takes the whole credit for being misogynist and sexist. He visualizes a blatant hatred for women in the drama. When it comes to women and his relationships with them, Jimmy exhibits a frighteningly conventional viewpoint. He has a bully like relationship with Alison, insisting that she follows his beliefs and way of life without any question. Luc Gillemann in the essay, 'The logic of Anger and Despair': A Pragmatic Approach to John Osborne's *Look back in Anger* contends that feminist critics who fault the play for using misogynistic language are making self-evident observations that don't further our understanding of how play works. The Women's movement had started to expose misogyny from different angles. Even then the views of Jimmy were acceptable to the author and the English audience, society was deeply rooted in a stereotypical mindset. In her book *Misogynies*, Joan Smith makes the case that sexism towards women is incredibly ubiquitous in Western culture. Jimmy considers women as primitive parasites; his hatred and fear of the women are visible in his dialogues.

Osborne portrays the women character as stereotypical, doing household silently; there is not much importance given to their opinions. Jimmy finds a replacement very convenient; he replaces Alison with Helena. Jimmy treats women as a tool for his own satisfaction. If men-women relations are built, males are the bourgeois class, as August Strindberg explains in his preface to 'Miss Julie'. In the play 'Miss Julie' the elite class Julie is sexually mastered by her father's worker because he is a man; sexually, he is an aristocrat. Jimmy is known to have had other affairs with two ladies on stage, attracting Helena from the very start. Alison is like a trophy wife, and he needs to break her fully to impose his complete sovereignty over her. Jimmy presented the idea of transferring his class hatred into sexual hatred. Jimmy wants to see Alison in absolute misery, in a defeated motherhood. Osborne pictures the image of Jimmy as a python, swallowing Alison's child and her happiness. He says "I don't care if she's going to have a baby. I don't care if it has two heads" (Osborne 76). There is an animal instinct visible in Jimmy Porter, and he tries to escape the life of a human.

Jimmy's life is unhappy because he is a misogynist and a male chauvinist. In the first act, Alison wears Jimmy's old shirt, but she manages to look elegant and beautiful. There is a metaphor that, if given a chance, Alison could make a good man out of her husband, Jimmy. If Jimmy had respected Alison for having the guts to abandon her social standing and luxurious lifestyle to be with him, she could have been able to act as a link between Jimmy and his

success, but the enraged man digs his own grave and opens the door to unhappiness. In Jimmy's relationship with Helen, she is just a replacement of Alison; her arrival and leaving is just a normal incident for Jimmy. This drama can be looked at as a bleak portrayal of marriage, a horrifying depiction that does not spare anyone to achieve its effects. According to Cliff, Jimmy functions as an irresponsible man in his marriage to Alison. He also compares the marriage to a short stretch of unforgiving torture. In such a relationship, the partners turn into adversaries and rivals. In the vicious battle of sexes, the male is compelled to entirely possess the woman. Alison was supposed to do everything. Alison has not known him very well or any of the men when she chooses Jimmy. He feels upset when she doesn't tell openly her sexual desires and feelings. Alison tells at the end that Jimmy desires a mix of a mother, a Greek courtesan, Boswell and Cleopatra. Jimmy married Alison to transform a wealthy girl into a married member of the lower middle class. Some critics believe that Jimmy has married to Alison just to take revenge on the upper class. According to G. M Carstairs, a Professor of Psychology, in 1962 states that there was confusion about sexual morality and people no longer believed in theological canons of behaviour between Alison and Jimmy. He discusses the brutality and insensitivity of the women, starting with the clumsiness of Alison and concluding with the female gender's never-ending flame. He states "why, why, why, why, do we let these women bleed us to death? (Osborne 89)". Drama closes with the reunion of Bear and Squirrel; it seems as a default that they still have not united as human beings. Apart from Bear, Jimmy is named as a 'Rabbit' and 'Pig', and Alison is categorized as 'Python' and 'Bitch'. Osborne ends this play in such a way that the question arises: what should we see if the curtain will go up once again? Kenneth Tynan writes in his review that the marriage of lower middle class Jimmy and upper class Alison is impractical, and later Osborne told this review 'the most hedging rave ever written'.

V. CONCLUSION

This research paper draws on a femininity and masculinity perspective in a husband-wife relationship. Jimmy is stuck in the realization of his mistress love and responsibility towards his wife Alison. Their complicated marriage demonstrates how challenging it is to have a successful marriage between different classes. Domestic household has been inescapable for Alison; she is presented as a submissive wife. She leaves Jimmy, but at the end of the play, she returns to the world of Jimmy. A question rises "If Marriage is the end of life, how can it also be the goal of life?" (Menon xii) Alison's life goal seems to be marriage;

she can't live without Jimmy. After knowing Helena's relationship with Jimmy, even after that, she can't stand up for herself. Alison is supposed to give up everything; she does everything to make him happy, but Patriarchy endorses the superiority of Jimmy. Johnson States that "Society is patriarchal to the degree that it promotes male privilege by being male dominated, male identified and male centered." (Johnson 165) Alison is forced to adopt the situation of middle- class family, and she has often been accused of being from a rich strata that was not under her control. Bear and Squirrel game shows the power dynamics. Play's ending implies that women must submit to men.

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