

## **Analysis of Jimmy Porter’s Tirades in John Osborne’s Play *Look Back in Anger***

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**ABSTRACT:** John Osborne is considered a dominant playwright who produced *Look Back in Anger* in 1956, in the post-world war II period in England. In 1944, the British Mass Education Act had made secondary Education free for everyone in the country. It shows that that people were free to depict their life in writings. John Osborne brought the revolution to portray the life of working class and their problems and depicted new angry energy to the theater and shocked the spectators. *Look Back in Anger* presents the invectives of the protagonist Jimmy Porter. He unleashes his invective against the establishment, the church and the family. His words are not merely violent speeches rather than they hold significance. My focus as a researcher is to analyze Jimmy Porter’s tirades and at the same time to state that these tirades or invectives of Jimmy Porter are justified so far as his contradictory situation is concerned. His position in the society is acknowledged only as a member of the working class but not as an educated person as Sunday papers leave him ignorant. Jimmy shows his hostility towards unjust attitude of the society, class discrimination and refusal to be assimilated by the bankruptcy of corruption, therefore the theater at that time brought the concept of angry young man.

**Keywords:** anger, Jimmy Porter, John Osborne, tirades, hostility towards system

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### **I. Introduction**

On the 8<sup>th</sup> May 1956 that John Osborne’s first play to be acted *Look Back in Anger* was performed by English stage company at the Royal Court Theater in London. This brought revolution to the theater in that it influenced the concept of Angry Young Man Movement, initially used by Kingsley Amis, whose novel *Lucky Jim* showed hostile attitude towards society and authority. Protagonists of this movement were anxious with status quo, refusal to be assimilated by the bankruptcy of society and corruption. The young men expressed anger and despair with the situation and that was just attitude, (Dubey, 2010).

Dubey analyzed that John Osborne (1929-1994) was postmodern writer. His play *Look Back in Anger* secured popularity and influenced the concept of Angry Young Man Movement. His hero, Jimmy porter, has exposed his anger with the social system, the church and the family. There is a sense of despair which leads him to greater anger and tirades against everything of the bourgeoisie-its aristocracy genteel, church, press and women. Osborne as a compassionate writer in love with people especially for the proletariat class, he supported them. After the successful production of *Look Back in Anger*, in 1957, the author asserted:

“I want to make people feel, to give them lessons in feeling. They can think afterwards...” (Dyson, 1980)

His creed was to make the audience and the reader feel and then if possible, think; they will be more and more acutely aware of the problems besetting them.

Before taking into consideration the tirades of Jimmy, it will be perfect to describe the story of *Look Back in Anger* briefly. The play is divided into three acts. Jimmy, Alison and his friend Cliff appear in the rented flat in small midland town in England. Alison is from upper middle class who is the main target of her working class Jimmy, the main protagonist of the play. Jimmy runs a sweet stall in spite of getting education from “red Brick University”. In Act I he shows his disgust for the Sunday papers as they have no concern with the problem of the proletariat class. He equally rejects the church bell to decline the hypocrisy of the society. Cliff and Alison are passive in his eyes as they do not show involvement in his affairs. In Act II, Helena, representation of higher class, visits Alison. Here Helena, Alison’s friend comes to know about the complex situation between Jimmy and Alison. Helena advises her either to disclose the good news of pregnancy to Jimmy or leave her the house. Alison deserts Jimmy by leaving the house as Colonel Redfern comes to take her home. Alison leaves a letter and discloses that she loves Jimmy but unable to stay with him. (Florman and Kestle, 2016) In the last act, she comes back home to join Jimmy and reconciles which manifests that Jimmy was right in his invectives and tirades. His anger was legitimate.

### **II. Analysis Of Jimmy Porter’s Tirades**

John Osborne is considered a dominant playwright who produced *Look Back in Anger* in 1956, in the post-world war II period in England. In 1944, the British Mass Education Act had made secondary Education free for everyone in the country. It shows that that people were free to depict their life in writings. John Osborne brought the revolution to portray the life of working class and their problems and depicted new angry energy to the

theater and shocked the spectators. *Look Back in Anger* presents the invectives of the protagonist Jimmy Porter. Jimmy Porter, who is about 25 years old, is described as “a disconcerting mixture of sincerity and cheerful malice, of tenderness and freebooting cruelty; restless, importunate, full of pride, a combination which alienates the sensitive and insensitive alike.” (Osborne, 1989, P. 9) Jimmy is a study in dualisms: he is angry and bitter, yet he is also tender and intense in his zealous love. Osborne attempts to paint Jimmy as a very masculine character, though the audience is left to decide how much of that is real and how much of that is an act. (Lane. Chazelle, Damien, 2010)

Class clash is the first thing that Jimmy is the bearer of stereotyped class image. This class clash is ever present theme in English literature and debatable issue. Osborne like Shaw was a realist. To him, bourgeoisie are always in the clutches of aristocracy. In spite of getting education from ‘red brick university’ he is running a sweet stall as he does not get a job. Jimmy utters a dialogue while talking to Cliff and Alison.

Jimmy: what's the Bishop Bromley say?

Cliff: Oh, it says here that that he makes a very moving appeal to all Christians to do all they can to assist in the manufacture of the H-Bomb.

Jimmy: yes it is quite moving, I suppose. Are you moved, my darling?

Alison: Well, naturally.

Jimmy: Even my wife is moved. I ought to send the Bishop a subscription. Let's see. What else does he say? Ah, yes. He is upset because someone has suggested that he supports the rich against the poor. He says that he denies the difference of class distinction. (p.13)

This dialogue is ironical and he presents the idea of working class who voices and highlights class difference.

This is his invective directed against Alison in general and towards society of the 1950s in particular. It highlights the class difference that Sunday paper feels him ‘ignorant’. Jimmy's tirade against the lack of intellectual inertia is witnessed from his dialogue. There is no one to give him response anywhere. (Day son, 1980)

“Nobody thinks, nobody cares. No beliefs, no convictions and no enthusiasm.”(Osborne, 1989, P.9)

He feels that there is passivity and people do not come out of their ‘delicious sloth’. He is ready to suffer for the sake of others. The initiation of suffering comes at his early age when his father died. Similarly, he suffers a lot when he finds his friend Mr. Hugh's mother Mrs. Tanner is about to die. His wife Alison from upper class remains indifferent to the suffering of others though she goes to the church with her friend Helena. His violent speech:

“Oh, my dear wife, you've got so much to learn. I only hope you learn it one day. If something—something would happen to you, and wake you out of your beauty sleep! If you could have a child and it would die. Let it grow, let a recognizable human being yourself.” (p 37)

His alienation in his life makes him frustrated as he gave much to Alison but she did not return anything rather than deserted her after the arrival of Helena. The prevailing norms of injustice, passivity and bitter experiences of life give isolation to Jimmy in the play not only at home but also society in general. Osborne depicts what it felt like to live in London during the 1950s. The play deduces that people were outraged at the discovery that the idealized Britain for which many people sacrificed their lives was not genuine. He utters a speech:

“The heaviest, strongest creatures in this world seem to be the loneliest.” Jimmy is quiet alienated in the thwarted and unreliable situation. His isolation and anger are concurrent. (p.94)

Jimmy then gives a monologue on Helena's life in Act II, scene I. He says that she is “an expert in the New Economics- the Economics of the Supernatural. (P.54). Her type has thrown out “Reason and Progress” and look towards the past, the Dark Ages, to find a way around the dark problems of the twentieth century. Her spirituality cuts her off “from all the conveniences we've fought to get for centuries.” She is full of “ecstatic wind....” Helena calmly tells him that she will slap his face and, sensing a challenge, Jimmy rises and starts to slowly move his face towards her. He asks her if she's ever watched someone die. She starts to move away, but he makes her face him. He tells her that if she hits him and tries “to cash in on what she thinks is my defenseless chivalry by lashing out with her frail little fists, I lash back at her.” (p.57). He asks her again if she has ever seen someone die. She answers “no.” Jimmy then proceeds to tell her about how he watched his father die for a year when he was ten years old. His father had come home from the war in Spain where “certain god-fearing gentlemen...had made such a mess of him, he didn't have long to live.” Jimmy recounts how his family had abandoned the old man and only Jimmy had been there to listen to his father's ramblings; “the despair and the bitterness, the sweet, sickly smell of a dying man.” (Davis, Lane. Chazelle, Damien, 2010). He tells Helena that “I knew more about -- love...betrayal...and death, when I was ten years old than you will probably ever know all your life.(Osborne, 1989) p. 58

Jimmy addresses Alison in a whisper. He wants to know why his suffering means nothing to Alison. He calls her a “Judas” and a “phlegm” and, finally fed up, Alison throws a glass across the room where it shatters. She tells him that all she wants is peace and goes to the bed to put on her shoes while Jimmy continues to rant. Jimmy responds that

"My heart is so full, I feel ill -- and she wants peace!"(p. 59)

Jimmy asks which of them really the angry and disturbed one is. He turns to Cliff and tells him that he wishes that he would try loving her so he could know the difficulty of it. He tells Alison that he wants to be there when she comes groveling back to him. Helena enters with two prayer books and tells Jimmy that there is a phone call for him. The audience then learns of Jimmy's own personal suffering, of how he watched his father die at a young age and how his family did nothing to help him. (Pg. 57) It is this early case of suffering that haunts Jimmy and allows him to feel both superior to others and too long for a more real way of living. Since neither Helena nor Alison have suffered in this way, Jimmy believes that they have not truly been born into the world. With Hugh's mother on her deathbed, Jimmy cannot handle her suffering alone and begs Alison to come with him to visit her. Alison, knowing that her father is coming to pick her up the next day and take her away, chooses to go with Helena. It is a choice for a world that Jimmy feels is unreal in some way and he is devastated by her choice.(Davis, Lane. Chazelle, Damien, 2010).

Jimmy becomes angry with Alison for allowing Helena to stay with them. During her visit, Jimmy's tirade towards her at the end of the first Act is one of his most malicious. This rant makes clear what Jimmy deems necessary in order to be truly alive. One must suffer as he did when he watched his father die in order to understand what it truly means to live. The audience sees that the death of Jimmy's father is integral to his own understanding of himself. This is explored further in Act II. When Jimmy tells Alison that he wishes that she could see her child die, it is a moment of both dramatic irony and foreshadowing. It is ironic because the audience already knows that Alison is present. Jimmy's attack on her foreshadows the death of her child and her future hardships. (Osborne, 1989, p.37)

Jimmy's anger is representative of Osborne's critique of the feminization of society in the 1950's. Osborne later wrote that Jimmy's anger is a manifestation of the subliminal anger felt by a generation of men domesticated by a feminine culture. Jimmy's anger is Osborne's attempt to return genuine masculine emotion to cultural life. This is one of the reasons that Osborne's play received such attention and critical reception, both good and bad. Some critics argued that his attempt was ultimately misogynistic. (Web p.39-49) (Davis, Lane. Chazelle, Damien, 2010)

He voices his feelings in the play against the social ills, society and the attitude of his own wife and family. His angry speech that he uttered in the following words:

"I may write a book about us all. It's all here. Written in flames a mile high. And it won't be recollected in tranquility either, picking daffodils with Auntie Wordsworth. It'll be recollected in fire, and blood. My blood." (Osborne, 1989. P.54)

John Galsworthy (1867-1933) like John Osborne raised his voice against this social injustice and discrimination in his plays especially "The Silver Box". Osborne portrays the bitter truth through his mouthpiece Jimmy. This voice and anger of Jimmy Porter highlight his search of identity as a man. His sentiments towards sufferings humanity are visible in the play but during his conversation with Helena he interprets himself in two words "angry and helpless". (P.58). He in Act I informs Alison and Cliff:

"Let's pretend that we are human beings, and that we're actually alive. Just for a while. What do you say? Let's pretend we're human." (P.15)

This is criticism on the entire community especially upper class who never feels what the poor comes across. Despite high and sound education they do not get good job. Influence in the society takes place only through money and riches. Sensitive writers never stay calm and Jimmy like characters appear on the stage.

### **III. Methods**

The strategy of the research is qualitative in nature. Content analysis approach is applied to identify the reasons of Jimmy Porter's anger. Content analysis is a research method which is used as systematic, replicable technique for making references from data to their context (Krippendorff, 2004). In many disciplines, this method is used for exploration and critical appraisal.

Primary and secondary sources included the text *Look Back in Anger* and the study available criticism on the mentioned play. Data is analyzed qualitatively. Excerpts from the texts are selected relevant to the problem under study the tirades of Jimmy. The study explores the following questions:

1. What are the causes of Jimmy's tirades?
2. How does he express his anger?
3. What is the role of his family, society and situation in initiating his anger?

### **IV. Conclusion**

The article, in conclusion, explains the tirades of Jimmy Porter and these tirades are not useless. He unleashes his invective against the establishment, the church and the family. His words are not merely violent speeches rather than they hold significance. His speeches are not for the sake of criticism but to establish a better world for himself. In the last act, he reveals that one day he would write a book but "it won't be recollected in

tranquility but it will be recollected in fire and blood. My blood! (Osborne, 1989). Dr. Dubey has highlighted that the destruction brought by the second world war to Britain's position and its economy, left the young people disillusioned. They regretted they could not do anything with the worst situation. Jimmy in anger said:

"I suppose people of our generation are not able to die for good causes any longer. We had all done for us, in the thirties and forties, when we were still kids. There are no good brave causes left." (p.84)

This is the real picture of the society that if there are no causes, then to reconcile with the current life without change. This cause of anger so far as Jimmy is concerned, is brought to light by Osborne through the dialogue by Alison when she told her father Colonel Redfern: "you are hurt because everything is changed. Jimmy is hurt because everything is the same. (p.68). Dayson, A.E., in "Look Back in Anger" (1980) aptly highlighted that Cliff, Alison, Helena and the Colonel realize that Jimmy was essentially a worthy and a capable man thought out of 'tune with the time'. They may not accept his ideas at the time but 'they never doubt that his torments is at root that of a good man whether he has the secret of finding it or not. "Jimmy is melancholic over the fact that people have escaped 'the pain of being alive' by living in the past. To put it differently, everybody hankers after past. His tirade on this world:

'What a romantic picture. Phony too, of course. It must have rained sometimes. Still, even I regret somehow, phony or not. If you've no world of your own, it's rather pleasant to regret the passing of someone else's.'" (Osborne, 1989, P. 17)

The church bells symbolize a respectable middle class morality that Jimmy finds oppressive. Helena subscribes to this version of morality, which posits that some things are clearly right, while others are wrong and "sinful." Jimmy, on the other hand, believes that the rules of respectable society are something to struggle against. In his mind, it is moral to act in commitment with his oppressed class, and to feel emotions as keenly and intensely as possible. The church bells chime from outside the window at various points in the play, reflecting the fact that these middle class rules are a fact of life in most of the world, and that they often intrude into the apartment, and into Jimmy's life. He curses and yells when he hears them, reflecting his anger at this system of morality. Alison leaves for church with Helena in the middle of act 2, following Helena back into a middle class world. His anger is on the fact that suffering humanity is being neglected in the society and personal prayers are preferred. This is nothing but pretention in Jimmy's eyes.

His invectives and anger are not rootless rather than he is ready to suffer for others and suffering humanity. He prefers humanity to go to church. At an early age, he listened to his father to hour after an hour and could not understand at that time but in the course of the play for his friend's mother he feels that help can save her. He rebukes his wife that her complacency has stopped her to help others. Jimmy sees suffering as an important part of his identity. Alison critical remark:

"Don't try and take his suffering away from him- he'd be lost without it." (P. 54)

The idea is that, no doubt, Jimmy's anger is an expression to his unrest and society but it holds no solution to the problem. He does not channel it through any political party, organization. John Osborne like John Galsworthy has pinpointed the reality and voiced against the social discrimination and injustice of the society.

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