



KITCHEN SINK REALISM IN JOHN OSBORNE'S "LOOK BACK IN ANGER" AND ITS RELEVANCE IN THE 21ST CENTURY SOCIETY

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Abstract : Kitchen sink drama depicted the grim reality of ordinary working class people. The literary works that fall in this category mainly deal with poverty issues, lack of employment, poor living conditions, and turbulent relationships. This paper attempts to study this literary genre in the seminal work of John Osborne's "Look back in Anger," that was first produced in 1956, and was regarded as a play depicting disillusionment and rebelliousness of post war youth in Britain. The protagonist of the play, Jimmy Porter, came to be looked upon as a spokesman of the post war young generation. In the public mind, "Look back in Anger" together with the "Entertainer" by John Osborne, became related at the time to social and political upheavals, the unease, discontent, and frustration of English society in the backwash of the Suez war.

The Kitchen sink realism deals with the time when the young generation was puzzled by the Hungarian revolution, unhappy about Britain's last imperialist fling at Suez, and determined to protest against the hydrogen bomb and about all kinds of political and social questions. This movement was developed in the late 1950s in theatre, novels, films, whose protagonists would usually be described as 'angry young men' that was displayed through their temper and the complete disillusionment in the post war youth. Osborne expressed his feelings by his sharp comments on matters ranging from "Posh" Sunday newspapers and "White tile" universities to bishops of the time. The ranting Jimmy Porter of a working class origin became the spokesman of this mood, just as the Byronic hero or 'Hamlet' or Marlowe's 'Dr. Faustus' had been for similar moods in their times. It seemed natural to relate the vogue of anger to the emergence of a new educated class which felt itself denied the opportunities of the old.

Keywords – Kitchen Sink Realism, Disillusionment, Rebelliousness, Post-War Youth, Angry Young Men

Kitchen sink drama depicted the grim reality of ordinary working class people. The literary works that fall in this category mainly deal with poverty issues, lack of employment, poor living conditions, and turbulent relationships. This paper attempts to study this literary genre in the seminal work of John Osborne's "Look back in Anger," that was first produced in 1956, and was regarded as a play depicting disillusionment and rebelliousness of post war youth in Britain. The protagonist of the play, Jimmy Porter, came to be looked upon as a spokesman of the post war young generation. In the public mind, "Look back in Anger" together with the "Entertainer" by John Osborne, became related at the time to social and political upheavals, the unease, discontent, and frustration of English society in the backwash of the Suez war.

The Kitchen sink realism deals with the time when the young generation was puzzled by the Hungarian revolution, unhappy about Britain's last imperialist fling at Suez, and determined to protest against the hydrogen bomb and about all kinds of political and social questions. This movement was developed in the late 1950s in theatre, novels, films, whose protagonists would usually be described as 'angry young men' that was displayed through their temper and the complete disillusionment in the post war youth. These type of plays were distinguished from the other forms of theatrical movement such as: avant garde theatre or the theatre of the absurd, characterized by the plays of authors such as Samuel Beckett. The most notable characteristic of this kitchen sink drama was the way they advanced a particular social message or ideology. This ideology was most often leftist that depicted the harsh realities of the working class people. Unlike the previous theatre trend that used to depict the lives of bourgeoisie, most prominently the members of the ruling class; the kitchen sink drama sought to bring the real lives, social inequality of the working class people to the stage. The lives of these people struggled between the dynamics of power, industry, politics, and social homogenization. Another principle feature of kitchen sink realism is the way in which they portrayed their characters that expressed their dissatisfaction with the ruling class status quo. The torch bearer of this genre of kitchen sink realism is strongly evident in John Osborne's classic play "Look Back in Anger," where he has studied the after effects of pent up frustration and social anger on the lives of ordinary household people. Osborne expressed his feelings by his sharp comments on matters ranging from "Posh" Sunday

newspapers and “White tile” universities to bishops of the time. The ranting Jimmy Porter of a working class origin became the spokesman of this mood, just as the Byronic hero or ‘Hamlet’ or Marlowe’s ‘Dr. Faustus’ had been for similar moods in their times. It seemed natural to relate the vogue of anger to the emergence of a new educated class which felt itself denied the opportunities of the old. However, some critics have noticed the irony in the term ‘kitchen sink drama/realism’ where the major works that belonged to this genre were centred around a male dominated perspective. Though the domestic world, during the mid-twentieth century, was believed to be the domain of the feminine, these plays rarely reflect the emotions or tribulations of its women characters. Women are often portrayed to be inferior and passive objects compared to the male figures in these plays. This is an unexamined critical component in many of these plays. Women are often assumed to bear the suffering and serve to men, and whenever conflicts arise, it is the man who is portrayed as the suffering protagonist. Women’s suffering is always the result of male suffering in these plays. Though kitchen sink dramas gained notoriety in twentieth century British culture for their unflinching anger and criticism directed towards the social, political, and economic establishment, the plays were also significant for the way they depicted the most intimate aspects of domestic life. The Kitchen Sink drama, in contrast to the popular Victorian plays that largely depicted the lives of well-established people, moved the action and emotion of the theatre from depictions of the public space of people’s lives into the most intimate of settings. The kitchen was considered to be the realm of the domestic, of females and servants, and Victorian drama often excluded any mention of it. Kitchen Sink dramas, however, turned this notion around and made the kitchen the centre of familial and social life. Whether social or domestic, the Kitchen Sink drama changed the trajectory of British theatre. Though many of the authors considered to have written in this genre such as Osborne, Arnold Wesker, Shelagh Delaney, and John Arden never claimed the title of Kitchen Sink dramatist, these author’s plays contained themes of common life that deeply resonated with British culture of the period. These types of plays signalled a resolute shift of British theatre into the 20th century.

The title “Look back in Anger” itself suggests the anger and social problems among the boys of the post-world war. It indicates looking in the past with discontentment and anger. Looking at past arouses anger as the youth of the post war England found themselves struggling between an economic expanding system and the outdated socio-moral conventions. All this left a powerful impact on the Angry theatre and in this play of Osborne as well. What this play represented? It certainly put forth the first resounding expression to its English audience not only of the troubled youth but of the tensions within large segments of the middle class in England of that time. The subject of the play is a despair of a generation that has only bitter memories of the past and betrayal of ideas. Certain characters from the play resemble the said realism. The character of Jimmy Porter stands as the spokesman of the angry generation. He is educated but underemployed and thus, expresses his masculine protest. He fails in two of the three main fields of human activities. He fails to find a satisfying work, and also fails to fit himself into a community. This failure of his makes him to channel all his urge to dominate the third i.e. marriage. In effect, it is not Jimmy but his anger that becomes the hero of the play. He is not only the spokesman of the play but also a rebel against the debased values of modern society. He operates a sweet stall, that makes him look back in anger towards the void in the future. He lashes out at those who are closest to him. He is sick of the absurdities of the English caste system. He is also worried about the lack of enthusiasm which affects the entire society, when he says:

“Oh, heavens, how I long for a little ordinary human enthusiasm. Just enthusiasm -- that's all. I want to hear a warm, thrilling voice cry out Hallelujah!...Hallelujah! I'm alive!” (15, Look Back in Anger)

Some critics have described Jimmy as a frustrated idealist, crying in the night, crying for light: in this way, John Osborne through Jimmy Porter suggests the hypocrisy of social order. According to John Russell Taylor: - ‘Like so many of the heroes of the Lucky Jim type of novel, he is socially adrift, in rebellion, or at least reaction, against the social and educational system which has helped to shape him and determined – not to act in the way ‘they’ might expect him to.’ Another character in the play named Alison represents the upper middle class liberalism. She believes in orthodox morality. She belongs to the upper middle class and fondly hugs the respectability and tradition of her set. She rightly thinks that Jimmy has married her from a sense of revenge. By punishing her and making her suffer he imagines that the upper middle class is being hauled up in his tribunal. Imagining that silence would stop his tirades, she keeps mum even in the face of provocation. The bears and squirrel’s episode is largely symbolic in the play. Here, the toy bear represents Jimmy as it reflects an aggressive and dominating nature while the toy squirrel represents Alison who is meek like her. They play the bear and squirrels game to relieve the monotony of life. They try to seek an escape from the sordid reality as they imagine themselves to be two animals. In these roles, they are neither hunted nor haunted. In Act III, Scene II, the bear and squirrel episode is again revived. Here, Alison is seen no longer conscious of her position in the social hierarchy. She collapses at Jimmy’s feet and cries out in deep agony. Jimmy, for the first time, holds her up with warmth and affection and tells her:

“We’ll be together in our bear’s cave and our squirrel’s dray, and we’ll live on honey, and nuts – lots and lots of nuts” (39, Look Back in Anger)

Allison responds equally affectionately:

“Oh, poor, poor bear!” (40, Look Back in Anger) sliding her arms around him.

On a review of what has preceded, it will appear even to a superficial observer that the bear and squirrel episode has been introduced by the playwright with a definite end in view. It is thus, symbolic into an escape into fantasy. They, thus, live in a world of illusion, of make-believe, of fantasy which cannot stand the slightest touch of reality. It is a refuge from the world which has set ‘cruel steel traps’ to catch the animals. The setting of the play with an ill-furnished one room flat had received a rude shock from the aristocratic circles. This static nature of the set suggests that the lives are arrested within the family and the situation of the past.

Jimmy’s addiction to tea and smoking in the house indicates nervousness, discomfort, frustration, and impatience within the youths of post-world war England. He even does not want to go the cinema because he is afraid that his enjoyment will be ruined by the kind of people who occupy the front rows. Thus, the angry young movement initiated by all the frustrated lower middle class graduates who were underemployed basically from the Redbrick Universities found themselves in precisely the situation that Jimmy Porter describes. Thus, the kitchen sink realism depicted a range of domestic social dilemmas in Osborne’s play “Look Back in Anger” through the anger that existed under the realm of elite British culture. Later, Osborne argued in essays and criticisms that, until this play, British theatre had neglected to reflect upon the true emotions of characters rendering them less realistic. Jimmy’s desire for a new life is an attempt to restore raw emotion to the theatre.

To conclude, it can be said that the kitchen sink realism in Osborne's play "Look Back in Anger" aims to examine in terms of four aspects namely, characters, setting, theme, and language. It highlights some characteristics that drift it apart from the previous theatrical movements. The modern life is also centred around materialistic values that makes people selfish, passive, and not empathetic about other people's emotions. Thus, the communication gap is increasing among families, friends, or close acquaintances. There is also absence for a 'will to communicate' amongst today's youth due to growing dependency on electronic gadgets, online learning, and the current social conditions. This play in accordance with the modern world seems to be designed to support the general disenchantment in the lives of people. On the whole, this paper attempts to approach kitchen sink drama as a distinctive approach that has a major resemblance in the lives of people in this modern day as well. It, in a way, tends to tackle the social and domestic concerns of people from the working class background and the impact of contemporary and political events on their private lives.

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