



Beyond the Ironing Board: Power Structure and Gender Dynamics in *Look Back in Anger*

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Abstract

Power structure is a major and inseparable part of any societal design; be government, public or private. It refers to a system or authority where power is organised into ranks with those at the top holding the most. They hold the recognised and convinced right to rule or make decisions, and the ability to control the resources and people. Gender dynamics refer to the ways in which power, roles, and expectations are distributed between genders in a society. Gender dynamics are informed by socio-cultural ideas about gender and the power relationships that define them. It also refers to people treating men and women differently in ways that affect their power, status and authority. Gender dynamics in relationships refer to the interplay of gender based interactions, and the power structures that influence them. These dynamics are shaped by cultural and societal norms which generally lead to traditional roles; men being dominant and women being submissive. These dynamics impact the conjugal life; how partners communicate, perceive their roles, and experience satisfaction within the relationship. The present study aptly explores the knocks of power structure and gender dynamics on the conjugal relationship within the modern framework of society between Jimmy and Alison in John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger*.

Keywords: Conjugal, Frustration, Argument, Psychology, Marriage.

Introduction

John Osborne, the Oscar winning screenwriter, is one of the well-known

playwrights of the 1950s; he changed the face of the British Theatre in the post war era with the publication of his play *Look Back in Anger*. John Osborne, the son of a commercial artist Thomas

Gofrey Osborne, was born on December 12, 1929 in London. He was among the most influential figures of post-bellum theatre; and was widely known as an English playwright, screenwriter, actor, and entrepreneur. Osborne's career as an actor and stage manager stormed into prominence when *Look Back in Anger* was premiered in 1956 at the Royal Court Theatre, London. The play which portrays Jimmy; the educated, intelligent but disgruntled and disaffected youth belonging to the working class, revolutionized the conventional polite theatre, and set the stage for depiction of raw honesty concerning life, class, sex and domestic realism. A BBC broadcast of twenty-five minutes excerpt on television ignited a major debate of the times regarding theatre which ultimately labelled John Osborne as Angry Young Man, and subsequently encircling a number of British playwrights and novelists from the mid-1950s, including Kingsley Amis, John Osborne, Allen Sillitoe, and Collin Henry Wilson.

Description

Published in 1955, and performed in 1956, John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* is considered a climactic in the history of British Drama. The play centres on Jimmy Porter, his wife Alison and two important characters; Jimmy's friend Cliff Lewis and Alison's friend Helena Charles who play significant roles in their conjugal life. Jimmy Porter is a man of complex personality; dissatisfied with his life, in general and unable to reconcile with the surrounding; the environment and people. He is a man of dominating character; all his speeches contain intellectual content. We find him irritated and enraged on people and things, especially with his wife Alison. He denounces people to express his frustration, and bitterness in endless rhetoric. Alison, on the other hand, represents a passively suffering woman; she had submitted herself completely to the will of her dominating husband. However, Jimmy's friend Cliff is amiable with Alison. Alison's friend, Helena Charles; an actress, who used to stay with

Jimmy and Alison during her performance at the local theatre, ends up having an affair with Jimmy. Cliff Lewis, on the other hand, always tries to strike peace whenever arguments ensue between husband and wife (Jimmy and Alison); he is also their flat mate, and he and Alison share a friendly affectionate relationship.

Jimmy Porter is a complex, 25-year-old man, slender and energetic, who combines intense sincerity, charming wit, and deep tenderness with sharp malice and arrogance. As a working-class individual, he is obsessed with the socioeconomic divide separating him from his wife, Alison, and feels stifled within the upper-class world he loathes. Alison, also around 25 and well-educated, comes from a privileged, upper-class background. Despite marrying for love, their union is not happy; it is characterized by profound class tension, verbal abuse, and emotional strain, despite moments of affection. His deep-rooted class gap causes major catastrophes, resulting in Alison escaping the dysfunctional environment to return to her parents, Jimmy starting an affair with her friend Helena, and the tragic miscarriage of their child.

The play opens with Jimmy and Alison on Sunday in their flat; Alison is ironing the clothes, while Jimmy is sitting and reading the newspaper, side by side passing comments on her and her family. "The same ritual" (Osborne 59); reading the papers, drinking tea, ironing every Sunday, bores and irritates Jimmy.

Jimmy: Why do I do this every Sunday? Even the book reviews seem to be the same as last week's. Different Books – same reviews. Have you finished that one yet?

Cliff: Not yet.

Jimmy: I've just read three whole columns on the English Novel. Half of it's in French. Do the Sunday Papers make you feel ignorant? (Osborne 54)

The power dynamics between Jimmy and Cliff demonstrate a complex interplay of

abusive domination and quiet dependency: lopsided and symbiotic. Jimmy controls the relationship through aggressive, intellectual anger, while Cliff manages the emotional landscape through passive endurance and empathy. While Jimmy and Cliff are friends who hail from working-class backgrounds, however, their relationship is deeply unbalanced. Jimmy holds the power in the friendship because he is the primary source of dramatic energy and intellectual discourse in their cramped, one-room life. Jimmy uses this position to bully Cliff, calling him "lazy" and a "ruffian" (Osborne 55). But Cliff is content with his "sad natural intelligence of the self-taught," (Osborne 53) and does not share Jimmy's academic education, Jimmy feels superior, using his education as a tool of abuse to belittle Cliff's simpler nature. Cliff often takes the brunt of Jimmy's anger, allowing himself to be a 'punching bag' for his friend's frustrations.

However, the dynamic is not purely one of victim and bully. Cliff holds a subtle power, often acting as the moral compass of the household and a source of stability that Jimmy lacks. He is a soothing, natural counterpoint to Jimmy's fierce, cynical fire. Furthermore, Jimmy is emotionally dependent on the very person he abuses. He needs Cliff's calming presence and his loyalty as an audience to his constant rants against "Establishment" values. The power dynamic shifts when Helena arrives, and Cliff's role as mediator becomes untenable.

Jimmy's irritation is reflected in the way he perceives things and people around him; it engenders arrogance that he exhibits to his wife, Alison. Alison is passive and submissive by nature; always shields her feelings, and is inexpressive. Cliff and Alison have a friendly relationship; Jimmy knows it, he has no objection; even then Jimmy is annoyed with Cliff for different reasons. His short temperedness, especially in hot discussions, manifests in criticizing Alison being "ignorant," "not so brilliant" and a "stupid bitch" (Osborne 54,57). His arrogant, pretentious behavior

consistently belittles Alison. Never at peace, he constantly fumes about class differences while acting superior. Jimmy is convinced that only he is truly educated and understanding, viewing everyone else as fools.

Jimmy: Well, you are ignorant. You're just a peasant. (to Alison) What about you? You're not a peasant are you?

Alison: (Absently) What's that?

Jimmy: I said do the papers make you feel you're not so brilliant after all?

Alison: Oh- I haven't read them yet.

Jimmy: I didn't ask you that. I said-

Cliff: leave the poor girlie alone. She's busy. (Osborne 54)

Jimmy comes from the working class; while his wife Alison comes from upper class society. Such disparity of rank and class, rich and poor, is deeply imprinted in Jimmy's psyche; it has made him emotionless, not practical. Alison's docility and humility never affect him; he remains indifferent to Cliff's cordiality, even though Cliff is from the same working class. He is envious of Alison's friendship with Cliff, as well as mutual understanding. He is against the norms of society, on the other hand Cliff accepts the circumstances; he is calm and peaceful by nature. Jimmy is exactly opposite, arrogant and outspoken; he is proud of his education.

I'm the only one who knows how to treat a paper, or anything else, in this house (picks up another paper.)The girl here wants to know whether her boyfriend will lose all respect for her if she gives him what he asks for. Stupid bitch. (Osborne 57)

Jimmy shows a complete lack of respect for his wife, Alison, often resorting to mockery despite her calm demeanour. Coming from a refined background, Alison rarely loses her temper or reacts to his provocations. Despite her sensitivity and education, Jimmy disregards her feelings, castigates her for "the White Woman's

Burden," (Osborne 54) and frequently makes offensive remarks about her father.

Jimmy: (to Alison) You don't suppose your father could have written it, do you?

Alison: written what?

Jimmy: what I just read out, of course.

Alison: Why should my father have written it?

Jimmy: sounds rather like Daddy, don't you think?

Alison: Does it?

Jimmy: Is the Bishop of Bromley his nom de plume, do you think?

Cliff: Don't take any notice of him. He's being offensive. And it's so easy for him. (Osborne 58)

Jimmy's wrath toward the elite is absolute, unyielding and boundless; his rage is directed upon Alison, not because she is his wife, but because of her upper class upbringing. Class consciousness is the main hurdle in their marital relationship; it wrecks their intimate connection and material bliss. Arrogance is embedded in Jimmy's nature; he finds no happiness in anything. It is essential for a happy married life to share emotions; as being married is not merely physical. Husband wife relationship is a healthy and sacred relationship; but Jimmy does not understand the sanctity of such a lovely relationship. He finds solace in passing sarcastic and humorous comments to Alison; on the other hand Alison is calm. She never reciprocates, though hurt; but sheds tears inwardly. She has become "a great one for getting used to things" (Osborne 61); the mental torture imposed upon her by Jimmy. She is neutral and good natured; but her passive attitude "to die, and wake up" (Osborne 61) is her real enemy.

Jimmy has grown completely disillusioned with his friends and family; he prioritizes his own personal attitude above all

else, which has ultimately destroyed his marriage and happiness. Actually, he despises the cultured, upper class society that Alison belongs to, viewing it a hollow existence; where "nobody thinks, nobody cares, no beliefs, no convictions and no enthusiasm" (Osborne 61). Feeling alienated, Jimmy believes both society and Alison's family are actively against him, particularly despising her father due to his upper-class background.

I hate to admit it, but I think I can understand how her Daddy must have felt when he came back from India, after all those years away. The old Edwardian Brigade do make their brief little world look pretty tempting. All homemade cakes and croquet, bright ideas, bright uniforms. Always the same picture: high summer, the long days in the sun, slim volumes of verse, crisp linen, the smell of starch. What a romantic picture. (Osborne 62)

Jimmy hates all those persons who come from, or related to aristocratic class. Edward is the only person whom Jimmy likes among her friends as "he is. Different dialect but same language" (Osborne 62). He begins to feel "exhilarated" (Osborne 62) when he comes home. Edward does not like him; but he gives him "something, which is more than I get from most people" (Osborne 62). Jimmy also wants to say something about Madeline; once his mistress but leaves the sentence incomplete; Alison completes the sentence; but keeps cool, even though being Jimmy's wife; but only says "he owes just about everything to Madeline" (Osborne 63). Cliff tries to pacify Jimmy but always sides with Alison. He scolds her for emotional numbness having "the passion of a python," who "just devours me whole every time as if I were some oversized rabbit" (Osborne 83). Jimmy's tirades; his envious comments on Alison, are unlimited which engulf her parents also; "they're either militant like her mummy and daddy. Militant,

arrogant and full of malice. Or vague. She's somewhere between the two" (Osborne 64).

Jimmy has no regard for the value of family and relations; the one thing that he knows is jealousy. He overrides the limits, both for the self and Alison, by addressing her "Lady Pusillanimous" (Osborne 66) and her brother as "the platitude from outer space" (Osborne 65) and "the straight backed, chinless wonder from Sandhurst" (Osborne 64)?

. Jimmy, with his mordant comments, wants "her to break"; but her protective psychological gear, rehearsed over the years, made her not to "go out of" (Osborne 67) her mind despite all these verbal attacks; she calmly carries on with her ironing and Jimmy busies himself with the radio. Domestic chores are not inherently a woman's duty, but rather a shared responsibility that should be divided equally. Jimmy is only sitting idle and chattering; he is smoking, reading the newspaper, eating, drinking tea etc. Jimmy always appears to be "nasty to everyone"; converts the "layful scuffle" with his "'frantic, deliberate effort" into a heated one; "pushing Cliff onto the ironing board, and into Alison" (Osborne 70) that results in board's collapse, cliff's roll-over and Alison's burnt arm. It is only for the first time in the play; we see Jimmy "dazed and breathless" (Osborne 70) in 'the blues.'

Jimmy: Darling, I'm sorry.

Alison: Get out!

Jimmy: I'm sorry, believe me. You think I did it on pur-Alison: (Her head shaking helplessly). Clear out of my sight! (Osborne 71)

Alison protests and disapproves of Jimmy's atypical behaviour; though Jimmy is least concerned; lacking compassion for his wife, only Cliff shows empathy towards Alison and bandages her. Jimmy's confession; the feeling of "being betrayed" has made him "predatory and suspicious," (Osborne 81) is

unfounded. Jimmy is spoiling a lovely and intimate relationship only because of his eccentric behaviour. Alison is such a lovely wife; but Jimmy has "his own private morality"; the "loose" (Osborne 74) to continuously torment her. This incident is a turning point in their married life. She discloses her pregnancy to Cliff; being pregnant after three years of married life, but is reluctant to reveal the same to Jimmy; her husband, because of her own reasons.

Can't you see? He'll suspect my motives at once. He never stops telling himself that I know how vulnerable he is. Tonight it might be all right- we'd make love. But later, we'd both lie awake, watching for the light to come through that little window, and dreading it. In the morning, he'd feel hoaxed as if I were trying to kill him in the worst way of all. He'd watch me growing bigger every day, and I wouldn't dare to look at him. (Osborne 74)

After some time, Helena, a friend of Alison; aged "as Alison, medium height, carefully and expensively dressed," (Osborne 84) comes to stay with them. Initially, the stopover seems "wonderful," (Osborne 84) but soon turns out to be troublesome. Apart from assisting Alison, Helena extracts their personal information; Alison's intended allegiance towards Cliff, the delicate and stressed relation of the couple, the "brilliant campaign" of Jimmy and Tanner for wolfing "food and drinks," disrupting "Nigel's political meetings" etc (Osborne 88,89,90). Alison, for the first time in her life, discloses the facts to Helena, and the kind of feelings she was experiencing at that moment:

For the first time in my life, I was cut off from the kind of People I'd always known, my family, my friends, everybody. And I'd burnt my boats. After all those weeks of brawling with Mummy and Daddy about Jimmy, I knew I

couldn't appeal to them without looking foolish and cheap. (Osborne 88)

It is the lack of mutual understanding on both sides that spoils their married life and makes it a hell. Jimmy's anger, and frustration are some of the factors behind it; Jimmy, though out of rage, curses Alison and speaks ill about their unborn baby. Alison admits that Jimmy's class-consciousness and his uncompromising attitude regards her 'a sort of hostage from those sections of society' against whom he "had declared war on" (Osborne 88) for "the sixty-four dollar one" (Osborne 88,112): the revenge. Helena, for Alison, out of concern, arranges for 'a big step' (Osborne 114); return to parents. Alison's misadventure; the marriage, against parents' advice based on "all those inquiries, the private detectives," with Jimmy; the "spiritual barbarian" who holds uncivilized, raw, and intense emotional nature that challenges the polite, conventional, and emotionally repressed middle-class society, has put her "on the fence" (Osborne 111,113).

Jimmy, and Alison who "have been on trial every day and night" (Osborne 112) of her married life in the same room, had shared romantic moments; especially their bear-squirrel game that makes them "little furry creatures with little furry brains" which Helena, whom Jimmy regards; a "saint in Dior's clothing," (Osborne 112, 92, 100) calls it childish. Jimmy scolds Mrs. Redfern, his mother-in-law, as a "rhinoceros in labour" and "an old bitch," (Osborne 112) for spoiling their conjugal life. Jimmy, being obsessed with witch cults, doubts "that somebody's been sticking pins into" his wax idol "for years" (Osborne 121). His suspicion of being betrayed goaded him to search in trunks, cases, drawers, bookcases, and everything. Though purely concerned with Alison and her fate, Helena convinces Alison of leaving "this menagerie" (Osborne 92) if things are unbearable, and Jimmy remains unrespectful, indecent and uncivilized.

Jimmy's frustration and its adverse effect on his conjugal life is that he is not well settled in his life. He has no permanent job or business; he is regularly drifting away from one occupation to another. This aloofness is also reflected in his behaviour and spoils his conjugal life. Alison is not allowed to write letters to her parents; she writes only secretly and confidentially. Jimmy thought it to be the infidelity of Alison. Alison thinks Jimmy married her out of revenge; while her father thinks they have married out of love. The tender relation between Jimmy and Alison comes to a halt when Helena, without the consent of Alison, sends a wireless message to Alison's father; Colonel Redfern. Colonel's reactions were prudent and balanced, though he had certain reservations for Jimmy; a university educated, on running a sweet stall while Alison defended the same.

Oh, he tried so many things- journalism, advertising, even vacuum cleaners for a few weeks. He seems to have been as happy doing this as anything else. (Osborne 110)

Alison Porter, provoked by Helena, departs; marking the end of a once-lovely relationship. Months pass without communication between her and Jimmy, sensing the opportunity Helena steps in to replace Alison; assuming all household responsibilities, initiating an extramarital affair with Jimmy, in all practical terms. The routine continues: Helena now ironing clothes while Jimmy and Cliff engage in their routine arguing and newspaper reading. However, there is a marked and noticeable dilution in the toxic and one-sided dominance of Jimmy. Helena refuses to be intimidated by Jimmy; solely the target of his rage. Jimmy finds Helena more receptive and engaged than Alison. Though Jimmy remains the central chaotic figure, Helena challenges his intellectual and personal dominance. Helena is sharp-tongued, stronger, and provides an intense verbal retaliation that challenges Jimmy's dogmas; misogyny and

otherness. She advances a new dimension; the dynamics of calculated resistance, in the relation. However, her initial opposition, though defiant, eventually succumbs to Jimmy's abusive and dominating masculinity, and ultimately relegates her to a framed domestic role of a caregiver. The adaptation breaks with the unexpected return of a frail, ill, and exhausted Alison, who has suffered a miscarriage. Jimmy, unaware of this tragedy, had made no effort to contact her since her departure. While Jimmy is preoccupied with Helena, the return of his wife complicates the domestic dynamic.

Following a period of profound anguish and the tragic loss of her unborn child, a broken and physically depleted Alison Porter returns to the cramped attic apartment she once shared with her husband, Jimmy. Upon her return, she is confronted with the uncomfortable reality of Helena Charles; her friend who has moved into her place. Despite this betrayal, Alison shows a remarkable lack of malice, refusing to blame Helena for the dire circumstances of the marital breakdown. Despite her self-admitted lack of faith in the "divine rights of marriage," (Osborne 134) Alison views her return as both foolish and vulgar. She feels a profound sense of regret and despair rather than anger, questioning her presence in the home, and clarifies that she had "certainly no intention of making any kind of breach between" the two; be it "hysteria or just macabre curiosity" (Osborne 134).

Helena, however, witnessing Alison's traumatized state; "ill and tired and hurt," (Osborne 136) and recognizing the moral culpability of her actions, experiences a profound crisis of conscience. She realizes that her happiness cannot be constructed upon the ruins of Alison's misery. Helena confronts her guilt, telling Alison that she has more right to be there, as she is legally his wife. Alison, however, is too broken to adhere to societal "rules" of marriage, highlighting the deep emotional

wreckage and twisted loyalties within the apartment.

It's all over between Jimmy and me. I've got to get out. No- listen to me. When I saw you standing there tonight, I knew that it was all utterly wrong," and she then speaks "he wants one world and I want another, and lying in that bed won't ever change it! I believe in good and evil, and I don't have to apologize for that. (Osborne 136)

Helena refuses to let Alison succumb to self-deprecation. She urges Alison to abandon her submissive stance and be true to her own feelings. Consequently, Helena makes the firm decision to leave the apartment and, by extension, abandon her illicit relationship with Jimmy. However, the departure of Helena does not lead to an easy reconciliation between the estranged couple. Jimmy, having spent months fuelled by anger and having finally embraced a new, passionate life with Helena, finds himself unable to offer comfort to a broken Alison. He is cold, indifferent, and callous toward the immense pain, grief, and trauma of her miscarriage, having previously cursed her with exactly this scenario.

Despite this hostility, the couple eventually reconciles in a final, fragile truce. Alison, having been stripped of her former detachment, upper-class complacency, and emotional insulation, finally experiences the raw, profound pain she was previously accused of lacking. In her despair, she concedes to Jimmy's demands, vowing to abandon her refined self to accept a "corrupt and futile" (Osborne 140) life, fully engaging with him in the mud of emotional suffering. The play concludes with them retreating into their private, infantile world – the "bear and squirrel" game – a fantasy that acts as a shelter from the "cruel" world (Osborne 140). This reconciliation represents not a triumph of love, but a shared retreat into a dysfunctional, romanticized existence where they can exist solely for each

other, escaping the realities that tore them apart.

Conclusion

John Osborne, in *Look Back in Anger*, explores the breakdown of modern marriage through the lens of rigid power structures and imbalanced gender dynamics. The central conflict between Jimmy and Alison is driven less by a lack of love and more by an unsustainable power imbalance rooted in class conflict and toxic masculinity. Jimmy, embodying a frustrated, working-class masculinity, asserts power through verbal abuse and arrogant defiance. Alison, representing a passive, upper-class background, adopts an overly submissive role, which allows Jimmy's abuse to continue. This unhealthy dynamic—where one partner dominates and the other withdraws—prevents mutual respect. The narrative highlights that Alison's extreme submissiveness acts as a catalyst for the relationship's dysfunction, as she fails to set boundaries, creating an imbalance that fuels Jimmy's volatility. Jimmy's inability to empathize or understand Alison's needs, coupled with his obsession with personal grievances, cripples their emotional connection. Conversely, Alison keeps vital secrets; her pregnancy and letters, from him, highlighting a deep mistrust rather than partnership. While Helena moves from a position of criticism to replicating the same toxic relationship, the resolution relies on a regression into childish, submissive games; "bear and squirrel", rather than mature conflict resolution. Their reconciliation is ultimately cynical, achieved only after the devastating loss of their child, highlighting that their union requires the sacrifice of external life to function.

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