



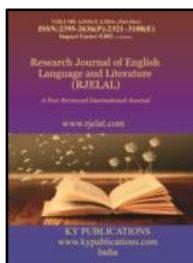
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## MAN AS A VICTIM OF THE MECHANICS OF SOCIAL SUCCESS: *THE WORLD OF PAUL SLICKEY*

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### ABSTRACT

John Osborne's play, *The World of Paul Slickey* was first performed in Great Britain on 14 April 1959. It propagates, man as a victim of the mechanics of social success. The play deals with the realities of contemporary mass media lacking the ethical insight and represents a fake journalist through the protagonist, Paul Slickey. The paper attempts to reveal the artificial world which usually man is forced to live in, to survive in the mechanical society. Paul Slickey alias Jack Oakham becomes the culprit in the socio-political competitive milieu. In the rat race of the materialistic society, the man is being exploited to accomplish something, he does not really want to do and his life mostly becomes a compromise like Paul Slickey in the play.

**Keywords:** Angry Young Man, Beat Generation, Post World War, Commodification

*The World of Paul Slickey* is a, "protest play with interspersed songs, this was specifically designed to provoke the maximum hostility from the Establishment by insulting the critics (as its representatives) and dedicated to their boredom their incomprehension, their distaste" (Christopher Innes, *MBDTC* 93). According to Colin Wilson in *The Rise and Fall of Angry Young Men*, "Long before the end of 1956, everyone was sick of the 'Angry Young Man Cult', including the popular newspapers that had launched it" ("Today in Literature"). By the time of the play, *The World of Slickey*, the Angry Young Man movement had achieved too much momentum to fade away, particularly since the emergence of America's Beat Generation, and the publication of a volume called *Protest: The Beat Generation and the Angry Young Men*. Osborne's anger towards the evils of the society has always been reflected through his plays. His career became in many ways anticlimactic, as his plays expressed his basic problems of self-pity and failure to control his temper—a behaviour which was always expressed in his works. He published an open letter in *Tribune* in

which he seems to have given voice to his anger: "This is a letter of hate. It is for you my countrymen" and went on, "*Damn you England*. You are rotting now, and quite soon you'll disappear. . ." (22). Critics actually became accustomed to receive abusive letters from him. When in 1966, *The Times* listed, in its diary column, some negative reviews of his adaptation of Lopede Vega's *A Bond Honoured*, Osborne sent the newspaper office a telegram announcing that he was declaring an open and frontal war on the newspapers and their paid hack. *The World of Paul Slickey* is also one of the attempts to wage wars against the newspapers, and here, he seems to have attacked *The Daily Racket* and its paid hack, Paul Slickey alias Jack Oakham. John Osborne declares in the note of *The World of Paul Slickey*:

I dedicate this play to the liars and self deceivers; to those who daily deal out treachery; to those who handle their professions as instruments of debasement; to those who, for a salary check and less, successfully betray my country; and those

who will do it for no inducement at all . . . A donkey with ears that could listen would no longer be a donkey; but the day may come when he is left behind because the other animals have learned to hear. (*The world of Paul Slickey*, Note)

Paul Slickey is an artificial self of Jack Oakham, concealed from his family. The play starts with the description of Scene I of Act I where "a cloth covered in large keyholes is revealed, through which can be seen parts of Paul Slickey's office . . ." (11). Paul Slickey's image is revealed through the keyholes, it is actually Slickey's 'self' which he does not want to reveal to the outside world where he is known as Jack Oakham. Jack is afraid to lose his allowances from his Boss who is also his father-in-law, Lord Mortlake. He thinks that perhaps the old man, who gave his entire estate to the family, may be dead. It is not greed but Jack's helplessness:

JO. You mean to say that your wife's family don't know that you're Paul Slickey?

JACK. You know what her father and the great man feel about each other. She'd cut my allowance if it came out. (13)

Ironically, a person, hidden from the world, is in the occupation of exposing people. So Paul Slickey welcomes all kinds of immorality in the society to his office. Paul exposes the mean realities of the present society and he does not do it for the betterment of his society but to utilize these immoralities for his personal benefit and advancement-to enhance his career in the newspaper, *The Daily Racket*. In the lifeless (morally and spiritually) society, Paul actually kills the dead, utilizing their blood as ink for his pen to write down the 'glamorous', though immoral, stories. Paul Slickey, as a journalist does not awaken the world but, on the contrary, does the post-mortem of the dead ones in the society. He also writes the false stories to fascinate the people of his country; hence he is truly a victim of the society. It seems that he uses the drawbacks of the society but this is not the fact; actually, the society uses him as a tool to entertain the people. Writing false story is something he is compelled to do by the present society. These are, perhaps, the tricks one has to know to survive in the present atmosphere.

Paul Slickey alias Jack Oakham does not reveal his true self to his wife. He publishes a false story about a church commissioner under his false identity due to which Jack's wife is also disturbed, as a part of foolish public, and she tries to confirm its truth. The play is "a biting musical satire of the London Press and an attack on individuals who allow themselves to be influenced and manipulated by mass media" ("Twentieth Century"). Under the richly comic surfaces, the play is a serious criticism of modern England. Jack discusses the issue of gossip stories in the paper with Jo:

JACK. . . . She's still mad about that story I wrote about the Church Commissioners having invested money in her brassiere company.

JO. Was it true? JACK: What do you mean-true? Once you've said it in print. It's difficult to make it sound like a downright lie. You should know by this time. It made a nice couple of columns. (13)

Jack's passion, in fact, is to become a playwright, but gradually perpetuated by the existing conditions, he is forced to become a journalist. His own words are explicitly expressive of it, "Too much concentrated competition. Someday people will find out what I'm really worth" (14). Deirdre does not have any sympathy for this and finds that, "Jack is complaining that he is worn out with the strain of being a man" (68). He is completely in the clutches of present situation, and so not in the position of leaving present job; even he cannot fulfill his dream to become a playwright. Undoubtedly, Jack has been victimized by the mechanical society, exploiting his talent for fake entertainment. Jack has struggled hard to achieve his dream but fails and is thrown into a deep and dark dungeon from where he is not able to come out. He discloses the story of his life full of struggle to Jo, his personal secretary and mistress:

Why I was just a kid when I started. A kid out of the army when I won, His Lordship's journalism scholarship. I was tough, I'd read books- I wanted to sleep with women! . . . I hate chips on my shoulders, holes in my socks, and a hard-hitting novel in my heart. I was a poor young reporter, and as I stood

around sloshing back other people's champagne and eating their cold turkey and strawberries, I couldn't forget the shabby raincoat I'd left at the door! (14)

And now he successfully gets the paper, *The Daily Racket* printed under the disguise of Paul Slickey. This is the height of degeneration of the country's social and political conditions which force a person like Jack to commit the malicious act of corrupting the present environment, rather helping him to accomplish his desire. On the whole, such vicious environment transforms an honest person into a corrupt and tricky man. That is why instead of publishing the paper successfully, Jack does not feel happy and questions the society, "Look at me now! Am I different? Have I changed? Am I just as talented as when I started out?"(14). He is no more the honest, ethical and sincerely working Jack Oakham; in fact, he kills him by allowing himself to succumb to the surrounding degeneration and vicious atmosphere to become Paul Slickey. He succeeds in doing it not just with his talents but with 'tricky tact', and thus, introduces himself as Paul Slickey:

I'm just a guy named Paul Slickey  
And the job that I do's pretty tricky.

.....

I'm twenty-eight years old  
And practically everybody, anybody,  
anything. (18)

Jack is also the defeated youth of 1950s, unlike Jimmy who has accepted his defeat. But Jack of *The World of Paul Slickey* sells himself to entertain people with the false stories through 'tricks'. These pretty tricks of Slickey can be considered as hypocrisy, cheating and falsehood. He cheats everyone including his own self with false stories, as he gives his own account thus: "Don't think you can fool a guy like me . . . Guys like us who are on the spot, can be relied to know what's not. . ." (15). This is what he does as a responsible person and the most trustworthy media man of public. He projects the thing falsely, of course, not to "build . . . [the nation's] boat" but to "make damn sure . . . sink it!" (15). Here the 'boat' is a symbol of the 'nation' for which he does not do anything positive, that is, towards its development and progress, on the

contrary, highlights the nation's evils to glamorize the paper. This why, Paul demolishes the image of his country in front of the world. Unlike building the nation, he creates false stories against the country which draw it downward. In his words, "A shoddy little talent and sawn-off imagination will never be allowed to go waste" (15). Unlike Jack, Jimmy protests against the society and, in fact, he actively takes revenge against the society. However, both are social victims. Jack is the extreme projection of Jimmy who finds his way to survive in the mechanical society: "don't think you can fool a guy like me! There's a woodworm in every family tree" (15). Jack christens him by a new name, 'woodworm'. He plainly accepts himself, as a trickster.

There is a twist between the characters, Jack and Jimmy protagonist of *Look Back in Anger*, another popular play of John Osborne. As a common man, Jimmy only used to scream and provoke all the time against the evils of the society, only to stir and awaken the common man. Jack, on the other hand, publicizes the problems of common man for the promotion of *The Daily Racket* and self profit. It is the fraction against the society from where he has terribly been dragged out. He is talented, intelligent, hopeful and dedicated, but he was earlier treated like a waste. Since Paul knows that he is talented, he uses his talent for his own good against the cruel society. He calls this common man, "[t]he newest public wonder . . ." (15). He astonishes the society, not for his achievements but for his failures:

JACK. Who looks after your interests,  
protects your freedom, and upholds your  
glorious traditions and institutions?

COMMON MAN. You do.

JACK. Who investigates vice, denounces  
prominent homosexuals and Labour M.P.s  
who try to be socialists, disturbs you about  
the divorce rate and decline of your  
Christian heritage?

(*There is the sound of a terrific explosion.*)

COMMON MAN. That's what I call  
entertainment.

JACK. And he's right, in his funny little heart  
he's right! (16-17)

Thus, for everyone, "[t]his is the age of common man" (18), who reads paper all the time and is entertained by the mishaps in the country. Paul takes advantage of this gesture of common public. He is famous like superhero who entertains the common man in his life full of struggle. Unfortunately, this common man is hopeful for the mercy from the person like Paul who actually investigates the problems of man, not to release him from them or provide a solution but to attain fame. Thus, one man is using the other man for personal gains. Jack has been exploited by the competitive society; now Jack, under the mask Paul Slickey makes use of the tattered life of common man to repair his own life. Paul courageously confesses:

I'll deride, I'll be snide, Have no heart, I'll be smart.

ALL: For this is the age of the common man! (15).

After the World War, newspapers revolutionized the daily life of the people and established a special place in the homes of the British. They are believed to be the expression of the present society. Their motive is to reform the society. Unfortunately, their role is drastically changed by man himself not to reform but to entertain the society for his personal profit. Paul Slickey also does the same by befooling the people around him. He cheats the society, his well-wishers, family and even his wife. He is involved in the extra-marital affair with the other lady, Deirdre who is also married. Ironically, both of them are involved with each other only for sexual gratification and not for affection. There exists only physical relationship devoid of any emotional bond. In the mechanical age, human body is synonymous to the machine to fulfill man's physical needs. In the following dialogue, Deirdre is afraid to lose physical relations with Paul Slickey. Without it, Jack says, "We'll be in desert and alone" (22). Their relation has not the strong base; it only depends on the physical intimacy. They do not know the meaning of love and trust. It is unfortunate for their relation as well as for the people whom they betray for their selfish pleasure. Paul answers the fear of Deirdre that in the commercial age, everything is available, even the human flesh, and "[t]he day is coming when

mass diversions of the flesh will be launched like new washing powders by gigantic commercial empires in fierce competition with each other"(22). It is through and through mechanical environment where everything is for the use of man which Marx, in his theory of reification calls, "*thingification* of social relations to the extent that the nature of social relationships is expressed by the relationships between traded objects" ("Reification"). Marx argues that:

. . . reification is an inherent and necessary characteristic of economic value such as it manifests itself in market trade, i.e. the inversion in thought between object and subject, or between means and ends, reflects a real practice where attributes (properties, characteristics, features, powers) which exist only by virtue of a social relationship between people are treated as if they are the inherent, natural characteristics of things, or vice versa, attributes of inanimate things are treated as if they are attributes of human subjects. ("Reification")

Marx's ideology can be understood as in the form of action in the play. It is only the commercialization which makes everything available as for Deirdre, "it doesn't merely satisfy, it actually kills desire" (22). It is just like a plastic fruit which may be beautiful and looks healthier but cannot satisfy one's appetite. However, Deirdre and Slickey both are involved in illicit relationship but both of them wish a simple, glow less life where there would be no lust, no passion, and no competition. Unfortunately, they are under the tight clutches of mechanical age, and both wish: "Let passion go out of fashion! Let the groin a last great groan. Let the lamb lie down with the lion. This fulfills our grand design" (23).

There is an act of an interview between Wendover, a business man and journalist. Wendover is a successful business man who has a humble beginning in Nottingham Rubber goods factory. He is successful to earn fame and money in his life. Description of this man in costly branded 'Savile Row' suit, flicking the ash out of his personally monogrammed cigarette, in his twenty-five carat gold cigarette holder, demonstrates his

richness of capitalist class. He is appreciated because of his valuables and not for his values. He has attained all riches through corruption, so called, "Corrupt Nobody" (39). He is a money maker of the mechanical age who has sold his soul to attain material gain. Even it is apathy to state that the journalist takes the interview of money maker and not donor. It seems that even media man is also in a state of pressure to interview this business class as it would be a better publicity for the paper to publish the interview of a famous business man of the country though he might have earned this affluence by corrupt ways. In early decades of 1920s, György Lukács, a Hungarian Marxist philosopher and a literary critic already warns about the dangers of ever-expanding capitalist economy:

[It] is no longer one sector of society alongside others. Rather, commodity exchange has become the central organizing principle for all sectors of society. This allows commodity fetishism to permeate all social institutions (e.g., law, administration, journalism) as well as all academic disciplines, including philosophy. ("Theodor W. Adorno")

The journalist is afraid of the rich man who might be profitable for the paper. It does not matter how corrupt he is. So here, the journalist changes the question, 'guiltily' to avoid the anger of a profitable man. He asks questions for the man not for the expectations of society. The answer of Wendover, on social concerns, clearly projects his shady image of being money minded:

JOURNALIST. Already you feel that your values are changing?

WENDOVER. That's a weird question!

JOURNALIST. He stammered guiltily and called languidly for another bottle of champagne.

JOURNALIST. Do you find, now that you have five hundred shares in British Steel, that you are worried about nationalization?

WENDOVER. Should I worry?

JOURNALIST. What about your socialist views now?

WENDOVER. If the Labour Party Nationalizes Steel, I'll probably be better off

than be better off than ever (Wendover laughs, then drinks)

JOURNALIST. Mr. William scowled savagely and said that as long as he got money he didn't give a damn. (40)

Ironically, Wendover works hard for money, and between money and work, he does not have any time for himself and his family as he says: "I must go home and get on with some work" (40). For him, home does not mean to meet his wife and children; it is another place to do work. His life is devoted to 'work' only. Here, through Wendover, Osborne questions the utility of success at present which seems futile. It seems that it is a conspiracy of the mechanical age which uses him for money making. Wendover consistently works and makes money. He does not want to involve the society or any social problems in his ways of the so called success. His life is "stepping into . . . gleaming Mercedes sports Car . . . Parties" (40). This is what Paul Slickey does as a media man and tells, "You've got to understand the mechanics of success" (38, 39, 40, 41, 93, 94, and 95). Paul preaches the lesson on the mechanics of success:

You've got to understand the mechanics of success.

A mediocre young actress need not rely on her mattress,

But it from acting she'll digress to publicity finesse

She can be as wet as watercress and still be success.

Every editor and every editress must be your dictator and dictatress

Match your poor seductiveness against this goddam bitch success. (93)

Politics, after the war, was treated as a great career opportunity in Britain. It was not regarded as social service but one of the businesses to earn money. Speaking tactfully is one of the significant traits in one's political career. It is used by the politicians to befool the public. Michael is also in this profession. He gives it a special term, "Parliamentary linguistics" (29). This language is used by the politicians to manipulate and present the 'lies' impressively to the people to earn votes and money. Politician as per qualification gives more



"scrupulous attention to the choice of words" (28). It is an irony that a politician gives more attention to words, rather than to the development and progress of his nation. He talks about himself (his political career) and the politicians believe that: "The English language and its proper usage is a matter of . . . [their] constant concern and vigilance. It is a consideration which . . . [they] should all do well to bear in mind" (29). Michael's political Anthem, for every politician, can be seen in the words: "It's a consideration we'd do well to bear in mind. You can play about with language in order to be kind" (28). It is shameful to watch Michael, teaching the other politicians to betray the public of Britain under the magic of highly impressive words. Michael's words take the audiences to the ugly and dark world of politicians of the present Britain. Solution of the problems can be found by Michael through only 'words'. He demands "peoples' phrases to sing this country's praises. . . . Angry words are being touted. Ordinary decency is being flouted. . ." (30). Michael is keen to show decency to cheat the people of the country. It is a trick to divert the attention of the troubled people who are craving for some action against their problem. There is no need of action against the problem, according to Michael, consoling words are enough: "If a problem's in a pressing condition. Give them words by the ton and the year-gives them a Royal Commission" (29). Michael deals with the things diplomatically. He calls his speech, "discussion" as he says, "A little intelligent discussion makes all the difference" (31). Like the other politicians, he always attracts the people with his words but never troubles himself to understand others. Even his wife calls him "a bore" (31). Deirdre is not happy with her husband's work. She does not honour it as a decent career:

DEIRDRE. Politics! God, I'm so bored with politics.

LADY MORTLAKE. Well after all, dear, you are married to a politician

DEIRDRE. Mummy, I wish you wouldn't encourage Michael with his political career. I'd so much rather he did a job of work.

Lady MORTLAKE. . . . Don't worry, he will soon enough. He's already made an excellent start with Young Conservatives.

They've been most impressed by his initiative- Lady Bartlett was only telling me the other day. Do you know, they only had three tennis courts before he was elected Chairman and then those awful hard ones at that? (32).

Whatever Michael did was a 'political campaign' for him. Lesley Oakham also impressed with his speeches, strongly feels that he "would get into East Molesworth that last time" (47). Both of them complain against the Income Tax Man, "who wants to take everything away from us" (47). It is a paradox that a politician who always talks about the nation, and thinks the entire time of making career in it, and criticizes the income tax man, who actually helps the nation in building it up. Lesley and Michael, both condemn the income tax man, "We want to screw, screw, screw the Income Tax Man" (49). However, on the other hand, both of them are in the extra-marital affair. Michael is the husband of Deirdre and Lesley is the wife of Jack Oakham alias Paul Slickey. Michael feels that Lesley might prove "a magnificent asset" in his political career. Michael already being a tool of politics wants to employ Deirdre as an instrument in his support. So he wants to marry Lesley. She denies marrying him as, she says, "Marriage is quite disgusting" (51). Answering Michael she explains; "Now you are talking exactly like Jack. He always wanted me to be an asset to him in his career. You must realize, Michael, it is no longer a woman's job to make a hero of her man, but to be a hero into herself" (51). "Marriages," according to Lord Mortlake, "are breaking up all over the place. Separations are commonplace. In life, in literature and yes-in the drama-adultery is regarded as a jest and divorce as a mere unimportant incident" (64). It is the curse of the 'mechanics of success' that marriage is also commercialized. It is like one of the business deals. Lesley and Michael both are indulged in the illicit relations but are not ready to get married. They both are career oriented. Michael admits that they could not marry each other:

Lesley feels that my own career would clash with hers, and I respect her point of view. After all, she is a highly accomplished woman, and we must recognize the fact

that woman- ah- is taking a new place in our rapidly changing society. We men will have to review our position, and- ah- bring it into line with present- day developments. (77)

It is difficult to decide, whether it is the issue of woman empowerment or the defect of mechanical society. There is no doubt that woman's position truly improved in the past years in Britain. But it is really shocking to hear from Lesley's proposal to Michael for the change of sex, to become woman to get success in politics. Osborne mocks at the degrading values of his country and countrymen. Professor Lambert Zuidervaart, Director of ICS's Centre for Philosophy, Religion, and Social Ethics also shows concern for the society "whose culture pursues so-called progress no matter what the cost, that which is 'other', whether human or nonhuman, gets shoved aside, exploited, or destroyed" ("Theodor W.Adorno"). There were such incidents of sex-change revealed through media. Now it has crossed the limit, to change one's sex is something where a human being starts devaluing his own self to fulfill the desire of immense wealth at the cost of even one's identity. This is suggestive of the fact that progress of economy leads to the commodification of human being which may be more sophisticated in manner and the exploitation may be less direct than outright slavery, but the domination of capitalists still continues with even greater defects. Lesley suggests Michael:

You're a politician, Michael and what you want, therefore, is power. And power, political power, like everything else, is passing into the hands of the women. Look to the future, Michael. Don't fight new battles with an old weapon! If you want to make certain of being a success in politics, there is only one realistic solution: become a woman! (79)

Osborne's play is a portrayal of mechanical society where man is being victimized. Towards the end of the play, Jo shows the paper to Jack, having lots of spicy stories, "People, more people! More flesh and blood, more human interest! More of the truth about the world in which we all live, the people, the ordinary people!" (92). Jack is happy to

serve the falsehood through papers and get success out of it:

Nothing too trivial or unimportant for us to package up for consumption at the breakfast table . . . This happy breed of men who give them what they want! (*Hurling papers in the air.*) These are our loaves and fishes! Come, come and pay your tuppence-halfpenny and let no man be turned away or unregarded! We have food for all. What's on tomorrow? (92).

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