



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

THE DISINTEGRATION OF FAMILY IN JOHN OSBORNE'S LOOK BACK IN ANGER

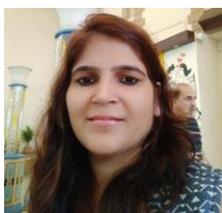
Dr. SHIVALI SINGH

Assistant Professor, Department of English

Social Sciences of Sciences, IFTM University, Moradabad

Email id- shivali.ssingh@gmail.com

doi: doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.73.123



Dr. SHIVALI SINGH

ABSTRACT

The Post-War social and economic conditions in England in the fifties were so bad that they disintegrated not only individuals and made them new Hamlets shouting and protesting in impotent anger against the rotten social and economic structure of Great Britain but also the families big or small, old or new. Whether it is Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* or *The Entertainer* or *Inadmissible Evidence* the story is the same everywhere. The family is on the focus in all these plays. The aim of the present research paper is to discuss disintegration of family in the play *Look Back in Anger* of John Osborne.

Key Words- Jimmy Porter, Alison, Disintegration, Family, World War II, Social, Economic

John Osborne, an English dramatist, actor, screen writer, was known for his excoriating writings. He explored different and many themes. He was the first to show and concentrate on Britain's purpose in the post imperial age. He came into the fame with the performance of his play *Look Back in Anger* at Royal Court Theatre by the English stage Company in 1956. It fell like a bombshell on the theatre goers and television viewers. It was a new breakthrough of the new Drama. His plays reflects the sickness of the post-war society , the wistfulness, idealism, cynicism and the unresolved quarrel of the post war youth with society and universe. Disintegration of individual and family is the common theme of his plays.

In *Look Back in Anger*, Jimmy Porter, a howling impotent intellectual has a broken home on account of his own political ideology and enthusiasm for social and economic reforms. Instead of fighting the rotten society, he fights his own wife because he thinks that his wife is his natural enemy because she

belongs to the upper middle class which he hates most. He married Alison in order to take revenge on her and her parents representing the upper middle class. He, therefore, keeps her as a hostage. Alison, Jimmy Porter's wife tells Helena:

I felt as though I'd been dropped in a jungle. I couldn't believe that two people, two educated people could be so savage, and so-so uncompromising. Mummy has always said that Jimmy is utterly ruthless, but she hasn't met Hugh. He takes the first prize for ruthlessness-from all comers. Together, they were frightening. They both came to regard me as a sort of hostage from those sections of society they had declared war on.¹

Alison is a conventional girl of an upper middle class origin. Her father, Colonel Redfern commanded the army of an Indian Maharaja in the pre-Independence period. Alison is well-bred, highly educated, sophisticated and cultured. Alison

married Jimmy Porter at her own sweet will against the wishes of her parents. When she met Jimmy Porter in a party, she was immediately drawn to him. She made up her mind to marry Jimmy Porter in spite of the fact that her mother dissuaded her strongly from leaping in dark. Alison was unmoved. When she married Jimmy Porter, the latter was jobless and penniless. So they passed their wedding night in the flat of Jimmy's friend, Hugh Tanner. It was here that she discovered that both Jimmy and his friend were ruffians. She learnt from their behaviour that Jimmy had married her for seeking vengeance on her.

All of a sudden something happened and a wall stood between them. The warmth of love was gone. Jimmy Porter started snubbing, humiliating and abusing her. He taunted her with all sorts of invectives. He always tried to irritate and provoke her but she went on suffering without saying or doing anything against her husband. While talking to Cliff Lewis, Alison and Helena Charles, Jimmy Porter exposes his mind and attributes some motives for his being angry with his wife.

Four years had rolled over since their marriage but Alison knew no peace with him. During those four years, Alison was ruthlessly bullied, humiliated and taunted with all sorts of unqualified adjectives. But she never answered back to her husband. She said nothing; she did nothing but suffered all because she had none to fall back upon in her distress. From the very beginning of the play, we see Jimmy Porter provoking and irritating Alison by saying all sorts of foul things about her mother and brother, but she never opens her lips. She remains neutral and detached like a saint. She suffers the indignity silently. She is a battered, punched, brow-beaten and trampled-on girl, who says nothing and does nothing in reply, but goes on ironing, ironing with a look of blanched sorrow on her face, which is white and exhausted as if after a hundred sleepless nights, tormented by a hundred ceaseless headaches.

If Jimmy Porter is a Hamlet, Alison is his poor Ophelia born to be scolded and castigated for the sins of her mother. The scenes Jimmy makes with Alison have the same candid brutality that

Hamlet showed Ophelia. In both cases, the frenzied mockery springs from an expectation of betrayal of faith. Ophelia is felt to be an ally of the corrupt court with the murdered king as its head, of her brother Laertes, and her father Polonius. In **'Look Back in Anger'** Alison's brother Nigel is Laertes and Alison's mother is cast in the role of Polonius. The fact Alison is secretly exchanging letters with her means that she is in communication with the enemy. Like docile Ophelia, women cannot be trusted because they do not understand that such an act is treachery. They do it in all innocence.

Guy Dumur rightly points out that *'Look Back in Anger'* deals with *"the problem of marriage between young people of different classes. A worker's son, embittered and magnetic; a colonel's daughter, pure and conventional. Petit bourgeois against petit bourgeois"*.² After their marriage, Jimmy Porter and Alison had never lived happily. Alison had been ill-treated and humiliated by her husband in the worst possible ways. She had a feeling that Jimmy married her just for seeking revenge or letting out his anger on her for those things for which she was responsible in no way. She tells her father that her husband is another Shelley. She calls him a sort of spiritual barbarian who has thrown down the gauntlet at her:

Oh yes. Some people do actually marry for revenge. People like Jimmy, anyway. Or perhaps he should have been another Shelley, and can't understand now why I'm not another Mary, and you're not William Godwin. He thinks he's got a sort of genius for love and friendship-on his own terms. Well, for twenty years, I'd lived a happy, uncomplicated life, and suddenly, this-this spiritual barbarian-throws down the gauntlet at me. Perhaps only another woman could understand what a challenge like that means?³

When the play opens, Jimmy Porter is seen grumbling and fretting against Alison. He has been trying to find fault with her and provoke her so that he could get a response from her and make it an excuse for a family quarrel with her. He uses abusive language against her mother, father and brother so

that Alison is provoked. He tells Cliff that so far as Alison and her brother Nigel are concerned, "They're what they sound like-sycophantic, phlegmatic and pusillanimous." He tells Cliff in the very face of Alison that his wife is a very clumsy woman because she is seen doing the same things every night. She jumps on the bed as if she were stamping on his face. She is very destructive in everything. She acts like a person launching a battleship:

She's so clumsy, I watch for her to do the same things every night. The way she jumps on the bed, as if she were stamping on someone's face, and draws the curtains back with a great clatter, in that-casually destructive way of hers. It's like someone launching a battleship.⁴

Though Alison has never slept with him or anyone else before her marriage yet her integrity is suspected by her husband. Though she is untouched yet her husband feels as if he had been deceived by her. He always taunts Alison for her virginity. Alison exposes her pain to Cliff saying:

And, afterwards, he actually taunted me with my virginity. He was quite angry about it, as if I had deceived him in some strange way. He seemed to think an untouched woman would defile him.⁵

Jimmy Porter, in fact, is a sadist who seeks his pleasure by inflicting pain on Alison. The more Alison suffers, the happier he is. His hatred and anger for Alison do not get catharised unless and until Alison suffers the pains of child-birth and loses her child before it sees the light of the day. When Alison returns from her father's house and meets Jimmy Porter, she tells him that she has made a mistake in being neutral and saintly, "*It doesn't matter! I was wrong, I was wrong! I don't want to be neutral, I don't want to be a saint. I want to be a lost cause. I want to be corrupt and futile!*"⁶

She further tells him that when she was in pain during the delivery of her child, she always thought of him only to see her how stupid, ugly and ridiculous she was because that was what he had been longing for her to feel. When all passions are

spent, Jimmy and Alison feel relaxed and they propose to play bear and squirrel and sing songs about themselves.

References

1. Osborne, John: *LOOK BACK IN ANGER*: Faber and Faber, London: 1971: P. 43.
2. Dumur, Guy in *LOOK BACK IN ANGER* ed. by John Russell Taylor: Macmillan, London: 1968: P.173.
3. Osborne, John: *LOOK BACK IN ANGER*: Faber and Faber, London: 1971: P. 67.
4. Ibid. P. 24.
5. Ibid. P. 30.
6. Ibid. P. 95.