

A Discussion on how the Incoherence in Jimmy's rage is both a strength and limitation of the play 'LOOK BACK IN ANGER'

Gopika.S

MA English and Comparative Literature

Central University of Kerala

Kerala.

Abstract

The disappointed youth feeling of America manifested in the art, this was the core essence of the monumental work *Look Back in Anger*. This work inaugurated the new stream of thought that projected a new specimen of societal conditions "The Angry Young Man", characteristic feature of which was anger. The paper attempt to discuss this anger and its incoherence to analyse the layered implications it hold.

Key words

Incoherence in rage, class struggle, disillusionment, past glory.

John Osborne's 1957 play *Look Back in Anger* received mixed reaction from audience. It was a fresh experiment in the theatre which was part of the Angry Young man movement, and is largely considered as a foundational work in the genre of which the term 'kitchen – sink drama' was coined.

One of the few appreciations the play received was from Kenneth Tynan who explained it as, "minor miracle containing all qualities one had despaired of ever seeing on the stage, the drift towards anarchy, the instinctive leftishness, the automatic rejection of "official" attitudes, the surrealistic sense of humour, the casual promiscuity, the sense of lacking a crusade worth fighting for and, underlying all these, the determination that no one who die shall go unmourned."

INCOHERENCE IN JIMMY'S RAGE.

The play is largely perceived as giving voice to a frustrated and politically and culturally disenfranchised constituency, the lower middle class. The social conditions of the then time produced the first generation graduates of this group, whose literary heroes became known as Angry Young Men.

Robert Wright reviewing the first production, “he obviously wants to shake us to thinking but we are never quite clear what we want to think. Is it class struggle or simply sex?” The paper attempts to discuss how this incoherence in Jimmy’s rage is both a strength and limitation of the play.

The most striking attribute in the play is Jimmy Porter’s rage. Anybody who skims through the play will be confirmed about the disappointment and the rage of the male protagonist instantly. This rage is one driving force in the play that takes multiple layers to showcase the socio-politico-economic conditions of the period.

An analysis of Jimmy’s anger opens before one the disturbing realities of Britain in 1950s. Jimmy Porter symbolized the general condition of Britain’s lower middle class during the period. It was an age of decay in Britain. The Angry Young Men movement produced plays which criticized this social condition. Their protest was headed against ‘the rigid pattern of class stratification’. Most of the heroes in the works belonging to the category were educated for roles which transcend their class identity. Most of the heroes are displaced persons in English society. They are characterized by an urge to have an acceptable identity compatible with their self-realization. Jimmy Porter is a perfect manifestation of these traits which rightly place him as the representative of the disappointed youth of the times.

With this play Osborne has brought Class as an issue before the British audience. English drama critic, Kenneth Tynan commented that,

“Jimmy represented the dismay of many young Britons... who came of the age under Socialist government, yet found, when they went out into the world that the class system was still mysteriously intact”.

The changing political condition in Britain was a source of great hope for the young generation but their hopes were not met, this caused deep disappointment among the young men like Jimmy. The issue of class is fore grounded in the play. The very pair Jimmy and Alison is the perfect image of the tension. Jimmy considers his wife Alison, who is from an upper middle class background as a symbol of his victory over the upper class. His dislike of the class is what

largely manifests as the angry abuses on Alison. Also Jimmy hates Alison's brother, Nigel who has enjoyed the benefits of his upper class birth.

Thus one can understand that the tension between the emerging new educated lower middle class and the middle class society is the most basic reason for Jimmy's rage. Through Jimmy's anger Osborne calls readers attention to the societal condition. Now let's analyze the multiple layers in Jimmy's anger.

Firstly Jimmy is disappointed at the fact that faded Edwardian glory of England can no longer be real.

“People of our generation aren't able to die for good cause any longer.....there aren't any good, brave causes left”(Look Back in Anger, 84)

Jimmy is quite nostalgic about his father-in-law's past as well. The present economic condition of England was not in a position to accommodate all the educated young men. In the former days England was rich enough to support all her citizens. Jimmy longs for those glorious past. Jimmy's liberal stand as evident from the play is a reaffirmation of establishment. When he is angry at the upper class he simultaneously longs to reach the same position. This can be seen in Act I when he reads newspaper; he ridicules his friend of not having the taste for sophisticated newspapers and asks his wife to explain to his friend. Here Jimmy is trying to identify himself with the upper class.

Second reason for Jimmy's rage is his disillusionment at the 'political decay' and the pretense of continued health in contemporary England. Jimmy who was educated under the Universal Education act was unable to find a work that matches his skills. In the contemporary condition of England, aspiration itself is faulty. Thus part of him reaches for success while other part mistrusts success. From this demeaning position Jimmy lashes out at everyone dear and around him. Anger is the manifestation of this disappointment and is directed at everything associated with British bureaucracy.

Finally, it is a more psychological reason rooted in his working class background. Jimmy has witnessed the sufferings and death of his father at a tender age. This has affected Jimmy deeply. His father's death developed in him a growing sense of insecurity which he tries to overcome by his anger. Moreover he believes that the sufferings and hardships of working class are alien to middle class. This psychological reason is the cause of Jimmy's rage against her wife. He believes that she has never confronted any such difficulties in life. According to his conviction sufferings validates human experiences. That is why he accepts her at the end, when he was convinced that she has suffered enough.

We can see that there is incoherence in Jimmy's rage. The above analysis clearly points to this incoherence. According to Encyclopedia of British writers; Vol 2, "Look back in Anger is powered by a great deal of raw emotions and passion, but it is not always clear what either Jimmy or the audience is supposed to do about it."

Exactly as the above line there is an ambiguity in the emotion. The play presents Jimmy as an angry young man, and only that. There is no concrete action taken in the play as an effort to change the situations or conditions. The play only complains about the contemporary conditions or rather it merely opens a ground for discussion. This lack of clarity in the presentation of rage confuses reader about where to place Jimmy. Jimmy is both a hero and anti hero in the play.

He rails against the moral cowardice of those who have not suffered as he has, but refuse as a matter of honour to accept any kind of understanding. At the same time, though enraged by the injustice around him he does nothing more than merely talking about it. This is done mostly in unfocused circles as well.

When one looks at the elements of sex in the play, the most striking one is the new attitude about the hetero sexual relations. Also the society was encountering an increased confusion about sexual morality. According to a Freudian reading of the character Jimmy Porter, it is seen that Jimmy can be understood as a wrongly developed individual. Even the confusions in sexual relations are an extension of the decayed social condition at large.

The central focus of the play is class struggle itself. The then contemporary socio- political condition, which led to the emergence of a new educated middle class. The tension between the new and traditional classes. The identity crisis of the new emerging group, there struggle to find a place and space for them is portrayed through Jimmy. Jimmy's rage is employed in the play as a tool to represent these conditions. It is an outlet of the disappointment of the people. He is trying to create a dignity for himself.

Another interesting observation is that Jimmy Porter can be seen as a Modern day Hamlet. According to Ardhendu De who makes a parallel study between the characters again the issue of corruption and class emerges. Hamlet was angry at the corrupted system which favoured the undeserving minority. Similarly Jimmy's rage is directed against the decayed social condition which still holds the remaining of the traditional class system. And which favours the upper and middle classes.

The use of rage as a tool to present the social realities is a new trend in theatre. In the play it is a realization of the class struggle and which extends to the issue of gender conflict as well. Thus more than limitation the incoherence in jimmy anger can be seen as strength to the play. Though it has not given any concrete action a serious thought and discussion is initiated through the play.

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