

## John Braine's *Room at the Top*: Lasciviousness and Immoral Social Mobility in 1950s England



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### Abstract:

John Gerard Braine, a well known figure of the mid nineteen fifty's 'angry young man movement' had come up in the literary platform with a dedicated mind to paint the blackest face of society with the color of post war enigma, mingled bitterness, sexual lust, hypocrisy and betrayal. The struggling experience of his real life provided him the essential impulses to create something of his own and it got expression through his bulky of literary creation. Braine, like most of his contemporary writers, took the initiative avocation for the social upliftment of lower class people in his debut novel *Room at the Top*. He, in the aim of giving momentum and a variation to the 'angry young man movement', had put forth his image of angry young man, with a subtle touch of different attitude into the central character namely Joe Lampton, an ambitious young man preoccupied with the desire of upward social mobility. Even amidst the overwhelming socio-economical crisis and aimless existence of frustrated life, Braine had truthfully shown the earnest strive of the lower class youth to come out of the muggy lower class barricade to get uplifted their social position. In the present novel, Joe Lampton being the heart beat of the post war lower class people, exhibits dauntless effort to change his position from inherited poor class backdrop to highly esteemed rich class people.

**Keywords:** postwar enigma, avocation, ambitious, social mobility, socio-economical crisis, class barricade

### Introduction:

John Braine was one of the emerging young talents of 1950s angry decade from Yorkshire. He had an inescapable impression of the 1950s angry young writers on him to set up his mind in the directed direction. If we see the flashback of his early life in the form of misadventures he had gone through, we shall come to understand how life force can be converted to literary force. Like most of the 'young angries', John Braine's life journey was not prosperous and happy contented. He belonged to a lower middle class family without any facilities and

consequently he could not attain a glamorous educational qualification. Before coming to the literary field, he had worked in a shop, laboratory and factory and after the war in a library. His lower class belongingness and unpleasant past played a crucial role to feel and understand the tumultuous condition and hopelessness of the poor class people and the reason behind their hatred for the higher class people.

Unlike most of his fellow writers, Braine did not express such a violent attitude and temperament towards society and all as others of his decade did, rather, he as a sensitive and conscious writer of the decade exposed a mild and witty outlook in a hidden tone of criticism. His novel *Room at the Top* critically evaluated the drabness of modern life, socio-economic struggle and seductive tendencies of the post war people of England. It showed an obvious picture of moral loss, illicit physical relationship and flirting nature and above all a keen desire to have a luxurious life of the then people in England.

Braine's image of angry hero is refined and different from others. The protagonist, Joe Lampton is presented as a very prudent, calculative and cold minded in his dealings with others. The prime motto of his life is social and economical upliftment by breaking the chain of poor class origin. Though he resembles Osborne's Jimmy porter, the icon of angry hero in the matter of lower class belongingness and poverty but there is a far wide difference between them in the matter of personal opinion, outlook, use of language and social conduct with others irrespective of rich and poor classes. Though he was one of the angry heroes of the contemporary literature but he was something different from others. He perceived that showing dissatisfaction, anger and hatred to others do mean nothing and of no use. As a true optimist he has kept his desire of becoming a rich and successful man burning and channelized all the cause of hatred and frustration to own self. Lampton does not at all wish to stay happy and confined within his old place Dufton. In a tone of dissatisfaction he mutters:

“Dead Dufton, Dirty Dufton, Dreary Dufton, Despicable Dufton” (Braine, 97)

John Braine's conception of 'angry young man' is more sophisticated and praiseworthy in its outlook towards society and people around. Unlike other writers under the same label, John Braine had keenly observed all the existing malpractices of the society but did not express forcefully by showing personal attack in a bitter tone. He is very calculative having a clear insight into the mind of common people. He kept it in his mind that the common people were not all through sinful for the social and moral degradation. They ignorantly followed the inescapable way to be indulged in social vices. His first and successful novel, *Room at the Top* though is wide apart from the haughty and ferocious nature of the protagonist, but its originality of the real mood and temperament of the working class youth is unquestionable. Sometimes it seems that the angry heroes with their poor fortune created in the artistic hands of the 1950s young writers are no others but the true replica of themselves. Regarding the class back ground and immediate popularity of the writers of the angry decade, Colin Wilson's opinion:

“I have, as will appear, my own reservations about the Angry Young Men. But what made them interesting as a group was that John Osborne, John Braine, Alan

Sillitoe, Stan Barstow, Arnold Wesker and myself were all from working-class backgrounds.” (*The Angry Years: The Rise and Fall of the Angry Young Men*, Kindle location, 201)

In the present novel *Room at the Top*, the protagonist, Joe Lampton’s struggle with self and society and the profession he had gone through to reach his goal or simply to become a rich man by any means, gave a genuine spirit to the movement.

Braine has utilized an account of realistic facts aroused from the malfunctioning of corrupted and morally ruined society to endow the novel with the attributes of angry young look. He is little bit deviated in thinking and expression from the typical conception of angry hero who is generally rough and aggressive for his own failures as well as of others. He has given an account of romantic, funny and flirtation type of characteristic traits into his hero, who is very conscious and cunning in understanding of others. Besides of producing a pretentious and cunning hero, he has also explored a number of distinguished aspects especially the social upliftment of the working class people in his fame winning novel, ‘*Room at the Top*.’

1950s England had witnessed an awkward and bewildered state of social immobility due to the great loss of World War II. While everybody was supposed to wrap themselves with the thick layer of anxiety and resentment for inability to fulfill their individual wishes, Braine’s angry hero Joe had found himself desperate in securing a highly esteemed and relaxed position in the top of all classes being detached from his own birth place Dufton. He is a very peculiar type of man, who does not believe that success can only be achieved by own hard work rather it can easily be achieved by adopting or legalizing others’ success as own by any coast and means. He is of the notion that the height of success he aspires to reach is not possible in his birth place Dufton. In the words of Joe:

“No dreams were possible in Dufton, where the snow seemed to turn back almost before it hit the ground.”(Braine, 85)

The social life Brain has portrayed here is colorless and dried and human beings are just living on namesake in the land which is barren. This scenario is better matched with the gloomy mood expressed in T.S. Eliot’s well known poem *The Waste Land*:

“Unreal City,  
 Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,  
 A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,  
 I had not thought death had undone so many.” (*The Waste Land*, Kindle Locations 191-199)

In spite of the sorrowful past regarding the sad demise of his parents, zero financial support and utter sexual involvement with a married woman namely Alice Aisgill, Joe did not give up the

hope to win Susan's heart, the only daughter of a rich businessman in Warley or simply the only key to open the rusted lock of his luck.

His physical movement to Warley and staying with Thompsons at the top of the city hind the starting of his ground breaking journey towards his high aspiration. The most surprising fact about him is that he does not want to be happy or contented but the happiest and most contented. His arrival at Warley gave him feelings of a new world, where everything is new and fresh and every day is endowed with new opportunity. He regrets for his late coming to Warley and within three months he has involved with every part of the town and its life. His coming into contact with the Town Hall people and especially the Thespians women brought him in the main stream of a sort of life he ever wanted. Thespians attracts him most because it welcomes the joining of working class people.

Joe and his friend Charles condemn the high rank officials and councilors by calling them with code name 'Zombie' and 'Capitalist beast'. The resentment is not only for their hollow and nasty behavior but mostly for their unique position and power from which he has been deprived. He has observed very keenly the basic needs one must get fulfilled in case of getting a pretty girlfriend and to place himself in a good social position. Joe's desire gets the voice-

"I wanted an Aston- Martin, I wanted a three-guinea linen shirt, I wanted a girl with a Riviera suntan-these were my rights, I felt, a signed and sealed legacy."  
 (Braine, 29)

He is sensible one to calculate the future of working under local government which definitely cannot fulfill neither of the needs he longs to achieve. Joe understood it very well that if he wants to reach the goal, he needs to go through transformation of his self as well as present class. Psychologically also he wants to be far wide from his native place as it relates him to his native poor class. In Mr. Aisgill's query of his belongingness to Dufton, he wittily replies that he was born there that means presently he has no intention to be identified by his birth place. Apart from his great mental set up and wisdom, his efficient acting of presenting own self as innocent and loyal is the main tool to mesmerize others especially Susan by defeating his one and only competitor Jack Wales though he is inferior to him in personality, position and power. Joe's good insight into women's heart and quality of speaking utter lie in an innocent manner placed him advance in the race and ultimately won Susan's youthful heart, whom he considers his passport to enter into the domain of rich class world. He is shameless to speak shameful lie. In spite of continuing all kinds of relationship with Alice he impressed Susan by saying she is the only girl he ever had. His self confessing can better define his inner psyche, in his words-

"I was the devil of a fellow, I was the lover of a married woman, I was taking out the daughter of one of the richest men in Warley, there wasn't a damn thing I couldn't do." (Braine, 84)

Post war England had witnessed extreme lasciviousness, flirtation, fallen morality existing in all kinds of relationship. Joe was over possessed with the passion of sexual lust with Alice besides of the thought of alluring financial career through marriage with Susan. It was not only man but

also woman even being in relationship or after getting married used to amuse themselves by frequently spending night, drinking wine with others on the name of freedom and aristocratic life. Lust for position, expensive car, luxurious life and beautiful women always revolve in the mind of young generation and Joe is not any exception. He was a combined self of greedy, crooked and hypocritical nature, who did not hesitate while having sex with ten years senior and married woman Alice. Sense of guilty or remorse cannot shake his moral being though he is victim of an illicit affair with Alice but in the matter of Alice's pose in her early life to an artist to earn some money, pricked his sense of morality and honesty, while it was the sole fact of her survival. Alice's voice in reply became the mouth piece of woman world. In her words:

“You are very brave, highly moral too. It isn't descent of me to pose for an artist who sees me simply as an arrangement of colour and light, but it's perfectly O.K. for you to kiss me all over and to lie for an hour just looking at me.” (Braine, 117)

The ups and downs of Joe's emotional state of mind always find its fortitude to Alice, who guides and gives solace to his tormented self. He has become so brain obsessed in his restless and immoral game of becoming rich that he has forgotten to listen to his heart even breaking his promise which resulted to Alice's committing of suicide. Joe's promise to Susan:

“I do love you, Alice. I'll love you till the day I die. You're my wife now. There'll never be anyone else. I'll be with you every inch of the journey.” (Braine, 185)

He has taken no time to break his promise of paying company to her for life long and considering her as his wife at the critical juncture of choosing either Alice or Susan, to entrap his long cherished goal and career. Joe has defeated his rival Jack, his poor class belongingness, nostalgia of old memory by reaching his final destination but cannot win happiness and peace of mind as he regards himself the cause of Susan's death. At the end he himself has become 'Zombie' the word he used to abuse the corrupted officials.

### Conclusion:

The decision and destination which Joe nourished for long though finally got its resolution, nevertheless, Joe could not be free from ineffable mental agony. He realized that becoming rich and getting all the luxurious things are the things he wanted and there is nothing peculiar about it but to erase his mental stress and to smoothen his journey, engaging a married woman as an object of sexual pleasure and leading her to commit suicide is not at all mercy able. Moral and ethics are the paramount values to judge someone's social and moral conduct. On the light of morality he was neither truthful nor someone to trust upon. His friend Charles has best explained his motive of loving Susan: “In love with her! Drivel ! In lust with her.” ( Braine, 88). Joe being the part and parcel of the poor class people exhibited very narrow mental set up which proves that he is not unhappy for his lower class belongingness and poor fortune but because of the fashionable life style, the rich class enjoys, which he cannot. The core drive behind his desire of becoming rich is his sense of poor class humiliation and dissatisfaction.

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