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The Theme Of Anger In John Osborne's *Look Back In Anger*.

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Abstract:

John Osborne, the recipient of Evening Standard Award and exponent of Angry Young Man movement, depicts the realities in America of 1960's. He makes his plays as a tool for social reform. He is one of the most celebrated American dramatists in post colonial period. The present paper analyses the theme of anger in John Osborne's play Look Back in Anger (1956). The play investigates the reasons for the protagonists' rage and the ways the characters reflect their anger on other people. The present paper particularly focuses on suppression, frustration and alienation of American youth that is reflected in the form of anger in the respective play. The paper attempts to reinforce that how the middle class people in America despite of academic excellence, do not find any worth place in society.

Keywords:

Unemployment, Anger, Aggression, frustration, psychoanalysis, isolation, alienation, etc.

The first performances of John Osborne's famous play *Look Back in Anger* staged at the Royal Court Theatre on 8 May 1956. It is regarded as a reaction to the affected drawing-room comedies. It is also considered as the beginning of a new era in the British Drama. One of the famous critics John Russell Taylor calls the play "the beginning of a revolution in the British theatre" (Taylor, 11). Arthur Miller calls the play "the only modern, English play" that he has seen (Taylor, 193). The critic John Russell Taylor believes that 'Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* "started everything off... the play is the first 'type-image of the new drama' (75). Many critics have regarded *Look Back in Anger* as a turning point in the history of twentieth-century British theatre because of its choice of topics from social and political circumstances of its time, its lower-middle and working-class characters, its realistic setting and its everyday language. Salgado notes that "the younger generation's frustrated political radicalism found a theatrical focus in the embittered and explosive eloquence of Jimmy Porter" (192). Another critic, Katherine J. Worth, explains the reason for *Look Back in Anger*'s impact on the audience: "Osborne astonished and fascinated by his feeling for the contemporary scene, and the mores of post-war youth, by his command of contemporary idiom." (Taylor 101). It can be noted that Jimmy Porter has become a kind of representative of post-war generation puzzled by the Hungarian revolution. He was unhappy about Britain's so called imperialist approach to Suez and dedicated to protest the Bomb and the nuclear weapons. According to Raymond Williams *Look Back in Anger* is "the beginning of a revolt against orthodox middle-class drama because he believes that "what passes for realistic drama is in fact telling lies; it is not about real people in real situations, but about conventional characters (superficial and flattering) in conventional situations (theatrical and unreal)" (27).

Osborne looks at the working and lower middle class people struggling with their existence in bed sheets or terraces of their attic rooms. After the success of the play, new playwrights such as Delaney, John Arden, Arnold Wesker, Harold Pinter, and John Mortimer started writing on working class background. They liked to be sensational to surprise and shock with their choice of topics from contemporary social and political circumstances. When *Look Back in Anger* first appeared, most of the critics of the time regarded the play primarily as a play of political and social rebellion and labeled the movement, as 'angry young men.'

Jimmy Porter, the protagonist of the novel, is considered as the mouthpiece for an angry young man's disillusion about the society he lived in. Therefore, John Osborne was known as the first of the 'angry young men.' The term was made up by a Royal Court publicist in those times however "it had first been used of Noel Coward at the time of *The Vortex* in 1924" (Leon and Morley 219). Alongside John Osborne, Arnold Wesker, Harold Pinter, and John Arden were continued the tradition of the 'angry young men.' Jimmy is regarded as the first non-middle class, provincial, antiestablishment anti-hero in modern British drama. Jimmy Porter is a British man of working-class background with a university degree (not even redbrick but white tile) and working at a candy stall despite his graduate degree. Here Osborne makes use of a realist- naturalist setting in order to reinforce his point and presents the living circumstances of post-war generation especially the younger generation of working and lower-middle class origins. He uses simple and the realistic language in the play. For instance, Jimmy shouts and swears most of the time he opens his mouth to talk. Cliff's Welsh accent is clearly understood from his speech. The characters can say what they feel or think up to a limit determined by the censorship. He shocks his audience with its bluntness.

The theme of anger is evident in *Look Back in Anger*. The dictionary definition of anger is "a violent, revengeful emotion that one feels about an action or situation which one considers unacceptable, unfair, cruel, or insulting and about the person responsible for it." Psychologists agree with the fact that anger is an emotional state that varies in intensity from mild irritation to rage and fury that might lead to aggressive behavior. Therefore, aggression can be considered as a way of expressing anger. Aggression is defined as "the behavior intended to harm (physical or nonphysical) another individual" (Abeles, Fischer, and Scherer 4). It is observed that the essence of anger and aggression begin with Sigmund Freud, especially in his psychoanalytic theory. Freud has several ideas about aggression. He initially believed that "aggression was a 'primary response' to the thwarting of pleasure-seeking or pain-avoiding behavior" (Albert Bandura, 12). He thought that all human behaviors were motivated by the libido (sexual energy and instinctive drives) and the repression of libidinal urges was displayed as aggression. Then Freud claimed that there were 'ego instincts' that are non-libidinal urges the general aim of which was self-preservation. "The major constituent of such instincts was aggression" (Arnold Buss, 184).

Anger is a feeling, experienced when a desired goal is blocked. According to the frustration-aggression hypothesis, when a negative affect is stimulated it elicits an experience of anger. Therefore, anger is considered as the emotional state that intervenes between the thwarting and expression of angry and aggressive acts. Berkowitz states that when "a person displays violently hostile actions upon being frustrated may do this because he is in an intense emotional state, i.e. his anger level is very high" (Aggression 35). There can be many reasons for experiencing the emotional state of anger. According to the frustration-aggression hypothesis, the main reason that produces anger is frustration. The emotions of isolation, alienation, anxiety, loneliness also trigger frustration therefore angry feelings. This paper highlights on the reasons of Osborne's protagonists' angry feelings

particularly the causes that make them frustrated. Osborne has expressed a sense of frustration and anger at the depressing circumstances of post-war Britain. Jimmy Porter is regarded as an embodiment of the frustrations of a particular age and class especially the generation of young men who have been expecting to leave behind their lower-class origins by using higher education. He is educated beyond his social roots; however, he cannot get what he expects from his education. Despite his university degree, he has worked as an advertising salesman, a neophyte journalist, and a vacuum-cleaner salesman. Then he starts to run a sweet stall for a living which is also not a proper job for a graduate man. According to Berkowitz "inability to fulfill the anticipations is a frustration" (Roots 16). Jimmy should have been working in a job suitable for his university education. It can be said that Jimmy is not working in a proper job due to his working-class origins. His university degree does not make him a member of a higher class. Carl Bode suggests that, "Jimmy knows that he is the displaced intellectual and that surely embitters him" (331). He is aware of the fact that he cannot change his social status only by a university degree however hard he tries. Therefore, as Bode claims Jimmy is "a man who has tried and failed to become middle-class" (331). According to the frustration-aggression hypothesis, Jimmy's not having a suitable job despite his university degree can be considered a "frustration produced instigation." He is frustrated due to the fact that his educational background does not fulfill his anticipations. Therefore, it can be counted as one of the reasons for Jimmy's rage. Simon Trussler asserts, "His outbreaks of anger derive from this failure to find fulfillment" (54)

Throughout the play Jimmy rails about politics, religion and other social institutions. He feels betrayed by the previous generation because his generation is experiencing the disappointment of World War II. However, he is looking for some enthusiasm instead of exhaustion. Because he had a father who believed that there were still, even after the slaughter of the first World War, causes good enough to fight for and collective actions worthy of individual support. It can be asserted that Jimmy's anger arises from a sense of having missed out the opportunities for idealism, or heroism, or at least for an action which had been provided to the previous generation. Having missed out the chances to take an action can be considered a barrier for Jimmy to do something good for himself or for the welfare of the society which is another reason for him to feel frustration and therefore anger. Christopher Bigsby affirms: "It was not the injustice of his society which angered Jimmy Porter, but the vacuousness of his own life. Education had given him articulateness but nothing to be articulate about.. It was its triviality, its pointlessness, which appalled Jimmy Porter, who was in effect an absurd hero rather than a social rebel. His anger was his attempt to simulate life; his violent language an effort to insist on his existence." (21). Initially Jimmy expresses the 'vacuousness of his own life.' He utters: "God, how I hate Sundays! It's always so depressing, always the same. We never seem to get any further, do we? Always the same ritual. Reading the papers, drinking tea, ironing. A few more hours, and another week gone. Our youth is slipping away. Do you know that? Oh heavens, how I long for a little ordinary enthusiasm. Just enthusiasm that's all. I want to hear a warm, thrilling voice cry Hallelujah! I'm alive! I have an idea.... Oh, brother, it's such a long time since I was with anyone who got enthusiastic about anything." (14-15) At the beginning of his speech about 'not having any brave causes' Jimmy seems to find the one whom he can put the blame on for his frustration and anger: "Why, why, why, why do we let these woman bleed us to death?... No, there's nothing left for it, me boy, but to let yourself be butchered by the women." (84-85) Lacey suggests, "The whole speech is symptomatic of the way that political and sexual impotency are interlinked in the play" (31). Jimmy's constant quarrel is with the British middle class, the class out of which he has

taken a wife. His resentment focuses on his wife, Alison. According to Michelene Wandor, "Jimmy's political rage is displaced; firstly, his energies are expended totally on interpersonal relationships, and secondly, his sense of class hatred is sublimated into sexual hatred and... attacks on women in general and his wife Alison in particular" (74). Many critics have called Jimmy a despot husband for bullying and attacking Alison all the time. Indeed, as Austin E. Quigley suggests, "Jimmy's attacks on Alison repeatedly focus on what he perceives as her lethargy, her timidity, and her readiness to accept whatever comes her way" (42). Jimmy comments on Alison's passivity from the very beginning of the play: "She's a great one for getting used to things. If she were to die, and wake up in paradise – after the first five minutes, she'd have got used to it." (16) "Nothing I could do would provoke her. Not even if I were to drop dead." (19) It can be noted that one of the main reasons of Jimmy's anger is Alison's timidity. Jimmy expects Alison to react against him when he taunts her with such words as "sycophantic, phlegmatic and pusillanimous." (LBA, 21) However, the more Jimmy provokes, the more Alison withdraws. When Jimmy goes on calling her 'pusillanimous' and bullies her, Alison 'leans against the board, and closes her eyes.' And says: "God help me, if he doesn't stop, I'll go out of my mind in a minute" and Jimmy answers, "Why don't you? That would be something, anyway" (LBA, 22). Jimmy wants Alison to give honest reaction to his humiliation of her. Even when Jimmy betrays Alison with her friend Helena, she does not say anything. In her farewell note, she writes: "My dear, I must get away. I don't suppose you will understand, but please try. I need peace so desperately, and, at the moment, I am willing to sacrifice everything just for that.. I shall always have a deep loving need of you." (72) Jimmy gets angry when he reads Alison's farewell note and he says: "Oh, how could she be so bloody wet! Deep loving need! That makes me puke! She couldn't say "You rotten bastard! I hate your guts, I'm clearing out, and I hope you rot!" No, she has to make a polite, emotional mess out of it!" (72) Jimmy complains about Alison's hypocrisy in refusing to express her anger at betrayal which can also be considered a middle-class manner. Even while leaving Jimmy, she is trying to be polite. However, Jimmy might have much preferred her to have emphasized, rather than suppressed, what she really felt. It might be her lack of response and affection towards Jimmy which causes him to treat her badly. Luc Gilleman, comments, "Jimmy is a frustrated husband who is brought to despair by his wife's passivity" (77). Jimmy is frustrated by Alison's timidity and silence due to the fact that he expects her to have some enthusiasm and energy. However he complains that "that girl there can twist your arm off with her silence" (LBA 59). At one of the rare moments that Alison could openly react against him the stage direction says: "The wild note in her voice has re-assured him. His anger cools and hardens. His voice is quite calm when he speaks" (LBA 51). Jimmy feels better when Alison expresses her anger openly. Jimmy also wants Alison to take the responsibility of being alive. He thinks that Alison should have stayed at home to fight with himself in order to solve their problems. It might be suggested that, Jimmy expects from women more than he could hope to get from them and when he is disappointed he turns on them with savage resentment. Susan Rusinko claims: "Jimmy's anger indiscriminately hits those who cannot share his pain or his real feelings, especially those whom he loves. At one point Jimmy accuses everybody else of wanting "to escape from the pain of being alive." His pain is deep-rooted, going back to a father who came back from the war in Spain when Jimmy was only ten and whom Jimmy watched die for twelve months (39). It can be said that Jimmy was deeply affected by his father's death since he was only a child when he passed away. He talks about his dying father as follows: "I was the only one who cared! I had to fight back my tears... All he could feel was the despair and the bitterness, the sweet, sickly smell of a dying man... You see, I learnt at an early age what it was to be angry and helpless. I

knew more about love, betrayal and death, when I was ten years old than you will probably ever know all your life." (58) Jimmy expects Alison to share his pain but he cannot say it directly. He is too proud to demand it. He says: "I've sat in this chair in the dark for hours. And, although she knows I'm feeling as I feel *now*, *she's turned over, and gone to sleep*" (LBA 59). After he learns that Hugh's mother, one of the people whom Jimmy really loves, died Jimmy asks Alison to come to the funeral with him. But Alison does not give an answer and prepares herself to leave the house. It makes Jimmy feel angry and disappointed because he thinks that Alison is supposed to be with him instead of leaving him alone when he needs her. Therefore, Jimmy is demoralized by the death of Hugh's mother and the pain of Alison's leaving him. Alison's silence leads to a lack of communication between the couple which can be considered another cause for Jimmy's rage. While Jimmy asks for openness Alison prefers to remain silent and do nothing. Indeed, she chooses to escape from the problems. It can also be observed that Jimmy has inconsistencies and conflicts in himself which may also cause angry feelings; as Berkowitz claims "psychological discomfort can produce the aggression activating negative affect" (Examination and Reformulation 70). He loves and despises Alison, attaches himself to her while rejecting her social origins. He does not like Alison's middle class manners and friends and he makes fun of them: "Oh dear, oh dear! My wife's friends! Pass Lady Bracknell the cucumber sandwiches, will you?" (LBA 51). Trussler claims, "His ethical system is a sentimentalized working-class Puritanism that he is almost Victorian in his insistence upon keeping a sexual relationship in its proper place in bed" (52). He hates Alison's mother but he has sympathy with her father though he is obviously in many ways the representative of everything Jimmy is against. It might be due to the fact that people from previous generation such as Colonel Redfern and his own father had the enthusiasm and at least had the causes to die for. Jimmy tells Cliff: "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 brigades do make their brief little world look pretty tempting. All home-made 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. If you've no world of your own, it's rather pleasant to regret the passing of someone else's. I must be getting sentimental. But I must say it's pretty dreary living in the American Age unless you're an American of course."(17) It is certain that Jimmy is nostalgic about the good old days of England because he is a part of a generation who has to handle the disappointments and difficulties left from World War II. However, unlike his generation he is trying to stay alive. As Mary McCarthy asserts: "He is fighting to keep Alison awake, to keep himself and Cliff awake, as though all three were in the grip of a deathly coma or narcosis that had been spread over all of England by the gases emanating from the press, the clergy, the political parties, the B.B.C." (152). It can be suggested that Jimmy is frustrated on account of the fact that he cannot awake the people he cares about. For instance, Alison's inertness can be considered as a barrier for Jimmy, keeping him from fulfilling his expectation to make her more active. As Berkowitz claims; "people become angry and aggressive on being kept from reaching a desired goal to the extent that they think that someone had intentionally and unfairly prevented them." It is called "aggression or anger-provoking situation" (Examination and Reformulation 63). Jimmy feels that Alison remains silent deliberately in order to make him angry. Her timidity can be regarded as a reaction to Jimmy's aggressive behavior. According to Berkowitz's frustration-aggression hypothesis, "every frustration increases the instigation to aggression which is anger. Anger is the primary, inborn reaction to thwarting" (Aggression 47). As a result, Jimmy is angry because he is frustrated. He is frustrated because he is running a candy stall despite his university degree; he is frustrated owing to

his middle class wife's passivity; he is frustrated on account of the fact that people whom he loves do not try to share his pain; he is frustrated since the older generation had made a thorough mess of things, and he thinks that there was nothing his generation could do except for talking nostalgically of the good old days.

It has claimed that anger can be analyzed in two ways considering the fact that there are two main aspects of anger which are the emotional state of anger and the expression of that emotion. In this play, the readers observe Jimmy's anger in both ways. He is frustrated and angry mainly because of the passivity and insensibility of the people whom he loves.

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