



Research Article

Representing the Themes of Class–Gender Conflict and the Concept of the Angry Young Man in John Osborne’s Look Back in Anger

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to critically look at the figure of this new ‘anti-hero’ to establish how the ‘angry-young man’ conforms to the patriarchal society in John Osborne’s 1950’s kitchen sink drama ‘Look Back in Anger’. This play has strongly raised voice for gender ideologies and class distinctions, where Alison Porter belongs to the upper-class society and Jimmy Porter belongs to the lower-middle-class society. Alison may be socially superior based on her upper-class status, but Jimmy conveys superiority based on his masculine gender. Here, Jimmy is the representative of patriarchy, and he symbolises the general condition of Britain’s lower-middle-class society, while both Alison and Helena are representatives of the matriarchal authority, and they symbolise the upper-class society of Britain in the 1950s. It is Jimmy’s search for a social identity in post–World War II, individual masculine identity, his transformation of class hatred into sexual hatred and his misogynistic attitudes that are the central subject matters of this paper. In ‘Look Back in Anger’, one can witness a complete intermingling of class and gender relation which raises questions about the role of these aspects in contemporary society, which this paper intends to explore.

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INTRODUCTION

Like Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, John Osborne, in his play *Look Back in Anger*, depicts the class-gender conflict in a new way in the realm of theatre. An expression of frustration, disillusionment, class-conflicts and anger of the post-war world, is woven into one whole play. A topic that is worth examining from a wide to narrow spectrum is the issue of class and gender conflict in the play. *Look Back in Anger* is an autobiographical

play and has historical backgrounds of post-World War II Britain. It belongs to the genre of ‘Kitchen Sink Drama’ which focuses on the domestic lives of the working class and whose protagonists could be described as ‘Angry-Young Men’ who were disillusioned with society.

Before proceeding further, it is important to know the reason for the anger of the post-World War II generation. Principally triggered by social discrimination, economic position, and

contemporary parameters of success, they often considered themselves failures in attaining the desired social standing, resulting in desperation, depression and dejection.

2. Depiction of Class and Gender Relation with respect to the theories of Marxism and Feminism.

Look Back in Anger is a complete intermingling of class and gender relations. Femininity in this play is highly associated with the upper-class and masculinity with the working-class. This leads to gender conflict as well as class conflict, as it has economic dimensions as well.

In this context of criticism, it is important to know the two distinct concepts of "Class" and "Gender". Marxist literary theorists tend to focus on the representation of class conflict as well as the reinforcement of class distinction through the medium of literature. According to Marxist literary theory, there is conflict between two different classes of society - One is the bourgeoisie, and the other is the proletariat. The bourgeoisie are the capitalist class i.e upper class, and the proletariat is the working class, i.e. lower class.

In feminist theories, feminists have consistently argued that the male becomes the standard for everything human, and the woman is never seen as anything other than an object. Here, human society is overtly and covertly patriarchal and tends to subordinate women to men in every sphere of existence - religious, familial, political, economic, social and artistic. Women are taught to derogate their sex and accept their subordination. Feminist scholars have interrogated and introduced theories of the 'Sex-Gender' opposition.

Traditionally, gender has been a social construction of biological sex. Consequently, male bodies have been equated with 'masculine' traits, whereas female bodies defined through the 'feminine'.

In every social and cultural experience, class-politics is inextricably linked with gender-politics. For example, a male gender, i.e. masculinity in our society, is the representative of superior power both by class and gender. On the other hand, a working-class woman is double marginalized by her class and also by her gender.

Feminist and Marxist criticism points to the social, political, sexual relation and power system in society. It can be said that while the class politics are explicitly highlighted, the gender politics remain repressed. Here, the 'angry young man' has dominated over women in Look Back in Anger.

However, recent scholarship has revealed how sex and gender are intimately related. It can be asserted that sex and gender are "Inescapably cultural categories that refer to ways of describing and understanding human bodies and human relationships, our relationship to ourselves and to others" (Glover and Kaplan xxvi).

Scholars like Judith Butler argue that gender is provisional, unstable, the total of appearances rather than the experience of the unifying force.

3. Social context of post war-II Britain during 1950's

As a theatrical text, Look Back in Anger acts as a battleground for various class and gender identities that confront each other.

And in order to do so, it is important to take into account the social context of post-war Britain during 1950's. After World War II, the young men often had to deal with the issue of an identity crisis. This frustration and boredom make Porter an 'angry young man'. In post-World War Britain, the British Labour Party introduced some social reform to build up a welfare state in England. But young idealists were not satisfied. This angry young man not only exposed the hypocrisies of upper-class culture and ethos but also portrayed the deep disaffection and lack of direction of those not privileged by their lower-class birth.

4. Patriarchy-matriarchy conflict and upper-lower class conflict represented by Jimmy and Alison Porter.

Jimmy Porter emerges as the representative voice of the lower middle class; he almost becomes their hero. His anger acts as a tirade against the aristocratic class that controls the social, political and cultural institutions of the nation. It is the class system with its inbuilt preferential treatment that makes Jimmy's existence seem so meaningless. Class, here, is an all-pervading presence in the play. Jimmy Porter belongs to the lower middle class, his wife Alison belongs to the aristocratic class, and his friend Cliff comes from the working class. Jimmy and Alison's inter-class marriage is a visible proof of the fact that certain class boundaries have been transcended, but as we delve deep into the play, we find that this transgression has serious ramifications.

Analyses of Stephen Lacey and Michelene Wandor follow more or less similar lines. Lacey draws out the links in the play between class-resentment and hostility to women, class snobbery and sexual emasculation.

Wandor offers a detailed reading of the play from a feminist perspective, which explores not only how women are represented in the play but also shows how the relationship between class, politics and gender has been constituted.

Jimmy Porter dominates the whole play through the power of his anger and language. Jimmy is one of the generations who faced compulsory National Service, and he is obsessed with the upper class. From the very beginning, he is full of verbose energy. He remarks, "I think I can understand how her daddy must have felt when he came back from India" (1.2).

Jimmy hankers after the past and can therefore feel the pulse of Colonel Redfern in spite of his upper-class background.

Jimmy and Alison have been married for three years and she tells cliff that they had not slept together before marriage. She said "And afterwards, he actually taunted me with my virginity". Jimmy is suspicious of Alison's love as she belongs to the aristocratic class.

From the very beginning of the play, the audience can see how he constantly torments his wife Alison through scorching terms. It is through Alison that Jimmy attacks the inertia of the whole upper class people of England. Jimmy's vitriolic anger and verbal assaults on Alison reflects when he rudely comments on Alison passive acceptance of everything in life, he said "She hasn't had a thought for years". (1)

Again Jimmy calls Alison “The lady pusillanimous” (1) – in a very insulting manner trying to convey that she lacks firmness of mind and courage. It can be said that, he projects the typical patriarchal belief that women are timid, mindless and passive. Jimmy attacks on the upper class world as a part of the class war he was waging with Alison as a hostage. Even Alison’s silence becomes a kind of resistance to Jimmy rage. So, Jimmy becomes the observer and victimizer. On the contrary, she is victimized and observed. Stephen Brooke argues that Jimmy’s misogyny becomes a substitute for a class struggle “An abusive and aggressive masculinity becomes a replacement for a lost identity” (Brooke 788).

The symbol of ‘bear’ and ‘squirrel’ is of utmost importance in the play. Jimmy is called the ‘marvellous bear’ where as Alison is treated like as ‘hoarding, nut munching squirrel’. ‘The bear’ symbolizes the masculinity and strength and on the contrary ‘the squirrel’ symbolizes her timidity and her objectification as a play thing.

Helena Charles’s role in the play becomes crucial in our understanding of gender politics in that play.

When she appears in act-ii of the play, the playwright described her as an attractive woman with a sense of matriarchal authority and as the gracious representative of visiting royalty “the royalty that tolerate the parliament and reasonable free assembly of its men folk” (2.1). It is clear that Osborne’s tone is satirical.

She is the one who actually contrasts Jimmy’s verbal abuse and even threatens to slap him. She also defends and guides Alison like a good friend, and encourages her to go out of the madhouse as well.

In Act-i Alison wears a “cherry red shirt” of Jimmy and in Act-ii, Sc-i, Helena wears an “old shirt” of Jimmy symbolizing how these women are treated like Jimmy’s property. They are defined by Jimmy and not allowed to define their own identities.

Alison becomes the “lost cause” and finally she comes back as a defeated women. She loses her everything. Michael Wandor points out the significance of Alison’s miscarriage “Jimmy has had to destroy the possibility of mother hood in her, in order to gain her as a ‘mother’ for himself”. (Wandor 151).

It can be said that when Alison loses her child, she learns what Jimmy wanted her to learn. It is as if the women in the play are raised in consciousness only because of Jimmy.

As cited earlier in this paper, Jimmy’s masculinity is threatened by the presence of powerful women.

One such figure is Alison’s class-conscious mother. Jimmy uses animal imageries and describes her as “She’s as rough as a night in Bombay brothel and as tough as a mate lot’s arse” (2.2). On the contrary Mrs. Tanner is someone whom he idealizes. This can be seen as the nostalgic idealization of the working-class mother, as Brook points out because in the case of Mrs. Tanner “The class and gender identity is fixed” (Brook 788).

5. CONCLUSION

All the points heaved in this paper move towards the conclusion that Jimmy is a rebel who constructs a battle ground for wagging a battle with the female. It would have been possible for the playwright to choose a man to embody the class conflict about which Jimmy is supposed to feel so strongly on the basis of his masculinity. The fact that a woman has been chosen significantly indicates that the play’s primary concern is not class but a turmoil in Jimmy’s mind about the nature of his masculine identity i.e. gender-conflict in which class-conflict is a resultant secondary component. It can be argued that Osborne has given us a new hero or anti-hero, a concept of angry young man, a rebel without cause, a revolutionary without revolution. But in the whole process, he has denied his female characters any significant voice. Hence, Aleks Sierz critically looks at Jimmy as a symbol of “negative youth” (sierz 160). For Sierz, Jimmy embodies a kind of masculinity that defines women as objects of suffering and victimization while men become active subjects desiring freedom and mobility.

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