

The Loss of Brave Causes: An Analysis of John Osborn's *Look Back in Anger*

Pritha Biswas, M.A., M.Phil., Pursuing Ph.D.

Assistant Professor of English

Department of Professional Studies

Christ (Deemed to be University)

Bengaluru, India

pritha.biswas@christuniversity.in

Abstract

Among the various British novelists and playwrights, who emerged in the 1950s and expressed scorn and disaffection with the established sociopolitical order of their country, John Osborne stands out loud. Their impatience and resentment were especially aroused by what they perceived as the hypocrisy and mediocrity of the upper and middle classes. The Angry Young Men were a new breed of intellectuals who were mostly of working class or of lower middle-class origin. Some had been educated at the postwar red-brick universities at the state's expense, though a few were from Oxford. They shared an outspoken irreverence for the British class system, its traditional network of pedigreed families, and the elitist Oxford and Cambridge universities. They showed an equally uninhibited disdain for the drabness of the postwar welfare state, and their writings frequently expressed raw anger and frustration as the postwar reforms failed to meet exalted aspirations for genuine change.

The trend that was evident in John Wain's novel "Hurry on Down" (1953) and in "Lucky Jim" (1954) by Kingsley Amis was crystallized in 1956 in the play "Look Back in Anger", which became the representative work of the movement. When the Royal Court Theatre's press agent described the plays 26-year-old author John Osborne as an "angry young man," the name was extended to all his contemporaries who expressed rage at the persistence of class distinctions, pride in their lower-class mannerisms, and dislike for anything highbrow or "phoney." When Sir Laurence Olivier played the leading role in Osborne's second play, "The Entertainer" (1957), the Angry Young Men were acknowledged as the dominant literary force of the decade.

As presented in Jimmy Porter's speech, which could then be read as climaxing in that long-postponed confrontation of the British male with his repressed feminine aspect, against the existentialist thought:

"There aren't any good, brave causes left. If the big bang does come, and we all get killed off, it won't be in aid of the old-fashioned, grand design. It'll just be for the Brave New Nothing-very-much-thank-you. About as pointless and inglorious as stepping in front of a bus. No, there's nothing left for it, me boy, but to let yourself be butchered by the women." (Look Back in Anger; Osborne 1966: 51)

The paper will set out to establish that Porter's anger is a depressive quotient of his deliberate psyche; the unfolding of a generation that will shape the future of the populace. Porter's indictment is not that the upper class is repressive, but rather that it has no remaining code of belief at all. Though seeming a dissident, he is really a frustrated traditionalist. Clearly, responses to Look Back in Anger were shaped by attitudes to its protagonist, Jimmy Porter. Porter was a symbolic figure in public and political discourse in the decade, ripped out of the play and paraded across the newspaper headlines, often collapsed into a composite figure with his creator, 'Osborne/Porter' or into the ubiquitous yet ill-defined 'Angry Young Man'. Look Back in Anger and its author can lay claim to being at the centre of the first theatrical celebrity event in postwar media history, circulated and discussed in ways that have become familiar in more recent times. However, this view of the play masks other more problematic characteristics, especially a complex relationship to British (or rather, English) history that reaches back beyond 1945. This is not to deny the play's undoubted importance for postwar culture and theatre (despite Look Back in Anger's diminished stock it seems pointless to pretend that its significance to its contemporaries was simply a delusion). However, it is these connections to the past, and the political dilemmas that result, that are of the most concern here.

Keywords: Angry Young Men, Look Back in Anger, John Osborn

'In the theatre', said Victor Hugo, 'the mob becomes a people' (171). Such a shaping of the modern democratic polis has been rehearsed in the dramas of England over the past half-century. If the logic of Yeats's re-reading of Shakespeare were to be carried forward and applied to some of the keynote players of modern Britain, then it might be possible to read John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, no less than *The Hostage* by Brendan Behan, as a postcolonial text.

The diagnosis offered by Osborne is astoundingly similar to that made by D. H. Lawrence after World War I. When the attempt by soldiers at blood-brotherhood fails, one is left only (said Lawrence) with 'cocksure women and hensure men', leading to that moment when 'men lose their hold on the life-flow'. Lawrence's remedy was to flee the country on the grounds that 'England's done for . . . in England you can't let go.' (D. H. Lawrence 1979. Selection from *Phoenix*, ed. A. A. H. Inglis. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 373–4)

Jimmy Porter cannot leave but, in remaining, he becomes a study of what Lawrence might have become – a powerless witness of the decline of romantic England from a dynamic, open society to a packaged heritage industry. Porter’s wife and her friends will stay in old cottages and visit ancient churches not because they retain any belief in traditional codes, but simply as a style option, a matter of external form. Jimmy Porter is appalled: ‘Reason and progress . . . the old firm is selling out . . . all those stocks in the old free enquiry’ (Look Back in Anger; Osborne 1966: 38).

For all his faults, Porter sees the English past as something to learn from. For his wife’s friends, it is something to learn about, something now museumized but scarcely the basis for a national future. Porter’s analysis of upper-class paternalism and pusillanimity is sound enough. The problem is that he has not worked the dialectic through, and so his revolt is in the endless against the imperialism of the aristocracy than against the timidity with which its members gave the empire up. The rebel is a conservative at heart, and there are moments in the play when he voices a very personal resentment against those seductive British forces which dispossessed his generation of the idea of England:

“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 brigade do make their brief little world look pretty tempting. All home-made cakes and croquet, bright ideas, brighter uniforms. Still, even I regret it somehow, phoney or not. If you’ve no world of your own, it’s rather pleasant to regret the passing of someone else’s.”

The clashes between Jimmy Porter and his wife might be taken as a version of the class war disfiguring British society, after the safety valve of empire has been removed – with the Welsh lodger Cliff cast in the role of a reluctant Celtic witness who is constantly tempted to opt out of the entire arrangement. Too young to have fought in World War II, too old to forget, Osborne’s generation could never subscribe to the warlike Old Britannia described by Linda Colley. So it had no option but to look back in a kind of muffled anger on the rhetoric of a diminished empire.

One of the major themes of John Osborne’s autobiography, *A Better Class of Person*, is in fact the sheer impossibility of recovering a personal or national past. England, allegedly underwritten by centuries of tradition, is depicted as a geriatric in the grip of a terminal amnesia. The famous challenge posed by E. M. Forster in an essay on racial purity is repeated: ‘Can you give the names of your eight great-grandparents?’

Forster had suggested that the betting would be 8–1 against and, true enough, the young Osborne never could find out who his ancestors were or what they did. All he ever got were vague anecdotes from family members who never asked the boy about himself. The autobiography (a far finer work than the plays) becomes a long protest against the conditions of its own impossibility,

and against a family which, having no sense of its own nation or tradition, substituted for them a tissue of platitudes about class and empire.

Look Back in Anger is a protest against a society in which the age of heroes has been replaced by that of the installment plan, and in which the writing of tragedy has had to make way for farce. The struggle of a protagonist against an immovable object has given way to a struggle against a ridiculous object. What is presented is not the old revolt of the proletariat against a tyrannical aristocracy, but rather the complaint of a frustrated lower-middle class against the failure of its overlords to define any code at all, around which the community could conduct a debate about who should inherit England. Porter seeks to goad and prod his 'betters' in the hope of eliciting a response.

Although beatnik males could make the breakthrough of admitting a feminine element in their personalities, whether in Jimmy Porter's long hair or in Elvis Presley's intermittent falsetto, no sooner had they done this than they were unnerved by the very freedoms they had taken; and so the woman within each of them cried out for proof that they were still, despite everything, macho and masculine. One way of asserting a jeopardized virility was to engage in acts of occasional cruelty, something found not only in Porter's behavior but also in that of the many gangs which flourished in Anglo-American culture through the period. These acts of violence were often attempts to compel the ruling class to abandon its pusillanimity by making a clear statement of what in fact it believed. Jimmy announces that all of England is living "in the American Age" and that the American influence is so entrenched and pervasive that he wouldn't be surprised if the new generation of English children turned out to "be Americans." Yet only a few decades earlier, at the beginning of the century, many in Britain believed their nation to be the dominant world power, the empire on which the sun never set, and a progressive society which its former colony, the United States, could only hope to emulate.

Porter, with all his references to Wordsworth, Eliot and so on, is more of a traditionalist than the aristocrats, who so easily surrender their traditions to the forces of the market. He is, in short, a conservative revolutionary. Most of Osborne's generation of 'angry young men' re-emerged in the 1980s as apologists for the British Prime Minister, Mrs. Margaret Thatcher (as he did himself). Nor was this a betrayal of youthful ideals: Mrs. Thatcher, in fact, stood for their implementation. She represented the coming to power of an insurrectionary lower-middle class within the Tory tradition, a group deeply resentful of the paternalistic old guard who liked to fudge all issues as they kept a firm hold of their gilt-edged bonds. If Osborne's play had really been as revolutionary as people pretended, it would probably never have been staged: but he, like Mrs. Thatcher three decades later, came to conclude that there was no such thing as society. The nihilism at the close of *Look Back in Anger*, as the central couple regress into an infantile game of bears and squirrels, robbed the play of much of its power: yet in that refusal to believe or assert anything lay a desperate kind of hope, captured by Kenneth Tynan when he wrote: 'One cannot imagine

Jimmy Porter listening with a straight face to speeches about our inalienable right to flog Cypriot schoolboys’.

Jimmy’s alienation from Alison comes precisely because he cannot break through her “cool,” her unwillingness to feel deeply even during coitus with her husband. He berates her in a coarse attempt to get her to strike out at him, to stop “sitting on the fence” and make a full commitment to her real emotions; he wants to force her to feel and to have vital life. He calls her “Lady Pusillanimous” because he sees her as too cowardly to commit to anything. Jimmy is anxious to give a great deal and is deeply angry because no one seems interested enough to take from him, including his wife. He says, “My heart is so full, I feel ill — and she wants peace!”

At one point in Act I, Jimmy complains of “the eternal flaming racket of the female,” displaying the gender gap that is characteristic of the cartoon, where Andy kips on the couch all day while Flo cooks, cleans and goes out to work. Although Alison is not a charlady like Flo, she seems never very far from housework, including the endless ironing that dominates Act I. Jimmy condemns her for this residue of Flo within her, at the same time that he denies his responsibility for helping to turn her into a working-class charlady. By looking at the cartoon, we can see in Andy’s combative relationship to Flo one pattern of the working class marriage that of spouses locked in a duel over money and sex. This working class marital battle had been a staple of the vaudeville show with its urban lower class appeal. As with the much earlier Punch and Judy routines of street theatre, it was funny on the vaudeville stage to beat or abuse your wife, but Osborne dignifies the condition by revealing the tragedy within it. At the same time, there is the fact that Alison can never be Flo because she is not working class.

The class system had been firmly in place in the bringing up of this child of the British military and imperial classes. Her father’s class, however, is on the way down, towards cheaper and cheaper suburban villas and boarding houses. Jimmy’s class is on the way up. The old way and the new way meet and clash and work out their destiny in the Porter’s flat.

The battle is even more explicitly expressed by Jimmy in terms of a popular newspaper and magazine advertisement of the time. In this exchange, Jimmy reveals that he had been reading the fine print in the non-posh papers and that he remembers an advertisement for Charles Atlas’s home bodybuilding course:

“Jimmy: Do you think some of this spiritual beefcake would make a man of me? Should I go in for this moral weight-lifting and get myself some overdeveloped muscle? I was a liberal skinny weakling. I too was afraid to strip down to my soul, but now everyone looks at my superb physique in envy.” (Look Back in Anger, Act III Sc 1; Osborne, John (1966). *Look Back in Anger*. London: Faber and Faber.)

Jimmy Porter operates out of a deep well of anger. His anger is directed at those he loves because they refuse to have strong feelings, at a society that did not fulfill promises of opportunity, and at those who smugly assume their places in the social and power structure and who do not care for others. He lashes out in anger because of his deeply felt helplessness. When he was ten years old he watched his idealist father dying for a year from wounds received fighting for democracy in the Spanish Civil War, his father talking for hours, “pouring out all that was left of his life to one bewildered little boy.” He says, “You see, I learnt at an early age what it was to be angry — angry and helpless. And I can never forget it.” (Osborne, John (1966). *Look Back in Anger*. London: Faber and Faber.)

Now, although there is some evidence in the play of popular music, there is none at all of rock and roll. Music does, however, enter the play in Jimmy's aggressive trumpet playing, his previous ambition to be a band member, and his two improvised sets of lyrics for what are intended to be blues songs (Act III). Music on the radio in the Porter flat is exclusively classical. In real British society of the time, however, the picture was very different.

Colonel Redfern confirms Jimmy's view of the centrality of the experience of empire in a speech that articulates his (the Colonel's) longing for India and sense of loss and dislocation when he was forced to return home: “The England I remembered was the one I left in 1914, and I was happy to go on remembering it that way . . . When I think of it now, it seems like a dream. If only it could have gone on forever . . . I think the last day the sun shone was when that dirty little train steamed out of that crowded, suffocating Indian station, and the battalion band playing for all it was worth. I knew in my heart it was all over then. Everything.”

This speech conflates a sense of a ‘timeless’ pre-World War I Britain with his experience of service in the army in India. Alison's rejoinder to her father is that “You're hurt because everything is changed. Jimmy is hurt because everything is the same”. This is often taken as a statement of where the political balance of the play lies, placing Jimmy on the left, and his anger rooted in a frustration caused by the inability of British society to alter.

Despite the lack of rock and roll in the play (perhaps even because of it), a synchronic survey of the music that formed the soundtrack to the lives of Jimmy and Alison's real counterparts might reveal assumptions about how young people conducted their lives at that time.

A particular contrast emerges between this popular illusion of constancy and Alison's confession to Cliff: “I don't want to have anything more to do with love” (Act I). This polite, romantic love from the song lyrics is not relevant to what goes on between Alison and Jimmy, which, although obviously still involving sex, includes a disturbing component of role playing, horseplay and even violence. In the light of these circumstances, the bear-and-squirrel game gains new relevance as the only way for them to express love. “It was the one way of escaping from everything – a sort of unholy priest-hole of being animals to each other.”

One conclusion that can be drawn from this brief survey of pop culture and its relevance to Osborne's play is that Jimmy Porter, of all the denizens of that flat, may be the most sensitive to the influence of popular culture and its iconic imagery. This sensitivity may be one cause of the anger that he expresses in domestic abuse. Since the message of popular culture in the mid-fifties spoke of a new youth movement—vital, rebellious and hedonistic—one could understand Jimmy's yearning in some way to be part of it, but knowing that he is too old and settled ever to have a part in it. To illustrate Jimmy's dislocation from the new rock and roll age, one can consider what he does for a living—selling sweets. Jimmy has the wrong kind of shop, selling the wrong kind of goods for the coming age. Sweets may have been good for the treat-starved years of the immediate post-war period, but soon a society with more pocket money would demand more sophisticated luxuries on which to spend it. Carnaby Street would redefine how the world dressed and spent money on dress. In economic terms, Jimmy has already missed the boat to success.

Jimmy comes from the working class and although some of his mother's relatives are "pretty posh," Cliff tells Alison that Jimmy hates them as much as he hates her family. It is the class system, with its built-in preferential treatment for those at the top and exclusion from all power for those at the bottom, that makes Jimmy's existence seem so meaningless. He has a university degree, but it is not from the "right" university. It is Nigel, the "straight-backed, chinless wonder" who went to Sandhurst, who is stupid and insensitive to the needs of others, who has no beliefs of his own, who is already a Member of Parliament, who will "make it to the top." Alison's father, Colonel Redfern, is not shown unsympathetically, but her mother is portrayed as a class-conscious monster that used every tactic she could to prevent Alison from marrying Jimmy. In his tirade against Alison's mother, Jimmy becomes quite vulgar in his description, wanting plainly to shock them rather than argue any point. He calls her a "bitch," and repeatedly mentions that she should die. He goes so far as to describe the stomach-ache the worms would have after they've consumed her dead body, becoming more graphic and vulgar as he progresses. After he slows down a bit, Helena and Alison offer a rather clear insight into his personality. Helena says, "You think the world's treated you pretty badly, don't you?" Alison interjects, "Oh, don't try and take his suffering away from him—he'd be lost without it."

Imaginative suffering is a dangerous thing and Jimmy knows it. Yet it is in the violence that he finds a solace to the failures of having anything worthwhile. The frailty of the human psyche is entangled with a rage towards the exactness of failure. As love becomes a victim of competition and non-responsiveness towards the heart and mind, it fosters a rage and a deep frustration towards life. Jimmy is a victim of such a tirade towards him and that is what he passes to his companions as a form of expression. Ironically, Jimmy has already found his earth angel, but doesn't want her any more. He wants something else to distract him from his anger at having been excluded from the fading class monopoly on money and power. Jimmy is angry because he is caught on a wave of popular anger and rebellion, which buoys him up. He is part of the wave, not its major contributor.

Thus, Jimmy despises the complexity of a woman's heart, only to approve of it – he desires such complexity but is unnerved by the overpowering nature of the “India-rubber”. Put in place, Alison-Jimmy-Helena are a complete combination of the half man that Jimmy is. Jimmy's frustration is in his incompleteness in reaching the apex of the organic energy of both sexes; a Hamlet like dilemma. Jimmy's anger is definitely not an “antic disposition” (Hamlet, Act I Sc. V). The anger is a deeply resident by-product of this incompleteness, both social and personal, in the incapability to achieve great ends: the lack of “brave causes”. He desires the Archimedean energy in the onomatopoeic “eureka” or “hallelujah”, and in claiming that he is ‘alive’, reiterating King Lear's anger over the loss in the codes of belief. Without this energy he is the ‘half man’, a surrogate of the residues of energy in the society.

It is a conservative, not a radical, view of British history, and one that equates the end of empire with a loss of nerve and the passing of an essential idea of Englishness. Osborne's lingering nostalgia for empire is sharpened by a knowledge that it cannot return (Ward 2001: 4) It is not that Osborne, or even the most ardent empire royalist, wanted to see the British army marching back into India, but rather that the loss of authenticity, of the sense that personal fulfillment and historical mission are as one, is mourned. As is so often the case, the imagery of empire cloaks an anxiety about Britain itself (Nandi 1999: 391).

Look Back in Anger was successful – and significant – largely because it seemed to represent a social and historical experience that was distinctively of the mid-fifties; it was undisputedly contemporary, marking the separation of ‘then’ (the domination of the pre-war symbolism of church and monarchy, the austerity of the postwar years) from ‘now’ (the sensibility of a newly engaged mid-fifties Britain). It also occurred in a year that delivered a series of shocks to British self-confidence and complacency, both at home and abroad, notably the Suez fiasco, in which British imperial hubris was exposed by the reality of US power, and the Soviet invasion of Hungary. Almost immediately the play was rapidly co-opted for the political and cultural left. Tynan's influential review of the first production in the left-leaning Observer constructed Jimmy Porter as a liberal hero, exhibiting ‘qualities one had despaired of ever seeing on the stage – the drift towards anarchy, the instinctive leftishness, the automatic rejection of “official” attitudes’ (Tynan 1984: 178).

The commercial success of Osborne's play had one important effect: it encouraged writers who might have thought of a career in film or television to try their hand at drama. Yet the underlying lesson in *Look Back in Anger* proved true: the more things seemed to change, the more they remained the same. The very success of writers from the ‘lower’ classes afforded them places in an English establishment which had long enjoyed a reputation for assimilating clever scholarship boys and girls. So the upper middle class found it relatively easy to tame most of the Angry Young Men and to transform their bitterest attacks into pleasing entertainments.

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