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Editor-in-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor

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www.the-criterion.com
criterionejournal@gmail.com

Class-Consciousness and Conjugal Relations in John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1957)

Dr. Neelam Mor

Assistant Professor,
Dept of English and Foreign Languages,
M.D. University Rohtak

Abstract:

The present paper analyzes the impact of class-consciousness on conjugal life of Jimmy Porter, a working class graduate boy, and Alison Redfern, a well-bred upper class girl, in John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*. Their conjugal relationships are principally characterized and coloured by class consciousness. In a hurry, they get married on physical plane, disregarding class affiliations but soon they find each other highly incompatible. Acutely class conscious they fail to forge meaningful and abiding conjugal relations in absence of cardinal virtues such as trust and tolerance, response and responsibility and commitment and cordiality. Through the strained conjugal relationships the playwright highlights disvalues such as mistrust, intolerance, non-involvement, dishonesty, misunderstanding, irresponsiveness and irresponsibility which frustrate all the prospects of conjugal harmony between them. It also makes road into their social relations. The way the playwright treats the theme suggests that the virtue of broadmindedness and vast-heartedness can go a long way to forge meaningful and lasting conjugal relationships.

Keywords: class-consciousness, conjugal disharmony, broadmindedness and cardinal virtues

It is generally suggested that Britain is essentially a class-conscious society where the upper classes are considerably preoccupied with the view of social position, the language and manners. It is sensitivity of people to gradations of prestige, the ritual and etiquette of interpersonal relationships within and across the lines that divide the population in form of social hierarchy. British literature throughout the Victorian period in particular and the twentieth century in general is a reflection of this manifestation of British society. The class-consciousness or social hierarchy has continued to plague the British society through the turbulent years and is still a phenomenon to reckon with. Alan Carter aptly observes, "In Britain they have inherited a society riddled from top to bottom with class barriers and petty snobberies, an establishment still powerfully entrenched, and a royal family still regarded as a British status symbol long after the rest of the world had got rid of even laughing at our pretensions"(20). In the Post-War Britain, the successive governments initiated a horde of social measures to create a just and egalitarian society, but class continued to be principal feature of the British society. John Osborne responded to this social malaise and dramatized it faithfully and artistically in his plays. He neither condemns the upper class nor glorifies the working class, but places both the classes in a critical perspective, highlighting their virtues and weaknesses.

In *Look Back in Anger*, Osborne dramatizes how acute class consciousness makes roads into the conjugal relationships between the spouses from the diametrically different social strata of British society. Jimmy Porter, a graduate from the working class, and Alison Redfern, a well-bred and educated girl from the upper class, get married, anticipating the chances of realization

of their respective needs in each other. It is assumed that the marriage is a part of Jimmy's attempt to climb up the ladder of social hierarchy. On the other hand, Alison perceives the potent prospects of a true companionship in Jimmy, as she feels lonely and alienated in her own family where the brother is "busy getting himself into parliament," (LBA 143) and the father is "remote and rather irritable" (LBA 45). The love between Jimmy and Alison is understood to be a version of the Medieval Romance in which Jimmy plays the role of "a knight in shining armour" (LBA 45) to unshackle his woman love from "the confinement of eight bed-roomed castle" (LBA 51). They get married in a hurry despite strong opposition from Alison's the parents.

The marriage creates a storm in the social circle of Alison. Acutely conscious of their social supremacy, the upper class people do just about "everything they could think of to stop" (LBA 45) the marriage, considering it as an act of molestation on the modesty of their class superiority. Jimmy laments, "There is no limit to what the middle-aged Mummy will do in the holy crusade against ruffians like me...she wouldn't hesitate to cheat, lie, bully and blackmail" (LBA 52). Mrs. Redfern's hatred of Jimmy is not a specific one, but it is an extension of apathetic and arrogant attitude of the upper classes to the lower ones, which is considerably discernible in the party where Alison and Jimmy meet before the marriage, "The men there all looked as though they distrusted him, as for the women, they were all intent on showing their contempt for this rather old creature" (LBA 45). The antagonistic attitude of "Dame Alison's mob," (LBA 46) especially of Mrs. Redfern deepens Jimmy's class-consciousness.

As the marriage takes place hastily in the Church, they do not get "much opportunity" (LBA 30) to understand each other in totality. The unrecognized aspect of the marriage is that they are so much engrossed in their respective concerns that they fail to identify the wide cultural gulf. They live happily for a few months, but very soon the cultural differences embedded in their psyches come to the surface as they confront the harsh realities of day-to-day life. Jimmy earns a little money by running a sweet stall on a footpath and Alison is deprived of her money in the bank account by her mother. With this, they are left with little money to have "a little celebration" (LBA 43). With no house to live in, they stay in the house of Jimmy's working-class friend, Hugh Tanner. In the new house, Alison feels humiliated and suffocated because of the unseemly and unruly behaviour of Mr. Tanner. Alison tells Helena: "... I couldn't believe that two people, two educated people could be so savage, and so--so uncompromising....They both come to regard me as a sort of hostage from those sections of society they had declared war on" (LBA 43). Now Alison comes to realize the sordid aspect of her choice of the marriage, and regrets her decision, "And I've burnt my boats" (LBA 43). Hitherto accustomed to luxurious life Alison misses her class, "...for the first time in my life, I was cut from the kind of people I've always known, my family, my friends, everybody" (LBA 43).

Jimmy also becomes class-conscious; viewing that Alison adopts an indifferent attitude to his concerns and convictions; needs and necessities. Jimmy's problem is that he seeks an absolute loyalty from Alison in all respects, but she refuses to surrender her autonomy and selfhood to him. Alison tells Helena:

It's not easy to explain. It's what he would call a question of allegiances, and he expects you to be pretty literal about them. Not only about himself and all the things he believes in, his present and future, but his past as well. All the people he admires, and loves, and has loved. The

friends he used to know, people I've never known---and wouldn't have liked. His father, who died years ago. Even the other women he's loved. (LBA 42)

It is obvious that Jimmy seeks from Alison an unquestioning loyalty to his beliefs and conviction. Mary MacCarthy rightly observes that "solidarity, a working class virtue, is for him, the only virtue that is real; he exacts complete allegiance and fealty from anyone who enters his life" (153). But Alison refuses to offer in totality what Jimmy wants from her. Alison confides to Helena "I tried to. But still I can't bring myself to feel the way he does about things. I can't believe that he's right somehow" (LBA 42). The way Alison looks at Jimmy's demands pinches him constantly. All this decelerates their flight into the realm of romance, leaving them more conscious of the apparently unbridgeable cultural gulch between them.

The increasing class-consciousness makes Jimmy "predatory and suspicious" (LBA 36). Assuming that he is "being betrayed," Jimmy furiously rifles through her handbag "to see "if there is something of me somewhere, a reference to me" (LBA 36). To his shock, she is persistently clinging to her class ethos, "She gets letter...from her mother. Letters in which I'm not mentioned at all because my name is dirty word....She writes long letters back to Mummy and never mentions me at all, because just I'm a dirty word to her too" (LBA36). Alison too admits it to Helena, "I used to have to dodge downstairs for the post, so that he wouldn't see I was getting letters from home. Even then I had to hide them" (LBA 65). To Jimmy, the continued and concealed correspondence is no less than "conspiracy and betrayal" (LBA 42). All this makes Jimmy furious and hit back at Alison for her "obnoxious social origins" (Brown52). Martin Banham rightly comments that Jimmy's bitterness is cry "from the heart for recognition, and nothing more" (16). The day-to-day bickering sows the seeds of mental incompatibility between them with a bearing on the other aspects of their marital life.

Now Jimmy's anger turns into taunts and tirades against everybody and everything from the class of Alison. The large amount of his vicious comments is aimed at his mother-in-law who is still acting as a sentinel of the hierarchical social structure that he has tried to pull down by accepting Alison as wife. He wages a verbal war against her---the war of class structure and values, one fight like a "holy crusade" (LBA52). He uses an exceedingly filthy language against his mother-in-law, "She would bellow like a rhinoceros in labour... to make every male rhino for miles from turn white, and pledge him to celibacy" (LBA 52). Jimmy's verbal assault on the upper class and its ways and manners is intensified by the snobbish attitude of Mrs. Redfern. Jimmy's behaviour to the higher classes is now wrought by this acidic anger. The barrenness of their life turns into an arena of reciprocated bickering and brawling. The spouses wage an open war of "challenges and revenge" (LBA 67) against each other. Alison tells her father, "Well, for twenty years, I'd lived a happy, uncomplicated life, and suddenly, this---spiritual barbarian---throws down the gauntlet at me" (LBA 67). The verbal war between Jimmy and Mrs. Redfern put a corrosive impact on the marital relations between Jimmy and Alison. Patricia Meyer Spacks observes that "nothing is Osborne's play affirms the reality of any other sort of relationship between the sexes than one of challenges and revenge" (68).

All this introduces us with the conflict in the psyche of Jimmy between his aspiration to ascend the steps of social hierarchy and, at the same time, his wish to remain loyal to the working class. The way Jimmy is clinging to the lower classes informs us of his agonizing

awareness of his class of birth. Jimmy's sentimental attachment and Alison's snobbish attitude to Mrs. Tanner are evident in Alison's version to her father, "Oh---how can you describe her? Rather---ordinary. What Jimmy insists on calling working class....Jimmy and she were fond of each other" (LBA 64). Alison's unresponsive behaviour towards Mrs. Tanner speaks a lot of the indifferent and apathetic attitude of the upper classes. Jimmy seems to be too harsh and heartless to recognize and satisfy her psycho-sexual needs. On the other hand, Alison also seems to be too selfish and introverted to share his sorrows and sufferings. They are locked so much in their respective shells that they refuse to acknowledge and appreciate their individual concerns.

Alison has neither made sincere efforts to detach herself from the upper class nor has she developed any emotional involvement with him or his class. Alison's stubborn refusal to accompany Jimmy to London to see the dying Mrs. Tanner and her return to her parents leave him alone to suffer the emotional void created in him by the death of Mrs. Tanner. He pours out venom against her when he wishes an embryonic destruction in her, "... If you could have a child and it would die...if only I could watch you face that" (LBA 37). Such a cruel and contemptible verbal assault shocks Alison into silence, making her more insensitive and indifferent to him. Alison's irresponsible behaviour and Jimmy's corrosive outbursts make it impossible for them to utter such "easy things of endearment to each other: "Yes darling, I know just what you mean. I know what you're feeling" (LBA 28). Asha Kadyan aptly remarks, "The feelings of class-consciousness are so intensely fixed in the minds of Jimmy and Alison that it results in sexual incompatibility of the couple generating frustration and despair" (109). Alison's indifference and insensitivity to Jimmy's psycho-sexual needs is also responsible for the estrangement between them. A.E. Dyson aptly comments that Alison has "responded to physical love, but not offered it; listens to ideals, but withhold enthusiasm; submitted to the attraction of Jimmy as a knight, but clung obstinately to the security of well-bred indifference in the face of his onslaught" (29).

It is Alison's irresponsiveness that makes Jimmy more fidgety. He tries to draw her into conversation, but as usual she seems to be detached and reluctant. "She remains indifferent to both Jimmy's attacks and his pleas, for in being so, she is able to retain something of her earlier self which annoys and irritates Jimmy so much" (Carter 61). The more Alison displays aversion to Jimmy, the more strongly he asks her for response. The cultural cleavages cause emotional sterility and unresponsive in them to their mutual needs. In the absence of emotional harmony, sexual relations come to an abrupt end, breeding frustration and sense of loss, laying down the idea that emotional compatibility can go a long way to shape conjugal ties. Katherine J. worth comments on Jimmy' frustration and its effect on the marriage, "His irritation with the absurdities of the class-system does of course colour his whole view of life and enters into the frustration of marriage"(103-4). They do need reciprocal acceptance to establish a truly harmonious relationship.

Alison refuses to appreciate and share Jimmy's belief and conviction, maintaining her upper-class exclusiveness and indifference to the pains and privations of the lower classes or it may be that she perceives no substance in his anger. The more Jimmy punishes her, the more he thinks of his revenge on the "overfed, over-privileged" (LBA 66). The more Jimmy punishes her, the more he thinks of his revenge on the "overfed, over-privileged" (LBA66) people of Alison's class. She is regarded by Jimmy as "hostage" (LBA 43) from a class on which he has declared a war.

In all their marital bickering and brawling, Jimmy's bitterness is aimed at the ruling class of British society. He finds Alison as an easy target of his anger and verbal assaults. Their day-to-day verbal skirmishes create the domestic environment tense and tiresome beyond endurance, leaving Cliff in a bitter mood. Cliff laments, "I cannot go on watching you two tearing the insides out of each other. It looks pretty ugly sometimes" (LBA28). The play dramatizes the breakdown of marital relationships between an immensely resentful young graduate from working class and passively resilient young woman from the upper-class. It is evident that the temperamental incompatibility between them leads the sexual incompatibility and then breakdown of conjugal relations.

Jimmy's hatred to the upper classes does not mean that he hates Alison. He wants to see her happy, but he is without adequate means to relieve her of the continuous drudgery at the ironing board, "There's hardly a moment when I'm not watching and watching you...I still cannot stop my sweat breaking out when I see you doing---something as ordinary as leaning over the ironing board" (LBA 33). He is in deep love with her and expects her to love him in the same way, but she does not respond to his love in the desired way, as she is still clinging, more and less, to her own class, "Trouble is---Trouble is get used to people. Even their trivialities become indispensable to you" (LBA33). She continues to give more importance even on the trivialities of the upper classes than the urgent and genuine needs of Jimmy. She maintains a certain distance from Jimmy and his class, but at the same time, she also wishes to have him, "I shall always have a deep, loving need of you" (LBA72). She ends up staying with both her husband and her parents, committed to nobody or no class. Colonel Redfern rebukes her for the stance, "You like to sit on the fence because it is comfortable and more peaceful" (LBA 66).

Alison gives a warm welcome to Helena. With the arrival of Helena "everything seems very different" (LBA 40) to her, but for Jimmy, she is one of his "natural enemies" (LBA 35). Jimmy tries to draw attention of Alison, "Oh, my dear wife, you've got so much to learn. I only hope you learn it one day" (LBA 37). Alison goes back to her parents and leaves Jimmy alone to suffer the emotional shock that he receives from the death of Mrs. Tanner. Now Jimmy turns to Helena and shares bed with her with a view to seek emotional support, but he fails to get any lasting relief, as she also maintains a certain distance from his genuine needs. She pretends to be in love with him, but she abhors sharing his woes: "I do love you, Jimmy, I shall never love anyone as I have loved you. But I can't take part in all this suffering" (LBA 93).

Now Jimmy comes to realize that emotional harmony is much more important than temperamental one. Alison, having suffered a personal loss in form of miscarriage, can be presumed to have realized her own defects, and to have returned with the intention of a deeper commitment to Jimmy's values. Alison admits to Jimmy, "It doesn't matter! I was wrong! I don't want to be neutral" (LBA 95). It is their common loss that reunites them. They revert to their private phantasy world of the bears and squirrels to admit that they are in need of constant support. The squirrel will help maintain the bear's furs and claws just as the bear will look out for his "none too bright" (LBA 96) squirrel. Now the man who has so vehemently derided the prevalent timidity of mind acknowledges that he and his wife are both "very timid little animals" afraid of the "cruel steel traps that lie everywhere around" (LBA 96). The way they express their emotions indicates the recognition of their mutual needs. He calls her "poor squirrel" and she calls him "poor bears!" (LBA96).

The game suggests that reconciliation between them is possible only when they commit to one another through thick and thin, transcending all the barriers of class and conventions. It puts forth the view that lack of trust, tolerance and understanding substantially owes to marital disharmony between them. It suggests that the virtues of love, trust, tolerance and understanding between the spouses from the different cultural backgrounds can go a long way to shape conjugal ties because without temperamental compatibility, sexual compatibility does not last long. Thus the play clearly and unequivocally presents Osborne's concerns and emphasis on the values of fidelity, honesty, mutual understanding, sincerity and the virtues of sacrifice and allegiance for martial happiness.

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