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The 'Hollow Men' of Osborn's Existential Heroes: A Critical Examination of the Angst Ridden Characters in John Osborn's *Look Back in Anger*

Abhik Maiti

University of Calcutta.

Abstract:

At the centre of the existential angst, dominating the great movements of life, there lays an essential absurdity. England in the aftermath of the two wars inherited this absurdity that upheld the human predicament in a world where “*nobody thinks, nobody cares. No beliefs, no convictions and no enthusiasm.*” Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* diagnoses humanity's plight as purposeless in an existence out of harmony with its surroundings. This irrationality and pointlessness of experience is transferred to the stage where by all semblance of logical construction and all intellectually viable argument is abundant. In the same strain, developed the Angry Plays of the Theatre of the Absurd. Beckett, Adamor and Pinter with the difference of attempting to seek value in a valueless world, to make sense out of what appears as senseless and fragmented action as the words of Amis, Waterhouse and Braine show. “*In the depth of winter, I finally learnt that within me lay an invincible summer*” These words of Albert Camus perfectly befits John Osborne who, after struggling a lot in the depths of his creativity, gave birth to Jimmy Porter, the protagonist of his most successful play, *Look Back in Anger*. All the other characters along with Jimmy languish in the self-imposed prison of their own design and burn in the purgatory fire called life. Camus says that “*for Jimmy it's neither, but a looking back in anger. He cannot recover and he does know the way to suicide; so he stays on his routined existence trying to create a why in the others.*”

Keywords: angry young man, angst, theatre of the absurd, kitchen-sink drama,

INTRODUCTION

Look Back in Anger (1956) is by far the most famous of John Osborne's plays. It was the foundational work of the genre for which the term “Kitchen-sink drama” was coined. The gritty realism of its setting represented a revolution in the British theatre, one which gave to the play when it was first produced a political and culture significance which it is hard to comprehend nearly 50 years later. The play was perceived as giving voice to a frustrated and politically and culturally disenfranchised constituency – the lower middle-class, first-generation graduates whose literary heroes, including Osborne, became known as the Angry Young Men.

Jimmy porter exclaims “*Oh heavens how I long for a little ordinary human enthusiasm just enthusiasm that's all. I want to hear a warm, thrilling voice cry out I Hallelujah! Hallelujah! I'm alive!*” Jimmy here voices the longing of his creator John Osborne, who in *They call it Cricket*, had written- “*I want to make people feel to give them lessons in feeling.*” *Look Back in Anger* is about the feelings of fury of the young post war generation that felt itself betrayed, sold out and ruined and in a stark contrast to the older

generation who are like “*sturdy old plants left over from the Edwardian wilderness that cant understand why the sun isn’t shining anymore*”, of women who seek identity in age old practices and relations like marriage, only to be “*left gasping for a little peace.*”, of people who cannot save their love from the “*cruel steel traps*” of society, of men who knows the inadequacy of the world to respond and choose to look on. Look Back in Anger is about the recognition of life as a “*tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury signifying nothing*” and looking back in anger on it.

Jimmy Porter carries the burden of an agony of consciousness of the world, a consciousness of deprivation of the emotional separation between what is and once was. As a post war individual, born in the void between the two world wars, his sensitivity of the world around him has paradoxically taken from him the softness of human touch. He is so desperately in love with life that he cannot believe that life can be this ordinary. He is the emerging angry man who understands and is therefore weary, whose contemplation makes him bitter. Camus in The Myth of Sisyphus had written, “*It happens that the stage sets collapse. Rising tram, four hours of office or factory, meal, tram, four hours of work, meal, sleep and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, according to the same rhythm. This path is easily followed most of the time, but one day the why arises*”. Jimmy Porter embodies the “*why*” and at times almost becomes the “*why*” by his very presence on the stage

JIMMY PORTER, THE OSBORNIAN PRUFROCK

“We are the Hollow Men

We are the stuffed men

Leaning together

Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!

Our dried voices: when

We whisper together

Are quiet and meaningless.”

-The Hollow Men, T.S. Eliot.

The harsh and miserable condition imposed by the wars on England’s society, had generated a sense of shared destiny. Refusing to be broken by the bitter disillusionment, emerges a young rebel hero, Jimmy Porter who came to represent an entire generation of angry young men and eventually became Osborn’s mouthpiece. The attitude of the Angry Young Men also occur in Kingsley Amis’s Lucky Jim, Tennessee William’s A Street Car Named Desire, John Waine’s Hurry on Down along with Osborne’s where the hero is presented as an “*outsider*”, constantly at odds with society, but Osborne’s Jimmy Porter does not confine to these historical context only- his constant struggle with himself and the people around him makes him a personification of every sensitive individuals of all times.

Alan Carter says, “*It seems that Osborn had ripped out an inner part of himself and tossed it bleeding onto the stage.*” And it may be due to this that a lot of autobiographical references may be fetched out from his work. Compared to theatrical heroes such as tight lipped Freddy, T.S Eliot’s spiritually challenged Lord Mackency, Jimmy is a rebel who is indifferent, solitary, In self- inflicted exile from the world, drawing strength from his own weakness and joy from his misery. All he wants is to break away from the routined existence, from the sameness of life and shout out in a miserable ecstasy “*I want to hear a warm thrilling voice cry out Hallelujah! Hallelujah! I am alive... let us pretend we are human beings and that we are actually alive*”

As Jimmy’s sustenance is his suffering, we encounter a rare, unprotected and lonely Porter whose anger has roots in early deprivation. Jimmy perceives the world as a cold, unsafe and insecure place, which was later developed in Beckett’s play, Endgame where all the characters fear that there is no place of safety; “*Outside of here, it is death*”

While Osborn claimed that his play was not a vehicle for message, it is clear that Jimmy is the message. What the audience take away from the play, is not its literal allusion, but the image of Jimmy, whether ranting a reading, playing the fool or stricken with pain. Though Jimmy desires a dream world, enacted through the bear and squirrel game, it is almost always invariably battered by reality. But Jimmy still nourishes a hope for revival, an optimist in a disillusioned world. There is a lack of coherent thinking and purpose in Jimmy and his failure to validate, are specific cause becomes the strength of the play as it empowers the readers or the audiences to see their own directions and develop their own understanding of social cause and social change. Thus a character like Jimmy echoes the words of Camus with a sigh, “*Well, the tragedy is over, the failure is complete. I turn my head and go away. I took my share in the fight for the impossible.*”

The women in Jimmy’s life symbolise the very deadness that Jimmy protests against and yet his basic alienation from the world prompts a longing in him for the women he loves to join him in his personal hell- sometimes it is Alison, later Helena or quiet early, the much elder Madeline. Like so many of Steinberg’s characters, Jimmy desires for more than he ever hoped to get from his women. Alison, in her conversation with Helena, enlightens on this, “*A kind of a cross between a mother and a Greek courtesan, a henchwoman, a mixture of Cleopatra and Boswell.*” The ambivalence of his demands arise from a basic insecurity of a man who fears the loss of all emotions in life that he so desperately desires to live. Jimmy’s troubled childhood had thoroughly sensitised him to the inadequacy of his mother’s position. Thus, Jimmy’s relation with women is perhaps the most appropriate indication of his personality: it’s a strange mingling of sensitivity and cruelty, insight and fullness, idealism and cynicism. His relation with women is often dependent on this understanding of his emotional vulnerability as it is dependent on his sense of sincerity towards them. As Jimmy moves from one woman to another, his helplessness is only reiterated as he searches in the other sex, his seed of identity.

ALISON AND THE MOTHER SURROGATES

John Osborn, when asked about his motivation to write "Look Back in Anger" had replied "*Why does one wish to breathe hope for laughter or fall in love?*" This is what Jimmy Porter voices out in the play. Both Alison and Helena seem to understand his desperate plea, but their loyalty to conventions prevent them from responding to his desired level of human energy, escaping, as Jimmy indicts, from the "*pains of being alive*". His attitude towards women, specially those belonging to the economically antagonistic class, contains in it a deep resentment.

At the age of ten, he knew to be "*angry and helpless*", frustrated and bewildered at his mother's condescending behaviour towards his ailing father. It is this lack of motherly care that he had suffered in his early life that made him search for the "*mother surrogate*"- his affection for Hugh's mother or his affair with Madeline, ten years older than him. The class of Alison for Jimmy is that of a "*sleeping beauty*" whose soul is "*cut right off from the problems of the twentieth century altogether.*" Even if he is a "lost cause", he wants Alison to join him in his platform of pains. What pains Jimmy most is Alison's awareness of his complaints and yet her insensitive choice of not responding to them. She can speak Jimmy's language as her conversation with Helena confirm: "*Its what he would call a question of allegiance ... All the people he admires and loves and has loved.*" Yet, she could never strive enough to overcome this class consciousness and achieve this allegiance towards Jimmy and soothe his verbal tirades. Alison has responded to physical love but not offered it, listened to ideals but withheld enthusiasm, submitted to his chivalrous attraction but clung obstinately to the security of well-bred indifference. The most telling criticism of her attitude towards the relationship is made by Redfern: "*you like to sit on the fence because it's comfortable and more peaceful.*" This is what Jimmy resents for she had never given herself to her husband with the honesty, which she knew he demanded and needed. Look Back in Anger conveys the message through Jimmy's trumpet protest; his boredom becomes an instrument on which he plays variations but the sound does not reach Alison blanketed in the "*White-woman's burden*"

This honesty is what we may say, marks Jimmy's relationship with Helena. Jimmy's relationship with Helena is essentially erotic, but does offer a prompt and vibrant participation that Jimmy regretted in his relationship with Alison. Infact, Helena turns out to be a revelation, inspiring Jimmy to clarify his presence, helping him to forget the past and dwell in the existing purpose of the present. Helena is one character with whom Jimmy is perhaps completely at home, but her class loyalty takes her away from an emotion of true worth. His relation with women is often dependent on their understanding of his emotional vulnerability, as it is dependent on his sense of sincerity towards them.

As Jimmy's life gets defined by yet another departure (of Alison), he breaks under the strain of having to stand in his shadow and confront Alison's suffering. But he still complains with child-like sensitivity, that Alison had failed to send flowers to the funeral of Mrs Tanner. But his knowledge of this "*mocking tender irony*" of life makes him realise that there is no point in reality to retreat. He feels tender towards Alison for her loss and he recognises the irony in the togetherness that would take them nowhere. For the magic world of the bear and

squirrel is now surrounded by “*cruel steel traps*”; the escape is nothing but a temporary whimsy. Whether Jimmy and Alison emerge victorious in their relationship is ambiguous but along with Osborne, we can hope that a resurrection from this emotional ruin will occur.

CLIFF’S COMPROMISED EXISTANCE

With his sad natural intelligence of the self-taught Cliff is a Prufrock who seems to have gone through Look Back In Anger and knows of the cruel steel traps which awaits at the end whose knowledge of the world and of life has taught him how futile it is to “*disturb the universe*” with the clarion call of your trumpet and who chooses to look on chooses to be a hollow man who behaves as the wind behaves and who participates in the mechanical movement round the prickly pear at five o’clock in the morning.

Man is many selves a many shades many emotions and varied responses mainly a functional character a natural counterpoint to Jimmy against whom Jimmy’s distinction is established in whose resignation is the direction of Jimmy’s anger But Cliff is also the insecure parasite who exists in the communicational gap between his friend and his wife he is the buffer between Jimmy and Alison who does not allow them to fly too far apart he is the one who schemes and the one who he is a true friend to Jimmy one who understands him but embodies the of his anger he is a man who truly loves both Jimmy and Anson but knows that the one only a compromised present and no future to invest true emotions in and nothing.

The first instinct of every human being is the desire to preserve himself. Life has definitely been cruel to Cliff by making him a parasite on to life, for, if life is mundane, at least its boredom is familiar. Cliff is too emotional, too caring, too humane to live alone, and life has made him “*easy and relaxed, almost to lethargy*”, robbed him of the effort to invest his feelings in a relationship beyond friendship, a bond which brings responsibilities, requires emotional as well as economic support Cliff finds company in Jimmy and Alison, the gap between them being just big enough for him to fit in comfortably.

Jimmy’s impression on Alison is only skin-deep. She only wears the “*cherry-red shirt*” of his passion and he can only burn her arm, as the ironing board collapses. It is to Cliff that Alison turns for support and comfort as Cliff ‘nods to’ Jimmy and the latter leaves the room. If Alison and Jimmy can cover the distance between them, are able to reach out to each other, Cliff’s presence in the household automatically becomes a superfluity as it is in the presence of a Helena, who doesn’t need Cliff to establish contact with Jimmy. Alternatively, if they move too far apart, if Jimmy is released of the responsibility of making a home for Alison and returns to his ‘jazz band’, his role of the ‘barbarian invader’ of the upper-classes, Cliff will be left with no home, no family. So acute is his need to remain in between these people, so insecure is he of losing them, that he is forever vigilant that the situation never gets out of hand. As Jimmy pursues Alison with his need of enthusiasm. Cliff intrudes with his desire to know what Priestly had said. And when Alison, attaches no value to Jimmy’s relation with Madeline, “*when he was fourteen or was it thirteen,*” Cliff lightens the situation as he teases Jimmy of being a “*proper little Marchbanks*” Forever nervous of an outburst. Cliff lives on the edge, as he tries to tune in the emotions and responses of Alison and Jimmy to the rhythm which will require him to be present in the orchestra of their life,

reminding Jimmy that the concert of Vaughan Williams had started and offers to 'put it on' as Jimmy calls Alison a "sycophantic, phlegmatic and pusillanimous" or "cheerfully grimacing" asks Jimmy to 'stop it' as he launches on an attack on women.

The heart and the mind are forever at variances with each other. Cliff's mind tells him that it is essential for him that Jimmy and Alison should not be very close to each other. But he genuinely loves them, he inhabits along with Jimmy and Alison not only their one room flat, but their world of pains, the pains of misunderstanding, the pains of emotional separation, the pains of not being able to trust, depend on the person who you had thought will be your companion throughout your journey of life. Every time Jimmy watches Alison, his foot beginning to twitch dangerously. Cliff shifts restlessly in his chair and wonders 'how much longer' he can go on watching those two "*tearing the insides out of each other*".

Cliff and Jimmy "*think the same about a lot of thing*", because they are 'alike in some ways'. Cliff understands the languages of Jimmy's trumpet, and Jimmy knows that, as he retorts. Cliff likes it 'alright', yet Cliff asks him to "*stuff it away somewhere*" because he knows the inadequacy of the world to respond. Jimmy thinks brawling is the only thing left that he is 'any good at' and so why shouldn't he brawl. But Cliff knows "*it won't do any good*", he knows that Jimmy is wasting his emotions, that the world will not understand him and perhaps even has a sense of anger and reserve about displaying emotions to an unsympathetic world. But Cliff cannot move beyond an occasional restraint and "*sit down helplessly*" when freed with the raw pains of Jimmy's anger. The depth of his affection for Jimmy is revealed as he tries to keep Alison from going and once she has left, goes out himself.

Cliff is 'half a dozen Helenas', but he has no security in life. He has been 'loyal generous and a good friend', yet Jimmy is 'quite prepared to see' him go. If life is just and fair, its justness is in giving reason to 'look back in anger' at their lives. Some express their anger, in others it is suppressed. And Cliff's suppressed angst will be that life has made him a disappointingly light-weight character. He has been given sensitivity, but life had shown him its futility too soon and taken from him the desire to strive. He loves Alison, but his realization of being common as dirt, stops him from proposing an alternative existence. It does pain him to carry always the mask of good humour, 'he is bound to feel tired at times, of chiming in with Jimmy's varying moods but knows that he will be 'worse' on his own and so continues to boil with Jimmy in the cauldron of his passion.

Cliff acts as a no-man's-land between Jimmy and Alison when Jimmy suffers the breakdown of all communication with his wife and rants and raves and is ravaged by Alison's refusal to react and his anguished accuse that "*Old porter talks and everyone turns over and goes to sleep*" that it is often up to Cliff who provides the comic relief in the play curbs the tension and soothes Jimmy's nerves either with his banters his mock quarrels or comforting him with the promise of a change from the smoky 'one-room' with "*come on now, be a good boy I'll take us all out and we'll have a drink.*" Jimmy is in a continuous search; an attempt to touch some chord in Alison which will result in her playing accompaniment to his discordant melody of emotions and in his quest, brings every aspect of Alison: her self her upbringing, her friends and her family under Jimmy's verbal tirade as he waits for her to

break or for her to come up with a response which he behaves is an inevitable human responsibility. But when his attacks go too far when Cliff fears she will react but her response will be a rift between her and Jimmy- a distance which even Cliff won't be able to bridge; he hastens to soothe her- *"Don't take any notice of him being offensive. And it's so easy for him"*

"Well shall we dance?" Cliff fools as he pushes Jimmy round the floor and holds him like vice refusing to let him go until he has apologized for being nasty to everyone. Cliff's life is a theatre of the absurd and he gives in with grim humour, as he does his mouse dance and squeaks *"Eek Eek. I'm a mouse"* and watches life make him a "nobody" dependent on his friend, busy controlling his anger and grabbing a little relief when Jimmy is in the proper mood.

Alison's news of being pregnant comes as a sudden threat to Cliff as he takes a few moments to recover before admitting his surprise. The child is a bond between Jimmy and Alison and Cliff somewhere may be afraid that it may give them a common interest to share and he may have to redefine his stance in the household or worse, may have been left with no role to play in it. And somewhere, he may seem to be jealous too, to learn of this degree of physical intimacy between Jimmy and Alison. It is quite natural for Cliff to be sexually starved and Jimmy's relation with Alison can only heighten his deprivation when he playfully accuses Jimmy of being a *"sexual maniac"*. It seems to be more a statement on his own hunger. Cliff *"exacts love"* and shows *"demonstrations of it at least"*, trying to satisfy himself with holding Alison's hands or hugging and kissing her. Deep down perhaps, Cliff loves Alison. He never expresses it but he is somewhat found out when he reassures Alison of being *"too young and too lovely"* to *"start growing up"* and admits of getting *"fond of people"*. But in spite of his jealousy and insecurity, Cliff is a true friend, urging Alison to tell Jimmy about the baby, and adds, *"After all, he does love you. You don't need me to tell you that"*

Cliff is 'not the District Commissioner', yet he is aware of his buffer's role, knows that if he had not been there, *"everything would have been over between these two long ago."* His class is used to brawling and excitement, at times he even enjoys being in the thick of it. But whether it is still and peaceful, no incidents with all of them 'reasonably happy', or a *"very narrow strip of plain hell"*, Cliff sits through all of it with his 'pity' for 'all of us', pity for himself, for Jimmy, for Alison, for Helena, for the playwright and for all of us, for inhabiting the charade the illusions of life, pity because he recognizes life to be a curse on all of us, a judgement of doom passed from the moment we are born, and as he waits for his sentence to pass, we release the futility of our life and pray for strength to carry on pray,

"Teach us to care and not to care"

Teach us to sit still."

CONCLUSION

"I am no prophet-and here is no great matter.

I have seen the greatness of my movement flicker"

As in Eliot's voice, in Jimmy's verbal tirade one may hear the loss of a past grandeur whose "Greatness has flickered" and survives only as a mere consciousness of a glorious history. This consciousness of the "high noon" of the Victorian and Edwardian era of Jimmy receives a bitter criticism by Sharon Pillai in the essay "...Coz the Future is a Bitch", a postmodern approach to the text: "Even if one were to overlook the peevish character of his truculence, what is impossible to overlook, is the actual bloody exploitative, mercenary and paracytic nature of the past that he (Jimmy) nostalgically idealises. Jimmy Porter nowhere seems to realise the devastating consequences of the colonial enterprise for large sections of the global population"

Algelie Multani in her essay "Jimmy Porter ko Gussa Kyun Aata Hyay?" comments, "We had the Indian version of the angry young man in the various personae played by Amitabh Bacchan two decades ago." However "In more recent times, when MTV selects the Business tycoon Anil Ambani as the youth icon, the angry young man has stopped being angry." The problems of the society are so overwhelming that "It is not Jimmy Porter that we want to be; but a Harry Potter with a magic wand"

The serious side of Cliff's nature is not lingered upon in the play. He might have been made to represent the older working class attempt at self-improvement. The play demands that all characters will pre-dominantly be there as objects of Jimmy's rage. Carrying within, the burden of his pain, his unexpressed desire, his unknown defeat. Cliff is lost somewhere in the current of the play in changing similarities of life. What stays at the end, is the disturbing cadence of Jimmy's trumpet, but few would remember or have heard at all, the low, repeating strains of the second fiddle Cliff, as he marked the rhythm of Jimmy's anger.

At the end of the play, Jimmy is striped even from the one thing that kept him going- his anger. He may say "They all want to escape from the pain of being alive. And most of all, from love" but he is trapped in the realisation of Helena's love and responsibility for his wife who had suffered the loss of heir child. Helena prevents her life from being a mocking tender irony" for that is what her life with Jimmy would have become had she stayed on with him even after Alison's return. Her future however becomes the remembrance of a past relationship, a looking back in anger on a society which respects an indifferent wife more than a loving mistress, or life with its chance meetings, its relations which become sapped of all emotions and emotions which do not find sanction in a relation.

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