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## Tragic Vision Represented in the Plays of John Osborne

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### Abstract:

John James Osborne, an English playwright, ex-journalist, screenwriter and actor, known for his excoriating prose and intense critical stance towards established social and political norms was born on 12<sup>th</sup> December, 1929 in Fulham, London. Osborne's tragic vision arises out of perception of the problems of existence in the face of nothingness. Osborne's heroes live in the world of nothingness which is resulted due to the prevailing customs and traditions and other evil forces, cause a rebellion against them. A full length study of Osborne's tragic vision of life, that emerges out of his tragedies would not only add to the greater appreciation of Osborne but also help to assess his achievement and assign the rightful place to Osborne in the history of Modern British Drama. Osborne's artistic vision seems to have been conditioned and shaped by two important forces -those are heredity and environment on one side and his own personal experiences on the other. While trying to trace the origin of the tragic impulses in Osborne, a researcher has to study these two inevitably.

**Keywords: John Osborne's Tragic Vision, Human Psyche, Tragic Vision of Life, A strong Impulse, Deep-seated Idealism, Sense of Isolation, Artistic Vision.**

John Osborne's contribution to British Theatre may begin by paying special attention to the effect evoked by his play "Look Back in Anger" on its inaugural performance. So many accounts were given by a number of critics about the unarguable significance of the drama because the production of this play has become a turning point in the theatre of post-war Britain. Kenneth Tynan gives a most fitting description: 'It all came to a head on a May evening in 1956 at the Royal Court theatre in Sloane Square'.<sup>(1)</sup>

Indeed wherever "Look Back in Anger" may ultimately stand in twentieth-century British Drama, the play had most successfully expressed the mood of its time, the mood of the 'angry young man'.

There is no denying that the compatriots of Osborne also did give vent to the anger of their generation. For that matter, though unfortunately, Osborne was even mistakenly associated with the group of fellow writers like - Amis, Dennis, Wain, Wilson, under the label of "Angry

young men". But none of those, except Osborne could voice the very language of the anger of 50's and 60's so effectively on the stage. The remark of Alan Carter in this regard is quite convincing: 'Not only were there discrepancies of age and status within the group, there were more important divergences of literary content'.<sup>(2)</sup> Jim Dixon of "Lucky Jim" written by Kingsley Amis has the cynicism as Jimmy but he has none of Jimmy's 'fire in the belly' and is unconcerned with those around him. Taylor too supports the same view by saying that Amis' "Lucky Jim" (1954) and John Wain's "Hurry on Down" (1953) have no deliberate intent, no serious programme. 'If there are indeed no good causes left, they (the heroes) are cheerfully reconciled to a life without causes'.<sup>(3)</sup> But the heroes of Osborne primarily aim to achieve "true existence", instead of letting their existence "to be a thoughtless accident'. They do risk all sorts of retaliation and do dare to be their own unique selves.

All critics agreed with the above view. Alan Carter and Simon Trussler have made penetrating studies of Osborne's dramas, from this point of view, but no specific study has been made regarding the 'thematic' of his tragedies, and the enlightening relationship between his plays and his tragic vision of life. A full length study of Osborne's tragic vision of life, that emerges out of his tragedies would not only add to the greater appreciation of Osborne but also help to assess his achievement and assign the rightful place to Osborne in the history of Modern British Drama. The words of Osborne himself provide a key to the general theme of all his plays:

Drama rests on the dynamic that is created between characters on the stage. It must be concrete and it must be expressed, even if it is only in silence or a gesture of despair. The theatre is not a schoolroom, nor is it, as many people seem to think, a place where 'discussion' takes place, where ideas are apparently formally examined in the manner of a solitary show-off in an intellectual magazine. It is a place where people spend much of their time responding nakedly - of failing - to the burden of trying to live, and preparing to die.<sup>(4)</sup>

In fact the last words of the above passage, 'preparing to die' signify what all the dramatist has to present on the stage, 'his tragic view of the contemporary life.' The years of 50's and 60's are characterized as highly sad and tragic by many thinkers. And it has also been emphasized that John Osborne was the most authentic spokesman of his age. Osborne astonished and fascinated his audience by his feeling for the contemporary scene, his understanding of the mores of post-war youth and by his command of contemporary idiom. The words of Jimmy are revealing:

Jimmy: I may write a book about us all. It'll be here. Written in flames a mile high. And it won't be recollected in tranquility either, picking daffodils with Auntie Wordsworth. It'll be recollected in fire, and blood. My blood.<sup>(5)</sup>

The above lines refer to the human suffering as was witnessed in Cyprus and the Suez and also in England. Osborne turned the mood of the time into living forms on the stage. Many people in the audience were able not only to recognize their own fears, but to hear their own words and voices also.

Osborne lived the tragedy he wrote. While trying to appreciate and evaluate Osborne's plays it becomes inevitable to consider Osborne's biography, especially his childhood and adolescence in detail. The poor and miserable conditions in which he led his earlier years appear to have a telling effect on his creative vision. Lack of acquiring adequate education, absence of a loving and comfortable home, his tense relations with his parents, his disappointment in life, inability to secure a stable livelihood may have forced to shape his cynical and pessimistic attitude towards life. Ultimately when he struck upon the profession of writing or livelihood, it appears plausible that he utilized the medium to give vent to his anger and despair. An in-depth study of this part may be essential in probing deeper into his creative spirit.

Now the question remains, whether Osborne is suggesting new values of revaluation. It would be of course easy to show that virtues praised by him are all to be found in previous writers. In that sense, however, it would be altogether questionable whether there is novelty in the gamut of his ideas. Hence we should change our question and ask not whether his wine was new, but whether it was his own conception of the 'revaluation' to pour us new wine. The answer is no.

In the present society all the values are devalued and hence Osborne turns nihilistic. The goal is lacking, the answer is lacking to our WHY? Values serve as means for our ends, but we are not able to realize our goals. Why? It is at this point that we come to grips with the worst obstacles that come under our way, those are, the totalitarian State and Church, and these two bear the brunt of Osborne's attack. This too is an announcement by 'drums and trumpets' of motif that remains characteristic of all his plays.

The reason why most men fail to heed the voice of their true self is twofold: fear and selfishness. Both keep man from heeding the call to achieve culture, for culture itself means remaining to one's nature and true nature. Those men afraid do not risk social retaliation and do not dare to risk their own unique selves; and those who are selfish and hypocrite adjust themselves with State for want of power and in order to achieve their own ends. It is for these reasons that the State becomes the devil in Osborne's work. It intimidates man into conformity and thus tempts and coerces him to betray his proper destiny. So also, the Church is attacked for similar reasons. Osborne emphasizes in his "Luther" that the kingdom of God is in the hearts of men, and he accuses Christianity of having betrayed this fundamental insight from the beginning whether by transferring the kingdom into 'another' world thus depreciating this life, or by becoming political and seeking salvation through organizations, cults, sacraments or priests. He will not put his faith either in Church or in a political party or programme, for Osborne believes

that the question of salvation is a question for the individual himself. It is a question 'for the single one'. Thus the State and Church become the arch enemies of self-realization and single one's remaking of his own nature. Further man's destiny is placed entirely in the hands of the despotic State. As we live in the period of atom-bomb and atomic chaos, everything on this earth is determined by the crudest and the most evil forces. The result is ultimate anarchy and chaos. Consequently all social structures will breakdown and men will seek only to rob and exploit one another. In fact modern man's present position is no way different from that of the primitive men, who also far from enjoying freedom lived in constant fear of savage animals, of his barbarian enemies, of his gods and even of his own dreams. Besides the man-made institutions which were supposed to counter attack those unknown forces had added to the miseries of an already troubled humanity. All this time the entire world is reeling under the terrible impact of corruption and in crisis of values and everything seems to be falling to pieces. There is great chaos and anarchy prevailing all over.

At such a point of time are born Osborne's heroes into an indifferent, if not altogether inhospitable or antagonistic world. Dante's words, 'In the middle of the journey of life, I came to myself in a dark wood where the straightway was lost', <sup>(6)</sup> apply much forcibly to almost all his heroes. An existence that holds out a moment to moment threat of extinction can only provide a sense of the precariousness of life, a gnawing sense of insecurity and it requires a tremendous human courage and ingenuity to discover the alternative imperatives, the strategies of survival. In fact this is the modern man's tragic dilemma of how to live in the face of nothingness. Certainly Osborne's tragic vision arises out of this perception of the problems of existence in the face of nothingness. Osborne's heroes live in the world of nothingness which is resulted due to the prevailing customs and traditions and other evil forces, cause a rebellion against them. Their primary aim is to achieve 'true existence'. They do not heed the voice of their true self. They are prepared to make all sorts of confrontations. In doing this they try to achieve their culture, a culture as we have seen earlier which consists in the overcoming of any discrepancy between inside and outside, between nature and true nature. Man need only cultivate his nature to realize himself, but he doesn't naturally succeed and the vast majority of men never do realize themselves. In reality what gives man his unique position in the cosmos is thus conceived neither as a natural endowment nor as a supernatural gift. Man as such is an animal. What distinguishes him is not that he is superior but that he has an additional potentiality and can raise himself above the animals, if he can cultivate his nature and realize his true self.

Hence for achieving culture man must shatter all those forces that come in his way. If the State and the Church intimidate man into conformity and thus tempt and coerce him to betray his proper destiny, a fierce desire should develop in everybody to quest for knowledge full of a strong consuming fire ever offering oneself as the first sacrifice to the truth one recognizes. Definitely he destroys his own earthly happiness by his own courage; he can be hostile even to the human beings whom he loves and to the institutions from whose womb he is issued. But he

should spare neither human beings nor things though he himself suffers in hurting them. Because he doesn't have any choice but to live in integrity, breaking with tradition or betraying his conscience. Thus it becomes necessary that we once become rather evil that it may get better; an evil for modern myopic eyes which consider negation always the sigh of evil. It should be quite interesting to observe T.S. Eliot's words in this regard even though he said it in a different context: 'So far as we are human, and it is better, in a paradoxical way, to do evil than to do nothing; at least, we exist'.<sup>(7)</sup>

Next, the tragic consciousness of modern men is different from that of the Classical. The Greeks believed in the inevitability of destiny which reduced their protagonists to beggary and blindness notwithstanding their divine powers. But in the modern world justice is passed from Universals to the rebellious individual. Yes, if one can attain a breakthrough, one can reach the glories of transcendence; if he fails, he must live in the contemplation of nothingness: he must remain in the torments of Zarathustrian Nietzsche. In such a condition the modern tragic hero, the alienated member unchallenged, would be free to turn inward upon himself to nourish the indignation in the dark underground. Further as we just noticed earlier, the hero like a Jimmy in "Look Back in Anger" is 'seized from without and arrested' without having done anything wrong'. The shock that he had been cheated, finds him miserably trapped in the iron frame of society. The shock also revels to its victim, the existential absurdity of life, and explodes its immanent god and ground. This man is taking the alternative of defiance and seizing upon nothingness, is alone; bold enough to take the existential consequences.

The tragedy in Osborne's plays arises out of the inevitable conflict between individual and society which is totally irreconcilable just because there is no other reassurance or alternative left in this godless universe. This nihilistic attitude echoes well in the early plays of Osborne like, "Epitaph for George Dillon" (1958), "Look Back in Anger" (1957), "The Entertainer" (1957), the title of "The Theatre of Society", because in each of these tragedies the conflict occurs between the individual and Society. Osborne's tragic sense of the contemporary society is very powerfully revealed in these dramas. The protagonists of these plays are the chief representatives of the age chosen from different sections of life to present the overall situation of post-war England. Dillon a writer; Jimmy Porter a young graduate from university; Archie Rice and Billy Rice the stage artists; George Holyoake a teacher by profession and so on. All these protagonists by virtue of their birth are caught in the vicious web of society and they are essentially idealists. Their self-awareness and their realization of the basic absurdity of the existential condition, make them rebel against that vicious web and so their struggle. They will their own defeat, instead of becoming meek submissive prisoners in that web. And so their struggle acquires the tragic dignity.

It is the passage of the artist from the theatre of 'society' into the theatre of 'soul'. In the first group the tragic heroes but only to see its futility; only to experience humiliation,

frustration, nothingness and the rootlessness of man in the contemporary post-war England. But these were the plays written from the bottom of the 'Hierarchical' society. And by the time, Osborne had completed "The Entertainer" and "Luther"; the man himself had grown in status and with him his heroes. From now onwards that is, with "Inadmissible Evidence" (1964), and the other tragedies like "A Patriot for Me" (1966), and "Time Present" (1968) we observe a definite shift in focus. In these tragedies the protagonists are struck down not only by the pathetic conditions of society but also by their own mistakes, rooted in their own characters, in the inner realms of their mind. These dramas can be grouped under the title of "The Theatre of Soul" because in these plays Osborne attempts to reveal the terrifying inner conflicts of the human soul. The artist's concern is no longer with the common man's struggle but with the forces working in the human 'psyche'. His 'vision' penetrates the basic situation of modern man who is entangled in abstract 'vicious circles' no doubt formed by himself due to his helplessness and the hostile living conditions of the modern world. In this manner the psychic condition becomes predominant in the later group of Osborne's plays. The 'inner disparity' of these characters denies them a satisfactory life outside and often becomes the fundamental cause for their damnation. In these tragedies the protagonists become victims of anxiety and in order to protect this basic anxiety they use various devices which are called as symptoms of neurosis. The more unbearable the anxiety the more thorough the protective means have to be. Karen Horney believes that there are in our culture four principal ways in which a person tries to protect himself against the basic anxiety: affection, submissiveness, power and withdrawal.<sup>(8)</sup> And this is how an inner disparity arises between his basic need and the protective measures he adopts which ultimately give rise to 'irreconcilable conflicts in modern man'. Thus, the 'intra-psychic' struggle with the self, which is the actual conflict in the later plays of Osborne, is the central conflict of all neurosis. Hence neurosis itself becomes the major path on which Osborne sees the tragic vision. In this aspect the ancient tragedy differs from the modern tragedy, which also means that the Aristotelian formalistic tragedy is substituted by the exposure of psychological and neurotic phenomenon.

Osborne's tragic vision bases itself on the helpless individual raging impotently against the cruel and inimical social set-up. The protagonist is born into that society from which he has no other option but to 'live'. What is left to him is only to live in such inescapable crisis, and the process of his life is only 'preparing to die'. This tragic situation is skillfully recaptured by the dramatist on the stage.

For the traditional tragic hero the conflict was very serious and his struggle, fatal. But for the modern neurotic tragic hero the conflicts are ignoble and his struggle is not fatal. This paradoxical situation enhances the intensity of tragedy because it does not result in any glorious fight between unique and noble parties. It is just like a butterfly stuck to the greasy ugly phlegm unable to fly away and only preparing to die. These are the leading lampposts for the tragic vision drawn in Osborne's tragedies.

Some detractors of Osborne opine that Osborne's heroes are only some wayward impotent raving impressive sounds, only to become futile. But the present study which tries to bring out his tragic vision clearly and concretely would throw new light on Osborne's intellectual and creative vision and consequently it assists us to assess him anew and also to assign the rightful place to John Osborne in Modern British Drama.

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