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Social Realism in Kitchen Sink Drama: John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* Context

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Introduction

Drama in England witnessed various stages of development and catered to the aesthetic aspirations and entertainment needs of the masses. Starting from the renaissance enlightenment through the Restoration down to the modern period of George Bernard Shaw, one could see arrays of focal areas drama basked in. However, the post World War II dramatic scenario offers a breakthrough to the theatre with the emergence of what is popularly known as Kitchen Sink Drama. The earlier preoccupation in tragedy with characters from 'high degree' and issues of perennial import, gave way to the emergence of playwrights such as J. B. Priestley, John Osborne and others experimenting with characters from the lowest ebb of the society and every day common domestic issues. Aristotle and Shakespeare seem to have been lost in the labyrinth of gap created by time. Besides thematic changes in drama, twentieth century witnessed changes in the way the protagonists position themselves in the society, experience it and live through it. The question of *catharsis* stands adequately answered even in a drama that chooses common issues of common masses which otherwise was alien to Shakespearean and classical plays. Kitchen Sink drama held the breath of the world in the 1950s through the 1970s with characteristics that distinguished it as a break even from the forms of drama that were popular prior to the advent of Angry Young Man Movement. Such plays could be compared against theatrical movements such as *avant garde* theater, or the theater of the absurd, popularized by Samuel Beckett. An otherwise common and most often ignored issue of an underemployed or unemployed youth in post World War Britain came to be at the center stage of this kind of play. The protagonist observes the society and its attitude towards the educated and capable youths marginalized by the incapable and uneducated capitalists. Class issue is dominant in the play which foregrounds the massive discontent of the lower class educated youth unable to shed the

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onus of their class origin in a system dominated by the capitalists/bourgeois. *Look Back in Anger* (1956), John Osborne's *chef-d' oeuvre* crystallizes Osborne's profound frustration,

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blistering anger and stupefying disillusionment with the depressing circumstances in post-war Britain. Jimmy Porter is regarded as an embodiment of the frustrations of a particular age and class especially the generation of young men who have been expecting to leave behind their lower-class origins by using higher education.

The research paper argues that Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* inaugurated a new age in English drama unfolding the 20th century Britain in its stark reality to the readers. The paper seriously investigates into Jimmy Porter's psychology whose astonishingly scathing disgust towards the upper class does not spare even his wife Alison. Jimmy's desire to tear apart the *beau monde* of the capitalists is treated in the paper with insight and depth. Besides unearthing the authorial intention, the paper goes on to examine the post World War British capitalistic system vis a vis the Communist pattern towards which the authorial tone galvanizes.

Reading Realism in Kitchen Sink Drama

David Sylvester's coinage of the widely used expression 'Kitchen Sink School' implies an artistic movement in paintings which portrays scenes of domestic life reverberating social realism of the post WW II British society. It questioned the *status quo* of the capitalist class and exhibited a strong socialistic inclination. Interestingly, Kitchen Sink School also designates a vibrant cultural movement grounded on the ideals of socialism as manifested in the visual and other realist arts. Literary and artistic works of the school realistically painted the working class in extensive details. Majority of artists advocating for social realism were painters with political inclinations that decried the vulnerability of the working class. The movement shares striking common features with the simultaneously surging Socialist Realism of Soviet Union. However, the fundamental difference between could be explained as-- social realism is a broader type of art that realistically depicts subjects of social concern while socialist realism is characterized by the glorified depiction of socialist values, such as the emancipation of the proletariat, in a realistic manner.

Socialist realism differs from social realism in that unlike socialist realism, social realism is not an official art produced by or under the supervision of the government. The leading characters are often 'anti-heroes' rather than part of a class to be admired, as in Socialist realism. Typically, protagonists in social realism are dissatisfied with their working class lives and the world, rather

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than being idealized workers who are part of a Socialist utopia in the process of creation. As such, social realism allows more space for the subjectivity of the author to be displayed. George Shi, of the University of Fine Arts, Valencia argues that to a considerable extent, social realism developed as a reaction against Romanticism, which promoted lofty concepts such as the 'ineffable' beauty and truth of art and music, and even turned them into spiritual ideals. As such, social realism focused on the 'ugly realities of contemporary life and sympathized with working class people, particularly the poor.'

Prior to 1950s, the working class of Britain was more often than not, stereotypically portrayed in Noel Coward's drawing room comedies and British films. This form of realism in Kitchen Sink Play was viewed to be in opposition to the 'well-made play', the kind which theatre critic Kenneth Tynan once denounced as being set in "Loamshire". 'Well-made plays' were a dramatic genre from nineteenth-century theatre which found its early 20th-century codification in Britain in the form of William Archer's *Play-Making: A Manual of Craftmanship* (1912), and in the United States with George Pierce Baker's *Dramatic Technique* (1919). Kitchen sink works were created with the intention of changing all that. Their political views were initially labeled as radical, sometimes even anarchic.

John Osborne's play *Look Back In Anger* depicted young men in a way that is similar to the then-contemporary "Angry Young Men" movement of film and theatre directors. The "angry young men" comprised a group of working and middle class English playwrights and novelists who catapulted to eminence in the 1950s. Following the success of *Look Back In Anger*, the label "angry young men" was later applied by British media to describe young writers who were characterized by a disillusionment with traditional British society. Jimmy Porter, the protagonist of *Look Back In Anger* is a graduate, but he is engaged in a trite manual occupation. The play deals with social alienation, the claustrophobia and frustrations of a provincial life on low incomes.

Look Back in Anger left a great impact on myriads of other writers including Arnold Wesker and Shelagh Delaney, to write plays of their own. The English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre, headed by George Devine and Theatre Workshop organized by Joan Littlewood were particularly prominent in bringing these plays to public attention. The film *It Always Rains on Sunday* (1947) is a precursor of the genre of Kitchen Sink drama. The

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gritty love-triangle of *Look Back in Anger*, for instance, takes place in a cramped, one-room flat in the English Midlands. John Heilpern, a prominent British critic wrote that *Look Back in Anger* expressed such "immensity of feeling and class hatred" that it altered the course of English theatre. Great amount of attention began to be paid to the genre and galaxy of writers, critics, scholars took interest in it. A critic named John Russell Taylor coined the term "Angry Theatre" .

The 'angry young man' movement connects to the much debated British New Wave—a transposition of the concurrent *nouvelle vague* film movement in France. Some of such *nouvelle vague* films as *The 400 Blows* of 1959, also laid stress on the depiction of the lives of the urban proletariat. Interestingly, British filmmakers, impressed by the New Wave, took to delineating such themes in their films. For instance, Tony Richardson and Lindsay Anderson in Britain, channelled their vitriolic anger into film making. Maintaining the same vein, confrontational films such as *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960) and *A Taste of Honey* (1961) which fall in the same genre, found a huge audience. The plot of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* revolves around a young machinist who spends his wages at weekends on drinking and having a good time, until his affair with a married woman leads to her getting pregnant and him being beaten by her husband to the point of hospitalization. *A Taste of Honey* depicts a 17-year old schoolgirl with an abusive, alcoholic mother. The schoolgirl starts a relationship with a black sailor and gets pregnant. After the sailor leaves his ship, Jo moves in with a homosexual acquaintance, Geoffrey, who assumes the role of surrogate father. *A Taste of Honey* raises the issues of class, race, gender and sexual orientation in sync with kitchen sink drama. In years to follow, kitchen sink realism came to receive a warm reception from television directors who produced television plays. The single play was then a staple of the medium, and *Armchair Theatre* (1956–68), produced by the ITV contractor ABC, *The Wednesday Play* (1964–70) and *Play for Today* (1970–84), both BBC series, contained many works of this kind. Jeremy Sandford's television play *Cathy Come Home* (1966, directed by Ken Loach for *The Wednesday Play* slot) for instance, addressed the then-stigmatised issue of homelessness.

Kitchen sink realism was also used in the novels of Stan Barstow, John Braine, Alan Sillitoe and others who hinged upon realism to explore domestic social relations. *Look Back in Anger* returned imaginations to the realist genre by capturing the anger and immediacy of post-war

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youth culture and the alienation that resulted in the British working classes. Kitchen Sink dramas advanced a particular social message or ideology in a way that was compelling and irrefutable. This ideology was most often leftist with working class setting. In contrast, the trend in Victorian theater had been to explore the lives of the wealthy members of the ruling classes. These classes were often orthodox/conservative in their politics and their ideologies. The Kitchen Sink drama sought to bring the real lives and social inequality of ordinary working class people to the stage. The lives of these people were caught between struggles of power, industry, politics, and social homogenization.

In Kitchen Sink drama, the characters express their unvarnished emotion and dissatisfaction with the ruling class *status quo* and Osborne's play crystallizes the same. In John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, Jimmy Porter plays the role of the Angry Young Man. He is angry and dissatisfied with a world that offers him no social opportunities and constantly renders him helpless in the face of crushing poverty despite being educated. He longs to live a "real life." He feels, however, that the trappings of working class domesticity keep him from reaching this better existence. His anger and rage are thus channeled towards members of the upper class around him. Osborne's play is a study in how this pent up frustration and social anger can wreak havoc on the British ordinary lives.

Almost all the major Kitchen Sink works produced in the mid-twentieth century, however, are centered on a masculine point of view. These plays rarely centered on the emotions and tribulations of its women characters. The power dynamics between male and female is often assumed to be masculine and is an unexamined critical component in many of these plays. Women are often assumed to serve the men of their household and, when conflicts do arise, it is often the man who is portrayed as the suffering protagonist. Women's suffering in such plays is always a result of the suffering of the male.

Though Kitchen Sink dramas gained notoriety in twentieth century British culture for their unflinching anger and criticism directed towards the social, political, and economic establishment, the plays were also significant for the way they depicted the most intimate aspects of domestic life. This was in stark contrast to popular classical or Victorian dramas and comedies which largely revolved around the public lives of socially established characters. The Kitchen Sink drama moved the action and emotion of the theater from depictions of the public space of

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people's lives into the most intimate of settings. The kitchen was considered to be the realm of the domestic, of females and servants, and Victorian drama often excluded any mention of it. Kitchen Sink dramas, however, turned this notion around and made the kitchen the center of familial and social life. In the case of the Porter's attic apartment in *Look Back in Anger*, the kitchen and living spaces were all one room on the stage. The boundaries of intimate domestic life and public life were blurred and thus created a realism not seen ever before in British theater.

It deserves mention that whether social or domestic, the Kitchen Sink drama significantly altered the trajectory of British theater. Great authors of the statures of Osborne, Arnold Wesker, Shelagh Delaney, and John Arden wrote in this genre without claiming the title of Kitchen Sink dramatist; however, their plays did contain themes of common life that deeply resonated with British culture of the period. Such plays signaled a resolute shift of British theater into the 20th century.

II

Social Realism in *Look Back in Anger*

Critical study of Osborne's literary output demonstrate that his greatest strengths as a playwright are in dialogue and characterization. Cliff and Alison, both at the mercy of Jimmy's sharper wit, feel they can fight back only by refusing to respond to his insults. Helena at first exhibits some cleverness, but once Jimmy has chained her to the bed and the ironing board, she simply works at being a good audience for him. Jimmy's sadistic attitude and intense antipathy to capitalistic inheritance of Alison reflects as he goes on saying to her:

> Perhaps, one day, you may want to come back. I shall wait for that day. I want to stand up in your tears and splash about in them, and sing. I want to be there when you grovel. I want to be there, I want to watch it, I want the front seat. I want to see your face rubbed in the mud--- that's all I can hope for. There is nothing else I want any longer. (Act II, Scene I, Lines 71)

Colonel Redfern is a complex character, not nearly as obtuse as Jimmy suggests, and Helena, who at first appears to be the villain of the piece, develops into a rather fascinating individual by the end of the play. Interestingly, it is not Jimmy but Alison who, according to Osborne's stage

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directions, is the most complicated of the three characters onstage at the beginning of the play. The fact remains, however, that Jimmy upstages everyone else because of his verbal brilliance. Jimmy frets at Cliff, "People like me don't get fat. I had tried to tell you before. We just burn everything up" (*LBA* Act I, Lines 45) The unchanged condition of the society reflects in Jimmy's anger which he wants to crush with a new "enthusiasm" for change. This is exactly what Jimmy means when he says,"Nobody thinks, nobody cares. No beliefs, no convictions and no enthusiasm."(*LBA* Lines 144)

Colonel Redfern's admission to his daughter Alison opens a wide spectrum of speculations about the British culture, attitude and social considerations. Jimmy's father-in-law explains to Alison about the former's attitude:

> Perhaps Jimmy is right. Perhaps I'm a – what was it? an old plant left over from the Edwardian Wilderness. And I can't understand why the sun is not shining anymore. You can see what he means, can't you? It was March 1914 when I left England, and , apart from leave every ten years or so, I didn't see much of my own country until we all came back in '47. Oh I knew things had changed, of course…….The England I remembered was the one I left in 1914, and I was happy to go on remembering it that way…….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. (*LBA* Act II, Sence II, Lines 53-86)

Decolonization in the wake of Indian independence and subsequent withdrawal of Britain from India made the Colonel realize that the sun of the British Empire is set and it might not rise again. Alison's quick and succinct observation addressed to Colonel is powerful and loaded with meaning, "You are hurt because everything is changed. Jimmy is hurt because everything is the same. And neither of you can face it." (*LBA* Act II, Sence II, Lines 89)

The play does not end with the triumph of the revolution or even with a useful martyrdom. If Jimmy Porter's wife has been brought into the working-class camp that has been accomplished not by him but by life; only because life has brought Alison pain, loss, and the experience of death does it become possible for her to empathize with her husband and, by implication, to surrender to his enormous ego. When the two are reconciled, they return to the fantasy world of

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their honeymoon; playing bear and squirrel, they retreat from the world. This is a far cry from the joint plans for social action that could be expected from a protest playwright. Jimmy mocks at the emptiness and shattering dependence of Britain, "We get our cooking from Paris (that's a laugh), our politics from Moscow and our morals from Port." (*LBA* Act I, Scene I, Lines 149)

According to cultural critics, these young men in Kitchen sink dramas were not a part of any organized movement but were, instead, individuals angry at a post-Victorian Britain that refused to acknowledge their social and class alienation. Jimmy's comment on the Bishop exposes the latter's bourgeoisie bent of mind, "He is upset because someone has suggested that he supports the rich against the poor." (*LBA*, Act I, Scene I, Lines 76) He reads aloud intending for his wife Alison, "The idea has been persistently and wickedly fostered by the working classes." (*LBA* Act I, Scene I, Lines 77-78) According to Jimmy the Bishop and his father-in-law belong to the same category as both of them are patrons of capitalistic system.

A theme that impacts the characters of Jimmy and Alison Porter is the idea of a lost childhood. Osborne uses specific examples -- the death of Jimmy's father when Jimmy was only ten, and how he was forced to watch the physical and mental demise of the man -- to demonstrate the way in which Jimmy is forced to deal with suffering from an early age. Alison's loss of childhood is best seen in the way she was forced to grow up too fast by marrying Jimmy. Her youth is wasted in the anger and abuse that her husband hurls at her. Jimmy's bitter experiences resound as he comes clear to Helena:

> You see, I learnt at an early age what it was to be angry—angry and helpless. And I can never forget it. I knew more about love…betrayal…and death, when I was ten years old than you will probably ever know all your life. (*LBA* Act II, Scene I, Lines 66- 71)

Osborne suggests that a generation of British youth has experienced this same loss of childhood innocence. Osborne uses the examples of World War, the development of the atom bomb, and the decline of the British Empire to show how an entire culture has lost the innocence that other generations were able to maintain. In Act I, Scene I, Cliff points out the zeitgeist of the time, "Oh, it says here that he makes a very moving appeal to all Christians to assist in the manufacture of the H-Bomb." (LBA Act I, Scene I, Lines 71)

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Hurling sarcasm at Colonel Redfern, Alison's father, who is a retired Defense personnel of the British Raj, Jimmy says:

> I hate to admit it, but 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 little world look pretty tempting. All homemade cakes and croquet, bright ideas, bright uniforms. Always the same picture: high summer, the long days in the sun, slim volumes of verse, crisp linen, the smell of starch. (Act I, Scene I, Lines 155)

Jimmy mocks at the shallow, ephemeral pomp and show of the British capitalists by directing his sarcasm to Colonel Redfern. Jimmy represents a deprived, exploited section of the British society bent on a change in the *status quo* of the system. Katherine J. Worth , explains the reason for *Look Back in Anger*'s impact on the audience:

> Osborne was astonished and fascinated by his feeling for the contemporary scene, and the mores of post-war youth, by his command of contemporary idiom. And his tart comments on subjects range from the posh Sunday newspapers and 'white tile' universities to the Bishops and the Bomb (1968: 101).

Breaking the conventions and introducing a play with otherwise commonplace, hackneyed issues and then stealing the mind of the audience with brilliant depiction and thus ultimately registering an epoch making beginning in the history of English drama was indeed a revolutionary step. John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* enthused many others in Britain who created many more Jimmy Porters and Colonel Redferns in later years.

Conclusion

The conventions of the genre have continued into the 2000s, finding expression in such television shows as *Coronation Street* and *East Enders*. Although *Look Back in Anger* is not as unconventional or original as it initially appeared to be—its popular and critical success must be attributed in part to the fact that it appeared after one of the dullest decades in British theater—it is nevertheless of more than merely historical importance. Britain of the 1950s finds a realistic portrayal in *Look Back in Anger* which led to a movement popular in literature as "Angry Young

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Man" Movement. John Osborne gave a new direction to English drama by focusing on common issues of the society breeding discontent among the educated yet unemployed/underemployed youths whose frustration over class system exposed the evils inherent in the system. Jimmy Porter represents any young man victimized by class system and foppery and snobbery of the British upper class.

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