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JOHN OSBORNE'S TREATMENT OF WOMEN IN 'LOOK BACK IN ANGER' : A FEMINISTIC STUDY

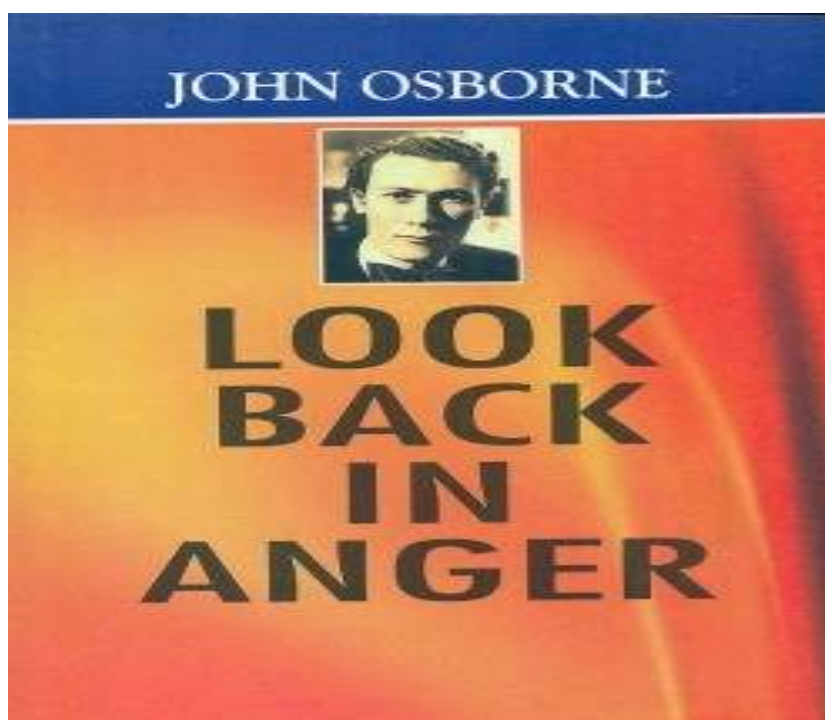


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Short Profile

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ABSTRACT:

Feminism is a movement aimed at equal rights for women in legal, social, cultural, political and other systems and in gender norms. Many writers depicted the sufferings of women in their works, winning the attention of the readers for their emancipation. On the other hand some writers, though they be speaking for the cause of the oppressed, display the disgusting attitude towards women. John Osborne, through his play Look Back in Anger, definitely belongs to the latter category of the writers. Jimmy Porter is the protagonist of the play, who represents the attitude of the writer. He is dissatisfied with

everything around him. He has great anger towards middle classes and higher classes. Amidst this the women in the play greatly suffer and Osborne has no sympathy for them nor does he ask for any justice for them. It has been typically depicted that whatever nature and approach to life the female characters in the play may have; they have all been reduced to same level of domination by Jimmy Porter and has been pushed down to silence and as the silent sufferers. This study aims at the enquiry into John Osborne's attitude towards women through his play 'Look Back in Anger'.

KEYWORDS

John Osborne, Attitude towards women, Feministic.

INTRODUCTION

From 1970 onwards 'Feminism' has established itself as a movement in Literature. Feminism is a movement aimed at equal rights for women in legal, social, cultural, political and other systems and in gender norms. Many writers, women as well as men, depicted the sufferings of women in their works, winning the attention of the readers for their emancipation. Those works very clearly put forth their author's admiration of women as equal and their advocacy for the women's cause. They feel this need out of the reaction to the long tradition of women oppression, suppression and subjugation.

On the other hand some writers, though they be speaking for the cause of the oppressed, display the disgusting attitude towards women. John Osborne, through his play *Look Back in Anger*, definitely belongs to the latter category of the writers.

Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* was first produced on London stage on 08 May, 1956, when he was just twenty-six. The play had been quite simply sent by him through the post to the newly established English Stage Company, a group idealistically devoted to new theatrical writing, and was first new British play to be produced. The play was an epoch-making; for it brought on stage the very new theme, dramatic style and language. With publication of *Look Back in Anger* the reputation of Osborne was set as an 'Angry Young Man' and he held the attention of many latter playwrights to follow him.

Look Back in Anger has Jimmy Porter, a post war youth of Europe, as its protagonist. He lives in a one room- kitchen flat, along with his wife Alison and friend Cliff, owned by landlady Miss Drury. Alison is a girl from middle classes who has married to Jimmy Porter in a fit of romantic love. Jimmy belongs to the proletariat class and runs a sweet stall in spite of being a university graduate. He is dissatisfied with everything around him. News papers, magazines, church and every system, political, social, educational, religious or whatsoever, then existent. He has great anger towards middle classes and higher classes. His dissatisfaction surely has Marxist leanings but amidst this the women in the play greatly suffer and Osborne has no sympathy for them nor does he ask for any justice for them. It has been typically depicted that whatever nature and approach to life the female characters in the play may have; they have all been reduced to same level of domination by Jimmy Porter and has been pushed down to silence and as the silent sufferers.

Alison and Helena are the major women characters in the play. Before we proceed to discuss them look the attitude of Jimmy Porter towards his landlady Miss Drury in the following words:

JIMMY: ...that mild old gentlewoman doesn't fool me,... She's an old robber. (p.9)

Alison is Jimmy's wife. She is mostly silent unless provoked by Jimmy; always leaning on the iron board and the pile of clothes besides her. There is constant teasing and verbal attack from Jimmy towards her. She is considered by him as a representative of the class she has come from. Every time he finds new verbal tricks to attack Alison's mother and her other relatives to the extent that she finds it unbearable. Referring to Alison's Mother and Father he comments:

JIMMY: ... either militant like her Mummy and Daddy. Militant, arrogant and full of malice. (p.7)

He even becomes more abusive. He calls Alison 'Sycophantic, Phlegmatic and Pusillanimous'. It is so easy for Jimmy to be offensive. He is always vindictive and do not realise the sufferings he inflicts on the others. He plays a Jazz music on trumpet and bothers Alison. Alison is suppressed and to such an extent that she could not dare to disclose her pregnancy to him, fearing his reactions. Jimmy is equally

bitter critical to the all women in general. The following passage brings out his general attitude towards women:

JIMMY: Don't try and patronise me. (*Turning to Cliff.*) She's so clumsy. I watch for her to do the same things every night. The way she jumps on the bed, as if she were stamping on someone's face, and draws the curtains back with a great clatter, in that casually destructive way of hers. It's like someone launching a battleship. Have you ever noticed how noisy women are? (*Crosses below chairs to L.C.*) Have you? The way they kick the floor about, simply walking over it? Or have you watched them sitting at their dressing tables, dropping their weapons and banging down their bits of boxes and brushes and lipsticks?

He faces her dressing table. I've watched her doing it night after night When you see a woman in front of her bedroom mirror, you realise what a refined sort of a butcher she is. (*Turns in.*) Did you ever see some dirty old Arab, sticking his fingers into some mess of lamb fat and gristle? Well, she's just like that. Thank God they don't have many women surgeons! Those primitive hands would have your guts out in no time. Flip! Out it comes, like the powder out of its box. Flop! Back it goes, like the powder puff on the table.

CLIFF: (*grimacing cheerfully*). Ugh! Stop it!

JIMMY: (*moving upstage*). She'd drop your guts like hair clips and fluff all over the floor. You've got to be fundamentally insensitive to be as noisy and as clumsy as that. *He moves C, and leans against the table*, I had a flat underneath a couple of girls once. You heard every damned thing those bastards did, all day and night. The most simple, everyday actions were a sort of assault course on your sensibilities. I used to plead with them. I even got to screaming the most ingenious obscenities I could think of, up the stairs at them. But nothing, nothing, would move them. With those two, even a simple visit to the lavatory sounded like a medieval siege. Oh, they beat me in the end—I had to go. I expect they're still at it. Or they're probably married by now, and driving some other poor devils out of their minds. Slamming their doors, stamping their high heels, banging their irons and saucepans—the eternal flaming racket of the female. (p.9)

Jimmy coins the filthy images and uses very abusive language when he mentions Alison's mother. He describes her:

"... she'd bellow like a rhinoceros in labour- enough to make every male rhino for mile turn white, and pledge himself to celibacy. But even I under- estimated her strength. Mummy may look like over-fed and a bit flabby on the outside, but don't let that well- bred guzzler fool you. Underneath all that, she's armour plated- ... She is as rough as a night in Bombay brothel and as tough as a matelot's arm." (Basics of English Studies, Version 03/04, Drama, p.127)

Finally, Helena, a friend of Alison, arrives to their home. She is a natural enemy of Jimmy. He is always in quarrel with her. They go to the extent of physical fight as well. Helena provokes Alison for rebel against Jimmy; writes to her father who takes her back. But then all of a sudden Helena is taken up by Jimmy and Alison is replaced by Helena. In the last Act Helena also has been tamed and made to behave as per the whims of Jimmy and bear him. Towards the end of the play Alison returns, losing her child. Helena realises her sins and misdeeds and decides to leave Jimmy. Alison now recovers the place from Helena.

In the whole play Osborne's sympathies are towards Jimmy Porter. In spite of his malice and putting others into the trouble and tortures he receives no penalty. Rather he goes on enjoying women,

one after the other. He even had an affair with Madeline before his marriage. No justice is done towards Alison for her innocence. Similarly, no contempt has been shown by the dramatist towards Jimmy for his misdeeds. If Alison and Helena come from the middle classes even the mother of Jimmy has not been spared from such unjust attitude. Jimmy refers to her only once in relation to his dying father. He sees a kind of villainy in her. He puts it:

"... As for my mother all she could think about was the fact that she has allied herself to man who seemed to be on wrong side in all things. My mother was all for being associated with minorities, provided they were the smart, fashionable ones." (<https://books.google.co.in/books>)

This was the attitude of certain male writers, even after 1950s, towards women. I hope this may make us realise the need and contribution of writings of the other women and men writers for the cause of women. Women need not to free only in the physical and political sense but from the patriarchal psyche of the men.

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