



Mental Cruelty To Alison, A Criminal Study Of John Osborne's *Look Back In Anger*

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Abstract

John James Osborne was a 20th Century English playwright, screenwriter, actor, and critic of contemporary politics. His works include *The Devil Inside Him*, *The Great Bear*, *Personal Enemy*, *Look Back in Anger*, *The Entertainer*, *Epitaph for George Dillion*, *The World of Paul*, *Luther*, *The Blood of the Bambergs*, *Under Plain Cover*, *Inadmissible Evidence*, *The Bond Honored*, *The Hotel in Amsterdam*, *Time Present*, *Hedda Gabler* and others.

A 20th Century famous English playwright, screenwriter, actor and social critic was John James Osborne. Osborne's major works are *The Devil Inside Him*, *The Great Bear*, *Personal Enemy*, *Look Back in Anger*, *The Entertainer*, *Epitaph for George Dillon*, *The World of Paul Sickey*, *Luther*, *The Blood of Bamberg*, *Under Plain Cover*, *Inadmissible Evidence*, *A Patriot for Me*, *The Hotel in Amsterdam*, *Time Present*, *West of Suez*, *Hedda Gabler*, *The End of Me Old Cigar*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Watch it Come Down*, *Try A Little Tenderness*, *The Father* and others. His kitchen sink realist play *Look Back in Anger* mirrors the class conflict and marital problems in 1950s England. The play gave prominence to the phrase "angry young man", which was originally addressed to 26-year-old Osborne by Royal Court Theatre's Press to promote the play. After the end of the Second World War in 1945, a group mostly of middle or working-class British writers including John Osborne, Kingsley Amis, John Brin, Alan Sillitoe, and John Wain started questioning the social orders, values, hypocrisy and orthodox, these prominent 1950s group led the 'Angry Young Man Movement'. In Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, the angry young man is Jimmy Porter whose anger reflects several social issues, his ill-treatment and verbal abuse to everyone give birth to several questions and possibilities. Marital problems in the Porter family are mainly created by Jimmy himself. Jimmy's character and behaviour are not surprising but realistic and common in a huge number of post second world war households. But this angry young man commits mental cruelty to his wife Alison. This article would find if any mental cruelty to Alison is committed by her angry husband Jimmy.

Keywords: Mental cruelty, Angry young man, Post second World war novel, Alison Porter, Jimmy Porter, John Osborn.

Not only is coercive control the most common context in which (women) are abused, but it is also the most dangerous. (Stark). On 3 March 2015, The Serious Crime Act 2015 in the UK received royal assent which marks a new offence of controlling or coercive behaviour in intimate or familial relationships (section 76).

This offence is constituted by behaviour on the part of the perpetrator which takes place "repeatedly or continuously". The victim and alleged perpetrator must be "personally connected" at the time the behaviour takes place. The behaviour must have had a "serious effect" on the victim, meaning that it has caused the victim to fear violence will be used against them on "at least two occasions", or it has had a "substantial adverse effect on the victim's day to day activities". The alleged perpetrator must have known that their behaviour would have a serious effect on the victim, or the behaviour must have been such that he or she "ought to have known" it would have the effect. (Statutory Guidance Framework 2)

Statutory Guidance Framework on Controlling or Coercive Behaviour in an Intimate or Family Relationship (Serious Crime Act 2015, UK) provides information on:

- Identifying domestic violence, domestic abuse and controlling or coercive behaviour;
- Circumstances in which the new offence might apply;
- The types of evidence for the offence;
- The defence

Domestic abuse cases were so frequent but due to lack of law, they were registered as common assault and sometimes on the ground of measure as criminal damage, threats to kill, harassment, threatening behaviour, or sexual assault. Six months was given to report the cases from the day of occurrence, which was extended to two years later.

Mental cruelty is completely different from physical cruelty. Mental cruelty can be of different types. For Example, verbal abuse, imposing power, making absolute troll, exaggerating disabilities, abusing related and loved ones, making crises for others, creating circumstances and unhealthy atmosphere, exposing personal or private life of others, and of many other types. 20th Century Britain saw a need for the professional development of psychiatry than more asylums. The reason was clear, after the World Wars depression, loneliness, and emotional breakdowns increased multiple times. Industrial developments gave birth to the class system. And it was a shared struggle for the educated lower-middle class and middle-class youth of the time. The Education Act of 1944 increased the number of educated youth in Britain. The labour party came to power in 1945 with a vision of a new era. But when the vision never became reality, the depressing generation became more depressed. By the 1950s the educated middle-class writers exposed the hypocrisies of the upper-class ethos. In 1954 the novel *Lucky Jim* mocked the social judgements, pretensions, and domination of middle-class academics in universities. Jim Dixon, a reluctant lecturer at an unnamed provincial English University, dislikes complexity, hypocrisy and established social beliefs. He is portrayed as a young rebel in *Lucky Jim*. In *Hurry On Down*, whose hero Charles Lumley feels alienated in the complex society. In May 1956 John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* presented Jimmy Porter, a man who is an "Angry Young Man". The anger resulted both in positive and negative ways. Positively the anger may expose the class problems and the true suffering of the lower-middle class people, or tell the status of women in contemporary society,

or the marital life of lower middle class or middle-class people. But in this paper, we would study the psychological treatment of Jimmy Porter on other characters, especially if any mental cruelty is caused by him to Alison. The plot of the story pictures loves jealousy, misunderstanding, hatred, mental cruelty, abuse, physicality, inferiority, class conflict, social alienation and reconciliation.

His major plays, particularly problem plays, have never ceased to be the 'lessons in feeling'. The depiction of the middle age group by Osborne is true to fact. Through his plays, Osborne had opened up a much wider subject than rebelliousness or youthful anger, that of social alienation. Social alienation is the feeling of being trapped in a world of meaningless codes and customs. In his plays, through characters he depicted modern man's personality and mentality of the modern generation. He portrays youth which is a disconcerting mixture of sincerity and cheerful malice, of tenderness and freebooting cruelty. (Tandle 456)

The post world war II novel published in 1956, shows the result of the 1944 British Mass Education Act which made secondary education free for common people. Jimmy is a product of free education and a sufferer of the same. He has his sweet stall despite having a certificate from "red Brick University". Jimmy's character is confusing and can't be determined in simple reading, he represents the inner psychological disturbance of the contemporary lower class.

Class class is the first thing that Jimmy is the bearer of stereotyped class image. This class class is ever present theme in English literature and debatable issue. Osborne like Shaw was a realist. To him, bourgeoisie are always in the clutches of aristocracy. In spite of getting education from 'red brick university' he is running a sweet stall as he does not get a job. (Naz 7)

While talking to Cliff and Alison Jimmy clearly expresses his view regarding the class in command many times in the text. Jimmy, a youth of 25, has strong dislikes for the upper class, which results in his upper-class wife Alison becoming his easy and main target. Alison is a soft-spoken and seemingly innocent character, she has her femininity and a very loving and caring domestic appearance. After the publication of the groundbreaking writing, the character of Jimmy is interpreted in both positive and negative ways. Sometimes critics have shown sympathy for him and tried to understand his concerns and problems and tried to look into the reasons for his cruel behaviour.

Osborne presents a small group of post world war young people who are existing in a sorry state of emotional and physical squalor. He gives a close-up to the marital relationship between immensely resentful graduate of working-class origin and the passively submissive young woman. The portrayal of Jimmy is to depict the changing moods of present generation. Jimmy's love-hate emotion is one of the reasons of his failure of marriage. Osborne gives moral message that loss of emotion, endurance, and compatibility leads to loss of relations. A marriage could not be survived unless it has emotion, honesty, endurance, and the most important compatibility. (Tande 457)

To justify Jimmy's behaviour sometimes scholars being kind blamed society and gave reasons and social causes for his anger.

The mental problems affect the society very badly. In the same way, struggling for life, and facing the social problems peoples are losing their courage. Because of mental stress, they are easily demoralized. Portraying the post world war human with mental and psychological and social problems, Osborne gives various moral message. (Tande 456)

But understanding the reason for a behaviour does not change the effect on others. It just tries to justify the same. Alison has no offence but she shows tender and good behaviour to everyone, her verbal use is well-merged, and she is not responsible for the class conflict of the contemporary time or anything for what Jimmy always targets her. She causes nothing harmful to others in person but she helps Jimmy in his household with her best possible contributions. But Jimmy in return verbally abuses the woman throughout the play. Jimmy also verbally abuses his friend Cliff who is not upper class like Alison, therefore it is evident that Jimmy is not rude only to his wife but to his class people like Cliffe. The play begins with a sharp abuse from Jimmy to Cliffe:

Jimmy: I've just read three whole columns on English Novel. Half of it's in French. Do the Sunday Papers make you feel ignorant?

Cliff: Not yet

Jimmy: Well, you are ignorant. You're just a peasant (To Alison). What about you? You're not a peasant, are you? (Osborne 8)

Jimmy is boastful and proud regarding his education, it is not that Alison is not educated but he keeps on creating scenes and giving mental pressure on his companions.

Jimmy: You are too ignorant.

Cliff: Yes and uneducated. Now shut up, will you?

Jimmy: Why don't you get my wife to explain it to you? She is educated. (To her) That's right, isn't it? (Osborne 9)

Jimmy's behaviour towards others is nothing masculine but shows the negative sides of criticizing. His verbal use is nothing praiseworthy and a rational person can't support or justify these kinds of speeches as acceptable, some scholars tried to justify his voice of Jimmy as a reaction against the feminization of society in the 1950s.

Jimmy's anger is representative of Osborne's critique of the feminization of society in the 1950's. Osborne later wrote that Jimmy's anger is a manifestation of the subliminal anger felt by a generation of men domesticated by a feminine culture. Jimmy's anger is Osborne's attempt to return genuine masculine emotion to cultural life. (Davis, Lane. Chazelle, Demien)

Fatness is a symbol of capital and consumption used by Jimmy when Cliff states that he can not see any use in his eating because Jimmy does not get fatter.

Cliff: Don't see any use in your eating at all. You never get any fatter.

Jimmy: People like me don't get fat. I've tried to tell you before. We just burn everything up. (Osborne 10)

Jimmy's lines are strong satires towards the upper class but in Jimmy's words at the same time superiority is present. He is sexually attached to his wife but he claims daytime that he has been married to a monument of non-attachment. Alison says "Tonight it might be all right - We'd make love. But later, we'd both lie awake, watching for the light to come through that little window, and dreading it." (Osborne 25) His expression "Pusillanimous" is a strong satire of Alison and dishonour. Through this word, he means "a fleshy Roman matron". He goes on to describe Lady Pusillanimous and her husband Sextus to arouse Alison's temper. His voluntary

harassment goes too far when Alison can't help uttering, "God help me, if he does not stop, I'll go out of my mind in a minute." (Osborne 18). Jimmy is so cruel to his wife that even after her appeal to stop mocking her, he continues saying, "Here it is. I quote: Pusillanimous, Adjective. Wanting of firmness of mind, of small courage, having little mind, mean-spirited, cowardly, timid of mind. (Slams the book shut.) That's my Wife! That's her, isn't it? Behold the Lady Pusillanimous. (Shouting hoarsely.) Hi, Pussy!" (Osborne 18-19). He is dominating and not a respectful humble person. Cliffe even addresses his "Lordship" (Osborne 19). He warns Cliff not to patronize him. When Alison says, "Really Jimmy, You're like a child." (Osborne 20) we find Alison even tries to justify Jimmy's Cruel behaviour. But Jimmy's anger is constant, he has even no respect for women in general, he asks Cliff:

Have you ever noticed how noisy women are? 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 belonging down their bits of boxes and brushes and lipsticks? ... When you see a woman in front of her bedroom mirror, you realize what a refined sort of butcher she is. 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. (Osborne 20)

His strong verbal attacks take "Alison to breaking point." (Osborne 22). She exclaims "Look out, for heaven's sake! Oh, it's more like a zoo every day." (Osborne 22) and tells Cliff, "I don't think I can take much more. I think I feel rather sick." (Osborne 23). These statements of Alison are a clear reflection of the effects of Jimmy's verbal abuse to her. Jimmy asks for tea multiple times and thinks of himself as the master of his wife.

Jimmy: I'm the only one who knows how to treat a paper, or anything else, in this house. (Picks up another paper) Girl here wants to know whether her boyfriend will lose all respect for her if she gives him what he asks for. Stupid bitch. (Osborne 10)

Jimmy violates the right to dignity of his partner by addressing her as a "stupid bitch" for an invalid reason. Not only by Jimmy, but Alison is also objectified by Cliffe, he tries to get physically intimate with her, and abuses her humble and mild behaviour and tender self. In the name of fondness, he kisses her hand and puts her fingers in his mouth without her consent. He takes the chance of enjoying her when her husband or boyfriend does not give her proper attention and respect. Alison does not react to anything, this may suggest two ideas: she is not brave enough to prevent Cliff, the dominating young male and she thinks that it is the responsibility of her husband or boyfriend, Jimmy, to control his friend and protect her as he is present himself, or she does not want to as she also likes Cliff's company. If the last one is true then this represents the openness of relations and the presence of extramarital affairs in contemporary times.

Cliff: (Grasping her hand) Why don't you leave all that, and sit down for a bit? You look tired.

Alison: (Smiling) I haven't much more to do.

Cliff: (Kisses her hand, and puts her fingers in his mouth) She's a beautiful girl, isn't she?

Jimmy: That's what they all tell me. (His eyes meet hers.)

Cliff: It's a lovely, delicious paw you've got. Ummmmmm. I'm going to bite it off.

Alison: Don't! I'll burn his shirt. (Osborne 10)

In Act II, Scene I, Helena asks if Cliff is in love with Alison, and Alison reasons that they are simply fond of each other. Though Helena found the affair not simple as stated as there was physical involvement. Alison explains:

Do you mean there must be something physical too? I suppose there is, but it's not exactly a consuming passion with either of us. It's just a relaxed, cheerful sort of thing, like being warm in bed. You're too comfortable to bother about moving for the sake of some other pleasure. (Osborne 35)

Even Jimmy believed in the openness of multiple love affairs, in Act I, Scene I, Alison tells Cliff about his eighteen's mistress Madeline, Cliff admits that he mixed up with all his women. Alison admits to Cliff, "He taunted me with my virginity. He was quite angry about it, as if I had deceived him in some strange way. He seemed to think an untouched woman would defile him." (Osborne 25) Jimmy has his own morality and always imposes them on others, Alison clearly declares that her husband taunts her for being a virgin, this is an instance of cruelty caused by Jimmy. But Jimmy seems jealous when he finds Alison and Cliff having their arms around one another, he says that Alison might be better off with Cliff, he also suspects Alison of betrayal, so he keeps on searching for her things when she is absent. Jimmy admits to Cliff:

When she goes out, I go through everything - trunks, cases, drawers, bookcase, everything. Why? To see if there is something of me somewhere, a reference to me. I want to know if I'm being betrayed. (Osborne 31)

Animal symbols are also significant to clarify Jimmy's domination, he is a bear, a wild and powerful animal while Alison is a squirrel, a small, fragile creature which is helpless in front of a bear.

Mental cruelty is when someone intentionally says wrong or abusive words regarding people one cares about, Jimmy is many times accused of the same in the play. Jimmy says that the mother and father of Alison are militant, arrogant and full of malice, and Alison is somewhere between the two. He addressed Alison's mother as "Overfed", and "as rough as a night in a Bombay brothel". (Osborne 46) After getting married Jimmy and Hugh used the family name of Alison and her "as a hostage" (Osborne 37). They visited known people of Alison and started "wolfing their food and drinks, and smoking their cigars like ruffians." (Osborne 37) Instead of Being sorry for their condition, Jimmy and Hugh "enjoyed themselves" (Osborne 37). This caused a state of disregard for Alison and they knowingly defamed her family in society, this is a kind of mental torture.

Jimmy's mental cruelty toward Alison gets worse when he wishes his wife, "If you could have a child, and it would die." (Osborne 32).

It is noticed, most of the times in the play Jimmy denounces Alison and Cliff for their being devoid of emotions. While criticizing Alison and Cliff for their coldness Jimmy ignores that he too, is emotionless. Once he said that Alison should have misery of loss of child. Only an emotionless husband can wish so, for one's wife. (Tande 456-457)

Jimmy never cares about Alison, but sometimes feels excited and sorry, sometimes loving and caring is not a justification for all-time torture. He asks when Helena and Alison go out for Church, "I didn't ask you what the matter with you. I asked you where you were going. (Osborne 43 -44) Jimmy's spontaneous taunting caused mental instability in Alison and she exclaims, "Why, why, why, why! (Putting her hands over her ears) That word's pulling my

head off!” (Osborne 46) and Jimmy is not empathetic, he says in reply, “And as long as you’re around, I’ll go on using it.” (Osborne 47)

Jimmy does not deserve a kind and humble person like Alison, but a Helena who can easily slap on his face and love passionately. If Jimmy represents the working class, Alison represents a good human, and there is nothing to be sorry for Jimmy’s loneliness:

His alienation in his life makes him frustrated as he gave much to Alison but she did not return anything rather than deserted her after the arrival of Helena. The Prevailing norms of injustice, passivity and bitter experiences of life give isolation to Jimmy in the play not only at home but also society in general. (Naz 8)

Conclusion

Jimmy is not only cruel to his upper-class wife Alison but his class friend Cliffe. He verbally abuses them both in an equal manner. Jimmy thinks of himself as the master of Alison and wants her to follow him blindly; he has no respect for her dignity or the dignity of women in general. Jimmy's morality is an arguable existence. His sick selection of words and verbal expressions are no doubt causing Alison mental pressure. And very clearly we find mental cruelty to Alison by Jimmy Porter.

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