Osborne and the Marginalized Female

John Osborne heralded a revolution in British Theatre. In 1956 when George Devine placed a notice in The Stage stating the requirement of a presentable play, Osborne submitted Look Back in Anger. This play was not only staged, but was considered by most critics to be the turning point in post-war British theatre. It evoked diverse responses from critics. To many like Christopher Innes, it was a 'sociological phenomenon'. Milton Shulman in the Evening Standard saw it as a play written about a 'love triangle'. Critics like Derek Granger, preferred viewing it as a 'drama based on class conflicts', while many viewed it as the voice of the disillusioned angry youth of the fifties. Howard Brenton, writing in the Independent at the time of Osborne's death in 1994, said, "When somebody breaks the mould so comprehensively it's difficult to describe what it feels like". Osborne's protagonist Jimmy Porter, captured the angry and the rebellious nature of the youth of the times, a dispossessed lot, who were clearly unhappy with the things as they were. He came to represent an entire generation of 'angry young men'.

Interestingly in all the varied responses to the play, too much attention was paid to Jimmy and as a result Alison was more or
less marginalized. Viewed from this angle the play becomes a strong assertion of male-chauvinistic attitude that gives the woman a secondary place and is convinced that that is the right place for her.

The school of theatre that this play belonged to became known as 'Kitchen sink theatre'. The dramatist under the label sought to convey the language of everyday speech and to shock with its bluntness. Micheline Wandor however sees the relationship between sink and psyche as critical to this play as to many others of the time. At one level it is a very clear class statement about the nature of the world represented on stage but on "another level it is the relationship between sink, psyche and gender which is also important. Whose world, dilemmas, emotions, story, is it we are following?"5

The three-act play takes place in a one-bedroom flat in the Midlands. Jimmy Porter, lower middle-class, university educated, young man lives with his wife Alison, the daughter of a retired Colonel in British Army in India. His friend Cliff Lewis, who helps Jimmy run a sweet stall, stays with them. Jimmy is intellectually restless, reads the papers, argues and taunts his friends over the acceptance of the world around them. He rages to the point of violence, reserving much of his anger for Alison, her family and friends. The situation is accentuated by the arrival of Helena, an actress friend of Alison’s. Appalled at what she finds, Helena calls Alison’s father to take her away. He
arrives while Jimmy is visiting the mother of a friend and takes Alison with him. As soon as she is gone, Helena moves in with Jimmy. Alison returns after sometime having lost Jimmy’s baby, apologizes and is accepted back.

The setting in Look Back in Anger has its own connotations. The ‘one room flat’ that the Porters live in, not only sheds light to the obvious fact that they cannot afford to live anywhere larger, but as Micheline Wandor suggests it seeks to underline a “hothouse of interpersonal relations”, by bringing together in a real and a symbolic way all the different living functions that the conventional family abode would have.

“It tells us that Jimmy is young and poor, and it shows us literally how all the domestic functions (except lavatory and bathroom) co-exist within one space: eating entertaining and sleeping.”

The food cupboard occupies a considerable part of the room. It might have suggested a female forte, but then it is the dominance of a small portable radio blaring loudly that is noticeable. The dining table has three dining chairs but the room has only “two shabby leather armchairs” (I.p.9), the latter number corresponds to the number of men in the house. The third chair is conspicuous by its absence: its absence suggesting the absence of rest and leisure for the woman of the house.
The curtain rises to reveal a Sunday morning. The men-Jimmy and Cliff- are seated in the armchairs, relaxing and reading the papers, for after all it is a Sunday. In contrast, Alison is standing and is working while leaning over an ironing board. Jimmy, aged twenty-five is an educated man who has married a girl from a class above his own, in spite of his prejudice against the middle class. He is a self-pitying and a self-dramatizing youth. T.C. Worsley finds him utterly useless, one who can do nothing with his brains and education except rail against what present day life offers him. He believes the world is out of order, but has neither the will nor the determination to set it right. "The author has written all the soliloquies for his Hamlet and virtually left out all the other characters and all the action." One can see a clear-cut division of labor on the lines of a male-dominated society. Even on Sunday, the woman is expected to work and Alison is seen doing her job as silently and as docile as ever. She goes on with her seemingly inexhaustible ironing.

Then the dress worn is also symbolic. The expensive skirt Alison is wearing is dominated by the ‘cherry-red shirt’ (I.p.10) of Jimmy’s, that she is wearing as the top. Here is Alison ironing one of Jimmy’s shirts and wearing another. Immediately she is identified as "‘his’ working for him, is into his territory and is wearing his clothes". The play belongs to the group of social-realist plays in which the stage directions played a very important role. The ‘cherry-red shirt’
dominates the color setting in the same way that the personality of Alison has been dominated by that of Jimmy’s. Though coming from a higher class than her husband, she has moulded herself to fit into his scheme of things. She has grown up with one attitude but has been forced by her situation into another. She is the woman who tolerates Jimmy’s invective and lives constantly with the threat of something erupting in front of her. Their marriage all along has been a one-sided compromise and Alison has been paying for it all through. But in spite of all the compromises and submissiveness, she is not absorbed into her husband’s value system. He never sees her as one of his own. She stands there as an alienated being, remains an outsider and a hostage from the upper class. She is also the one to receive all the angry tirades against her class. Alison represents what a sexist-biased society calls ‘the cult of true womanhood’ by which women were expected to have the virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity.

Alison’s subordinate role is confirmed as the play moves. In terms of stage setting, she stands at the extreme left, below the food cupboard. The lights are clearly on Jimmy, who occupies a central position throughout. Though Alison may seem to dominate the action by standing, the real dominance becomes apparent soon. Jimmy speaks more than all the characters put together. The mere emotional intensity of his outbursts is enough to make him carry the scene even though what he says is actually nothing, save hateful abusive utterances, most
unbecoming for a university graduate. Like Derek Granger, we are questioned how: “it might be thought impossible that anyone so blatantly loutish as Jimmy could survive as a central figure let alone keep a wife for five years. He is mean, arrogant, self-pitying, cruelly abusive and so utterly disposed to feel injured, that he hardly permits himself two consecutive moments of common civility.” John Osborne himself testified in the Preface to the Collected Plays Vol.1 that though there are five clearly defined characters on the stage only one is acknowledged as visible.

The conspiracy had it that Jimmy Porter occupies a vacuum talking without pause to himself. His wife, her father, his temporary mistress, his closest friend, contained no reality, no substance, no impact. Porter was an abortive, loutish Hamlet who has no Gertrude, Claudius, Polonius, Ophelia or even Horatio to distract the eye and ear of those unwillingly gathered to behold his tedious presence.

Jimmy is a rebel in class terms but then so is Alison, who has revolted against her parents to marry a person from the lower strata of society, but here the stage clearly belongs to Jimmy. Not once are we allowed to see or feel Alison’s sufferings or her physical and mental trauma and not once are we allowed to see her side of things. She stands marginalized all through.
To a certain extent, critics may be right to see the play as a play of class-conflict, but more clearly it is a play highlighting the conflict between the sexes. Alison epitomizes for Jimmy all that he hates in the upper class but it is not always on the basis of her class that she is attacked. It is her femininity that is the main target. As Micheline Wandor suggested that it was possible for the playwright to choose a man to embody the class conflict, but when the playwright deliberately chooses a woman to serve as a hostage he certainly had something else in mind. “It indicates that the play’s primary concern is not class but turmoil in Jimmy’s mind about the nature of his masculine identity of which class is but a secondary component.”\(^5\) Alison might belong to a higher class, but Jimmy has constantly to hammer into her, that he is superior because of the sex, which he is born with.

Christopher Innes talks of a symbolic structure beneath the apparent realism of *Look Back in Anger*. He outlines how the four main characters of the play are clearly divided on class lines in which sex equals status. Honest, male protagonist are set against beautiful, but repressed or immoral females, with social conflict represented by the sexual battleground of Jimmy Porter’s marriage to the upper class Alison and his seduction of her more self assured counterpart, Helena. Christopher Innes in Modern British Drama feels:
“Society is characterized by Alison’s apparent avoidance to commitment, which in Jimmy’s view equals an inability to feel emotion”\(^i_6\).

Throughout Jimmy is a raging pugnacious bore. Not letting a single opportunity of hurting Alison slip by, he constantly showers abuses not only at her, but her whole family in a most distasteful manner. Eric Keown, reviewing the play for Punch at the time wrote that Osborne “draws liberally on the vocabulary of the intestines and laces his tirades with the steamier epithets of the tripe butcher”\(^i_7\). One is shocked at the choicest abuses reserved for Alison’s mother. “…that old bitch should be dead!”(I,i,p.53) and more shocking is the fact that he wants Alison herself to join in the onslaughs:

JIMMY: ...(To Alison) Well? Am I not right?

*Cliff and Helena look at Alison tensely, but she just gazes at her plate.*

I said she’s an old bitch, and should be dead! (II.1.P.53)

It seems as if Jimmy is trying to test the limit of Alison’s endurance and patience. And Alison has to undergo this test all through. The stage directions shed light on his desperate attempt to displease and hurt. “He looks up at both of them for reaction, but Cliff is reading, and Alison is intent on her ironing... He has lost them, and he
knows it, but he won’t leave it” (p.14) “The tired appeal in her voice has pulled him up suddenly. But he soon gathers himself for a new assault.” (p.19) “Jimmy is rather shakily triumphant” (p.21). “Jimmy watches her waiting for her to break.” (p.22) “He can smell blood again and he goes on cheerfully” (p.55) These stage directions point to his neurotic determination to keep his supremacy. A.E. Dyson believes:

“His tenderness for his wife is unable to survive the restless suspicions which turn love into conquest, marriage into revenge and the normal reticence of others into insult”.

He further traces the condition to the “psychological make-up of a misfit who has the iconoclasm peculiar to that most dangerous type - the frustrated messiah, who because he cannot save the world, comes to feel the desire to destroy it instead.”

The failure of Jimmy is his inability to be coherent about his despair. One wonders why a university-educated man is running a sweet stall? Is he capable of doing nothing except ranting. What has made him such a difficult man to live with except that the fact that he saw his father die. We are left to work out our own causes and like Milton Shulman we realise that “futility is our only clue.”

Ronald Hayman believes that “anger has to be directed against something and if you’re angry about something then you are not really angry.” Maybe Jimmy wants to shake us into thinking but we are never quite clear what it is he wants us to think about. Is it the class
struggle or simply sex. This incoherence in Jimmy's character leaves one baffled. Osborne's characters are in fact defined by their inability to act. "Since there aren't any good brave causes left social frustration is taken out on personal relationship."^21^ Jimmy is a man who needs a cause. Alison recollects her first impressions of him:

He'd come to the party on a bicycle, he told me, and there was oil all over his dinner jacket. It had been such a lovely day, and he'd been in the sun. Everything about him seemed to burn, his face, the edges of his hair glistened and seemed to spring off his head and his eyes were so blue and full of the sun... Jimmy went into battle with his axe swinging round his head- frail and so full of fire. I had never seen anything like it. The old story of the knight in shining armour- except that his armour didn't really shine very much.

Jimmy is no doubt displaced, but he also has an enemy in the form of his wife in his camp. That is why he married Alison, seeing her as a challenge and all that followed was revenge. The colonel cannot understand this marriage equation "I always believed that people married each other because they were in love. That always seemed a good reason to me. But apparently, that's too simple for young people nowadays. They have to talk about challenges and
revenge. I just can’t believe that love between men and women is really like that...”(II,ii.p.67). And Alison confesses to her father that living with Jimmy had indeed been “a trial” for her. “I’ve been on trial every day and night of my life for nearly four years.”(II,ii.p.67).

Milton Shulman finds the language that Jimmy Porter uses for his wife as one that one would even hesitate to use to the lowest drab of the streets. After four years of marriage he hasn’t yet wearied of fuming class consciously against his mother-in-law and gloating over the indigestible feast the worms will have of her.

"... The trouble is not with the world...but with a playwright who having wit and an obvious turn for forceful writing wastes these gifts on a character who could only be shaken into sense by being ducked in a horse pond or sentenced to a lifetime of cleaning latrines...Jimmy is indeed infatuated with his own voice” 22.

He recognized this for in his last play he described himself as a "churling, grating note a spokesman for no one but myself, with deadening effect, cruelly abusive, unable to be coherent about my despair."23

Jimmy and Alison's marriage is in fact a case of those traditional marriages, where wife is never treated as an equal partner and is denied even her individuality. It has been a nightmare for Alison. Immediately after marriage she had to bear not only Jimmy, but also
Hugh, Jimmy’s friend, with all their savage mannerisms. She had to live through many moments of agony, embarrassment and emotional torture as Jimmy and Hugh forced themselves with their uncivilized and brutal manners on Alison’s friends and relatives: “I felt I’d been dropped in a jungle. I couldn’t believe that two people, two educated people could be so savage and so-so uncompromising... They both came to regard me as a hostage from those sections of society they had declared war on.”(II, i. P. 43)

Jimmy seems to be a true follower of Rousseau’s dictum that “the first and foremost quality of a woman is gentleness. Made to obey... she ought to suffer even injustice and bear wrongs from a husband without complaining.” In fact violence emerges as another centre-mechanism of patriarchy in terms of formation of gender roles. As Kate Millet argues violence is essentially sexual in its character and it takes the form of aggression, hatred, contempt, wife-beating, rape and the desire to break personality. The rationale underlying this belief is that women are inferior and dangerous. Unless women meet men’s needs, they deserve to be punished to the most severe degree if necessary:

Excepting a social licence to physical abuse among certain class and ethnic groups, force is diffused and generalized in most contemporary patriarchies... Before the assault the female is universally defenceless both by
her physical and emotional training. Needless to say this is the far reaching effect on the social and psychological behavior of both sexes.23

Like those patriarchs, Jimmy believes that a husband should at times unfairly accuse his wife. The accusations leveled are many. Alison is mocked at, ridiculed and condemned for almost everything. She is snubbed for not having read the papers, reprimanded for having being born in the upper middle class and scorned at for having the kind of mother that she has:

Jimmy: My God, those worms will need a good dose of salts the day they get through her! Oh what a bellyache you’ve got coming to you, my little wormy ones! Alison’s mother is on the way! (In what he intends to be a comic declamatory voice) She will pass away, my friends, leaving a trail of worms gasping for laxatives behind her- from purgatives to purgatory.

(II, i. P.53)

It is surprising that given Jimmy’s passion for invective, how he manages to sell any sweets. He is a mixture of an exhibitionist and a sadist. Not only is he extra-vocal about his inconsequential anger,
but he wants to be heard too. This is so because he wants to be convinced that his bullets have found their mark and have not been wasted. Any doubt in that hurts his ego and he returns to hit all the more savagely:

JIMMY: ... You can talk, can’t you? You can express an opinion, or does the White woman’s burden make it impossible to think?

Alison: I’m sorry. I wasn’t listening properly.

JIMMY: You bet you were not listening. Old Porter talks and everyone turns over and goes to sleep. And Mrs. Porter gets ’em all going with the first yawn

(I, i. p.11)

Demanding an answer when there isn’t any and prodding the other person to talk while never giving her a chance to, is simply another way of torture. And it is this torture that Jimmy is so good at inflicting. One can never be sure whether his anger with Alison starts in a genuine desire to save her or is because of an ugly type of possessiveness. For Jimmy, Alison is an enemy and therefore anything associated with her becomes a natural object to attack. On hearing that
Helena is coming to stay with them, his quick retort is, "One of her old friends. And one of my natural enemies." (I,i. p.35).

The great question that keeps looming is, what does Jimmy want after all. One could have sided with him if all he was demanding was a "little animation" (p.14) if what he wanted was simply to make people get up from their "delicious sloth" (p.15), if he was just bothered about "youth slipping away" (p.15) or if he wanted people to be "enthusiastic about something" (p.15). But his barbs are issueless. Indeed he is a "tiresome young man" (p.50) with the sole purpose of being unpleasant and worst of all is his deliberate attempt to do so. As Michelene Wandor puts it, "Alison's family represents all that Jimmy despises in a ruling class, which no longer espouses an old-style patriotism, and since that cause is dead, for Jimmy there is no longer any good cause to die for. The anguish is ironic, since while Jimmy may despise their cause, he has none of his own" 26. And Ronald Hayman avers:

"Not that 'anger' is really the right word. Osborne used it in his title and it had come to stay. It was a catchphrase for a long time ... Jimmy is himself negative in that he has no alternatives to offer. He'd like to see things changed but he has no ideas about what they ought to be changed to. Osborne is no latter day Shaw with a program of social reforms. His basic feeling seems to be that if there aren't any good brave causes left which are worth
dying for then there can’t be any causes that are worth fighting for. This is a romantic and very negative assumption but Osborne manages to lend a positive ring to it and one of the main reasons for Jimmy Porter’s popularity has been his success as an embodiment of the man of action who is frustrated because there’s nothing he can go into action for- it’s very comfortable to identify with him on this score and thousands of people have taken him to their hearts who in ordinary life would find such a man boorish, arrogant and tiresome.”

So here was Osborne desperately trying to give a cause to his ranting hero when there was none in sight. This was partially because of his near absolute identification with him. In his autobiography A Better class of Person talking of his marriage to Pamela, he quotes one of Jimmy’s speech:

Jimmy: The last time she was in church was when she was married to me. I expect that surprises you, doesn’t it? It was expediency, pure and simple. We were in a hurry, you see. (The comedy of this strikes him at once, and he laughs.) Yes we were actually in a hurry! Lusting for a slaughter! Well, the local registrar was a particular pal of Daddy’s, and we knew he’d spill the beans to the Colonel like a shot. So we had to seek some local vicar
who didn’t know him quite so well. But it was no use. When my best man—a chap I’d met in the pub that morning—and I turned up, Mummy and Daddy were in the church already. They’d found out at the last moment, and had to come to watch the execution carried out. How I remember looking down at them, full of beer for breakfast, and feeling a bit buzzed. Mummy was slumped over her pew in a heap—the noble, female rhino, pole-axed at last! And Daddy... I’m not sure what happened after that. We must have married, I suppose. I think I remember being sick in the vestry.”

And then he says, “Apart from the references to Daddy and the Indian Princes, it is a fairly accurate description of our wedding.” Christopher Innes comments: “Pamela’s refusal to be drawn was the power of his sphinx paw... Author and protagonist are mirror opposites. Whereas Jimmy mistakes loving selflessness for unfeeling passivity, Osborne interpreted (Pamela’s) bland complacency for the complaisance of a generous and loving heart.” Pamela Lane like Alison had become pregnant, suffered an abortion and had left the husband. Her parents just like Alison’s had strongly opposed their marriage and as the autobiography says were so disturbed that they
even went so far as to engage a private detective to keep an eye on their son-in-law. These facts taken from his own life, would no doubt prompt the dramatist to identify with his protagonist and the phrase "Angry Young Man" was used to describe both. No wonder then, that Jimmy has his creator's sympathy, whereas Alison is the outsider—never understood and always undercut.

Jimmy wants total allegiance from Alison. Behaving like a child in many ways, he wants total conformity. He wants Alison to stop ironing and all activities to come to a standstill, just because he is tuning his radio. He expects her to applaud when he talks of all the girlfriends he has had. He praises them constantly and condemns her all through.

Repeatedly stressing that he is superior to her has almost become a habit with him. David Hare in "Theatre's great malcontent" tries to defend Jimmy Porter by averring that John's subject is failure and that "John's characters, vibrating with life, have no clue how to put the nightmare away, how to forget it, put a sock in it, repress it or even, for God's sake, how to talk the bloody thing to death. These are people for whom the fear always returns." But David Hare in his brilliant essay failed to see what living with such a character would amount to. Jimmy makes a case of glory for himself out of his father's death and condemns Alison on that score too:
Jimmy: Anyone who’s never watched somebody die is suffering from a bad case of virginity.

*His good humour of a moment ago deserts him, as he begins to remember.*

For twelve months, I watched my father dying—when I was ten years old. He’d come back from the war in Spain, you see. And certain god-fearing gentlemen there had made such a mess of him, he didn’t have long left to live. Everyone knew it—even I knew it.

*He moves R.*

But, you see, I was the only one who cared. *(Turns to the window.)* His family was embarrassed by the whole business. Embarrassed and irritated. *(Looking out)* As for my mother, all she could think was the fact that she had allied herself to a man who seemed to be on the wrong side of things. . . .

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

*(II, i.p.58)*
Jimmy belongs to the category of men who seek from women much more than they could ever hope to get, and when disappointed turn on them with savage resentment. To him, Alison appeared to have a wonderful relaxation of spirit when he first met her, but it doesn’t take him long to be disillusioned. The fault is not Alison’s, but his own. It is in not letting her occupy the same pedestal on which he himself stands. She is the sleeping beauty-good-looking, attractive, passive hence sought after, but of no value once won over. “Sweet and sticky on the outside, and sink your teeth in it (savoring every word) inside, all white, messy and disgusting.” (II, i. p.49)

Living with such a man the wife is unable to comprehend what exactly her husband wants:

“He wants something quite different from us What it is exactly I don’t know - a kind of cross between a mother and a greek courtesan, a henchwoman, a mixture of Cleopatra and Boswell…”

(III, ii. P.91)

In spite of all the verbal onslaughts and the seemingly apparent heroism, there is a fear lurking beneath. Jimmy fears Alison’s passion as her passion makes him suspect his own masculine identity:

“Do you know I have never recognized the great pleasure of lovemaking when I didn’t desire it
myself. Oh, it’s not that she hasn’t her own kind of passion. She has the passion of a python. She just devours me whole everytime, as if I were some over-large rabbit. That’s me. The bulge around her navel- if you’re wondering what it is- it’s me. Me buried alive down there, and going mad, smothered in that peaceful looking coil. Not a sound, not a flicker from her- she doesn’t even rumble a little. You’d think that this indigestible mess would stir up some kind of tremor in those distended, overfed tripes- but not her! She’ll go on sleeping and devouring until there is nothing left of me.”

(I. p.37)

And then these accusations are generalized, “Why, why, why, why do we let these women bleed us to death?” (P.84).

Ray Huss in "Social Drama as Veiled Neurosis: The Unacknowledged Sadomasochism of John Osborne's Look Back in Anger" traces Jimmy's aberrant behavior and explains it by the unresolved oedipal situation in which he is enmeshed. Jimmy requirement of a "cross between a mother and a Greek courtesan" and his anger and a "feeling of defilement" at Alison being a virgin at the time of their marriage is based on the uneasy feeling that she resembles
the sexually taboo mother-figure than the acceptable courtesan figure. The other side of their ambivalence - his overt attraction to the mother image - is emphasized when Helena is described in the stage directions as having 'matriarchal authority that makes most men who meet her anxious not only to please but to impress' and this figures again when Jimmy becomes so emotionally involved in the death of his friend's mother.

Alongside this fear of sexuality, another fear working deep down in Jimmy's psyche is the fear of motherhood. It brings out all the bestial qualities in him. Sexuality and motherhood are synonymous with femininity and it is this femininity that he fears. Motherhood reminds man of his own incompetence. He cannot create the way a woman can, and since he cannot, he would like to destroy everything that may remind him of his own incompetence. Jimmy's imagery becomes morbid and sickening when he refers to it. It would have been understandable if all he wished was that Alison should have a first hand experience of suffering, as he feels he himself had. She could have suffered by seeing some other form of suffering, but Jimmy most monstrously and heartlessly wishes her (their) child to die:

"If you could have a child and it would die, let it grow, let a recognizable human face emerge from that little mass of India rubber and wrinkles." (p.37)
and afterwards this callous and unfeeling husband would like to rejoice experiencing a sadistic pleasure:

"I want to stand in your tears, and splash about them, and sing. I want to be there, when you grovel... I want the front seat." (P.59)

This horrible wish of his looks all the more gruesome, because it comes at a time when Alison is actually pregnant. Later when he is told by Helena of the fact, all he has to say is "I don’t care" "I don’t care if she’s going to have a baby. I don’t care if it has two heads!" (P.73). However he does care enough to see it dead and then like a sadist wants to splash in it and laugh and enjoy himself. She is allowed to be motherly but she can be motherly but only to him.

In a marriage like Jimmy’s and Alison’s, one person always stands at the receiving end. The ideas, the ideals and the actions of one are always seen to be correct and those of the other as wrong. Psychologically viewed, it is the concept of the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ or ‘projection’ as it is called, that is operative between them. It is the concept of viewing the second person as ‘the other’. ‘The other’ is seen as different in every way. According to David Holbrook in *Images of Woman in Literature*:

Projection is a way of defending the ego against unconscious impulses, affects and perceptions that we fear will be painful if admitted in full awareness. We deny recognition of these
internal elements and perceive them as originating outside ourselves. ...Whenever our harmony is threatened and the frightening impulses to hate become disturbing, we are liable to expel these and to ascribe them to other persons or to causes external to ourselves. To some extent we treat the other person as a blank screen onto which we can cast various aspects of our personalities that we somehow cannot yet consciously acknowledge".

David Carins and Shaun Richards in “No Good Brave Causes” write “Women are a threatening ‘other’ in the face of which the male must to generate his own security, exercise the ultimate sanctions of repression and the denial of the independent female subject. In terms of colonial discourse Jimmy’s practice is a model of what Homi Bhabha defines as standard in this ‘apparatus of power’. The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonised as a population of degenerate types--- in order to justify conquest and to establish system of administration and instruction”.

Shoshana Felman in “Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy” (1975) uses Jacques Derrida’s analysis of the way that oppositional thinking dominates western culture. She raises questions as to how things are understood in relation to their opposites and how hierarchy is imposed upon the resulting oppositions for example Man/
woman, sane/insane, speech/silence, same/other. Thus woman becomes the man’s "‘other’ and is therefore what he is not - insane and silent". Kate Millet in Sexual Politics asserts that assent to the ideological aspect of patriarchy is obtained through the socialization of both sexes to basic patriarchal principles regarding the gender roles:

"Status is a persistent affirmation of the belief in male superiority and guarantees the superior status of male over the female. Perceptions of temperament, which involve the formation of human personality along stereotyped lines of sex category (‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’) are based on the needs and the modes of the dominant group and they are dictated by what its members appreciate in themselves and find convenient in subordinates aggression, intelligence force and efficiency in the male and passivity, ignorance, docility, virtue and incompetence in the female".

This can however create serious problems and consequences in marriage such as that of Jimmy and Alison’s, when one starts seeing the partner as the cause of tension and worse still when one starts believing that if only the other would change, harmony would be restored. “One thereby protects one’s own self-image as good, free of negative reactions and troublesome attitudes. One does so by projecting the bad onto the other.”
For Jimmy, Alison is ‘the other’. That is why he keeps snubbing her so as to keep his own identity intact. He imposes his own infirmities on to her and then believes them to be hers. He sees her as a “sycophantic, phlegmatic and pussillanimous” (p.21), her ways are seen as “destructive”. Her sitting at the dressing table is viewed as a kind of butchery:

“Did you see some dirty old Arab, sticking his fingers into some mess of lamb fat and gristle? Well, she’s just like that... Those primitive hands would have your guts out in no time” (p.24).

Nowhere in the play however has Alison shown such attributes. On the other hand, it is Jimmy himself who is violent, abusive and blustering. He cannot even think of creating. His morbid imagery can only concentrate on destroying. He accuses Alison’s mother of spying on him, but that is exactly what he does when he rummages his wife’s handbag, drawers and reads her letters. Talking of his own wife Pamela, he says in his autobiography “I watched her eating, walking, bathing, making-up, dressing, undressing, my curiosity was insatiable. Seeing her clothes lying around the floor (she was hopelessly untidy, in contrast to my own spinsterish habits), I was captive, even to the contents of her open handbag and the few possessions she had brought
with her”[24] Ann Belford Ulanov in her book *Receiving Woman: Studies in the Psychology and Theology of the Feminine* points out to a certain underlying problem behind wife-beating. She says:

“In case of wife-beating we see projection working in its most primitive form. There the husband projects onto the wife fearful images in himself that he violently repudiates. He then punishes her for having them while indulging those impulses in himself in the beating - process”[37].

Jimmy thus seriously suffers from this disorder.

Jimmy is a thorough male-chauvinist and therefore it is the whole female sex that becomes his target. The male friends of Alison, Webster for example, are more easily accepted than her female friends. The spouse’s mother is more of a target than her father is. He talks of the “eternal flaming racket of the female”.

I had a flat underneath a couple of girls once. You heard every damned thing those bastards did, all day and night. The simplest, everyday actions were a sort of assault course to our sensibilities. With those two, even a simple visit to the lavatory sounded like a medieval siege ... Slamming their doors, stamping their heels, banging their irons and saucepans...

(i. p.24-25)
But all through he is the one who makes all the din and all the clamor. Above all there are no reasons in the play that warrant such provocation. Ray Huss avers: "There is nothing strindbergian in such misogyny because unlike a Strindberg play *Look Back in Anger* provides no dramatic development of the reasons for it." The women in the play are not in any way a threat to the protagonist but are in fact "propelled towards him as a moth is drawn to a candle flame". Helena is drawn towards him. So is Alison and that is why she comes back. Hence the provocation is all unwarranted. The play reflects upon the cruelty that results from inequality within marriage. Jimmy’s empty passion seems to be undercut by his lack of awareness. He is totally ignorant of his wife’s pregnancy. Also his inability to understand that her father’s “Edwardian values are comparable to his own”.

His political claims are made questionable by his failure to see that her friend Helena is in fact the depersonalized product of an Establishment upbringing, that he mistakenly accused Alison of being. Such a marriage is an incomplete realization that offers growth to just one partner. Jimmy has never seen Alison as his equal and not even as a separate individual, and this is why Alison finds it impossible communicating with him. She rather finds it easier to have a rapport with Cliff to whom she confides of her pregnancy. Communication in the real sense occurs only between her and Cliff.
The only other woman who is seen on the stage is Helena. Helena like Jimmy, is middle-class, but she is an entirely honest character. She is middle-class not only by birth, but by her convictions as well. She interferes in the marriage for Alison's good for she genuinely sees Alison would be better off outside it, even before Alison is able to see it herself. It is she who makes Alison realize the inhuman mental torture that she has been subjected to. Alison finds it a respite talking to her, though the trumpet in the background keeps reminding them of Jimmy’s dominating presence.

Between the two there is at least some sharing and communication. It is because of Helena that Alison gathers enough courage to go to church and in the process defies Jimmy. This naturally shocks Jimmy “Have you gone out of your mind or something?”(p.51) he roars. That Alison could step out of the parameters he has set, is totally unbelievable to him. Allison’s revolt and Jimmy’s reaction would have gathered enough sympathy and admiration for Alison, but this is cleverly coincided with the time of Hugh’s mother’s death. Therefore her going to church is seen as her refusal to be with Jimmy at a time when he needed her the most. Alison’s act is hence allowed to be adversely judged and Jimmy is shown to be right.

Act III is the repetition of the first except that it is Helena who stands at the ironing board. Jimmy wants total conformity from all
women who would line with him; hence Helena too is now wearing his shirt above her own skirt. However Helena is different. She is middle class and according to A.E. Dyson this is why she is essentially “disruptive to Jimmy, both when she conspires against him and when she is his mistress…” 38

However she does not compromise on her values and very soon refuses to stay with him any longer. Her walking out may be partly because of a guilt feeling of wrong done to Alison, but it is also because she cannot surrender or conform as completely as Jimmy wants her to.

The ending conforms to the prevalent male chauvinistic attitude. Alison comes back, a poor lost suffering woman. Looking rather ill, she feels guilty and foolish. Again it is she who begs forgiveness and avers, “I was wrong, I was wrong!” (p.95) And then:

“All I wanted was to die, I never knew what it was like, I did not know it could be like that! I was in pain … I thought if only if only he could see me now, so stupid and ugly and ridiculous. This is what he’d been longing for me to feel. This is what he wants to splash about in! I am in the fire and I’m burning and all I want is to die! It’s cost him his child and any others I might have had! But what does it matter- this is what he wanted from me!
Here again the concept of ‘self’ and the ‘other’ becomes operative. This ending becomes striking when read in this context. Alison submits to Jimmy’s definition of love. Conforming to his standards she says, “Don’t you see! I’m in the mud at last! I’m groveling! I’m crawling! Oh, God-”(p.95) David Cairns and Shaun Richards in “No Brave Causes” says, “Such a reading however has to be erected in opposition to that preferred by the text where the strength of characterization indicates that the dramatic intention is to create empathy with Jimmy and an acceptance of his self and social analysis as confirmed by Alison’

Finally comes the most powerful visual image when Alison “collapses at his feet”. He “stands frozen for a moment, then bends down and takes her shaking body in his arms”(p.95). They then indulge in their old game of bear and squirrel and seem to find solace. It shocks one to see that it is Alison who is the sufferer but is apologetic. She is accused of going away and of not sending flowers at Hugh’s mother’s funeral. She is accepted back only when she collapses at his feet and it is only then, that he condescends to pick her up. This powerful image seems to confirm his righteousness and places him on a higher pedestal. The narrated psyche at the center is structurally male. We never follow Alison off stage. The single set is
Jimmy’s territory, and the women come and go. We do not follow their stories. We do not see Alison’s response to her miscarriage except what she comes and tells Jimmy. As Michelene Wandor says:

We are given no potent reason for her decision to return. All these are not important in a play where women are so well marginalized. The scenes between Alison and Helena, though touching and delicately written, are largely about Jimmy, both because the sound of his trumpet always reminds them (and us) of his dominating presence, and because Osborne does not really ‘write’ the women from within their own experiences. They are only important for their relationship to Jimmy.”

In *Look Back in Anger*, Woman is acceptable only if she surrenders completely, conforms to, as well as adapts the male’s standards and mars her own individuality completely. Sadly, the last scene does not establish the end of a confrontation. It looks very likely that the whole cycle of attack, torture and collapse shall begin once again, once the escapist game of bear and squirrel comes to an end.

Osborne’s work comes full circle with *Dejavu* in 1992. He returns to Jimmy Porter thirty six years later, living in comfort in Shropshire, still accompanied by Cliff. But things haven’t changed much. One also ought to remember that by the time John Osborne wrote *Dejavu*, *Look Back in Anger* had been well received and
critically reviewed. It had also seen its share of criticism, and John Osborne was extremely aware and sensitive to it. In the author’s note to the play he wrote:

“The original character of J.P was widely misunderstood, largely because of the emphasis on the element of ‘anger’ and the newspaper invention of ‘angry young man’...Wearisome theories about J.P’s sadism, anti-feminism even closet homosexuality, are still peddled to gullible students by dubious and partisan academics”\[42.

Osborne comes around to defend Jimmy and calls him ‘a man of gentler susceptibilities, constantly goaded by a brutal and coercive world’. Though the play speaks otherwise nevertheless John Osborne made a conscious attempt in Dejavu to rectify and justify Jimmy’s position. He wanted ‘a mild delivery’ and avers “It is not necessary or advisable to express bitterness bitterly or anger angrily. Things should be delicately plucked out of the air not hurled like a protestor’s stone at the enemy.” (p.279-80).

He attempts to justify his hero by squarely blaming Alison, but the justification itself is so hollow that the only purpose it serves is to highlight the fact that he certainly belongs to Jimmy’s party:
"If I still sound peevishly impatient after all this time with such commonplace incomprehension of the work whose reputation I am doomed to be buried beneath, it is because I am mystified by the myth. Indifference is the most blithely cruel and effective of weaponry. Hamlet is almost devoured by the inefficacy of those who surround him. It was Alison not her husband who was the most deadly bully. Her silence and her obdurate withdrawal were impregnable. The ironing board was not the plaything of her submission, but the bludgeon and shield which were impenetrable to all Jimmy’s appeals to desperate oratory."

But little did he realise that by now Jimmy’s character had grown out of his hands. And now even consciously he could not dictate to him either to tone down his voice or convince the audience that he really had something to fight for. In Dejavu _too Jimmy remains what he essentially is - a roaring, pugnacious bore.

The play opens with the men- Jimmy (now J.P) and Cliff sprawled on a Sunday morning reading the papers and there is the “well- used ironing board”- the eternal symbol of drudgery. There is a woman again at the ironing board, only this time the wife has been
replaced by the daughter who wears a T-Shirt with the words “I am Scum” on it. J.P is of “indeterminate age, casually and expensively dressed” and is smoking a pipe. Going by his tone one might assume that he might have mellowed down a little, but very soon one realizes that he has not lost his sting. It is Alison’s radio now that is on the top of the food-cupboard and she soon tunes it so that it emanates a loud blare of music. “She glances across to the men, then turns the volume down to a level”, (p.32) yet J.P soon lowers his paper then gets up “slowly and deliberately... goes over to the transistor and turns it off”. Alison in response “smiles sourly and puts on the headphones”

The older Jimmy is even more prone to monologues than earlier and mounts extensive attacks on progressives, gays, feminists, Australians, lower-middle-class, and the change in the Church of England. The cause for such outbursts again is absent as in Look Back in Anger and one grapples in vain in trying to justify it. His life appears a big waste when he sings:

I don’t give a shit for Nicaragua,
I don’t give a bugger for Brazil,
I don’t give a hoot for Heethiopiaa,
I’m the one the nobs would like to kill.

--- --- ---

I don’t give a fart for Venezuela,
I don’t even know it on the map…
(p.295)

J.P like his counterpart in *Look Back in Anger* loves to speak and definitely wants to be heard, even though what he is saying might be utter nonsense:

“…A recent survey carried out by the Human Engineering and Social Technology Department of Chichester New Town University has produced an impressive body of evidence in its third report that the annual consumption of more than five hectares of white buttered toast per person may lead to a serious incidence of pre-martial incest, particularly among young people.”(p.297)

And the warning cannot be missed: “Don’t go to sleep”. Alison is gone for good but Jimmy’s jibes are there to stay. When his daughter questions him “How did you really feel when your first wife left you?”, all he has to say is “I felt… I thought… I shall never have to go to the ballet again…”(p.299)

*Dejavu* was greatly criticized, yet it has two strong points: oblique comment on *Look Back In Anger* as myth and as a play, and the pain visible in Jimmy-sinking with his claret, his teddy bear and his Book of Common prayer.
Nevertheless one searches in vain for some independent women in Osborne but fail miserably. Women are totally marginalized and seldom do we hear their side of the story. The limelight clearly falls on the male and the narrate psyche remains male-centred.
Notes


6. John Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, 3rd ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1983) 9. All subsequent quotations have been
taken from the above edition and have been incorporated in the text.


8. Ibid., 42.


10. Ibid., 97.


23. Website [http://www.imaginatiostruck/else75.html](http://www.imaginatiostruck/else75.html).


33. David Cairns and Shaun Richards "No Good Brave Causes: The Alienated Intellectual and The End of Empire." Quoted by Neeraj Mallik in Worldview ed. of *Look Back in Anger*.op. cit. 44.


