Chapter I

Introduction

The greatest critical impact of post structuralism is that it has decentred the word. It created a crisis of sign. The sign stood vertically divided between the signifier and the signified without the prospect of a stable relation between them. "In brief it may be said that post structuralism fractures the serene unity of the stable sign and the unified subject."2

This crisis in the world of language had a close parallel in what happened in the world of the human subject. Freud lighted on the discovery that the human subject, like a split sign, is irremediably divided—between the conscious and the unconscious. Jacques Lacan went further. In his re-reading of Freud, Lacan made the human subject a linguistic metaphor. The subject is continually caught up in a process of articulation that escapes him. Unconscious itself is a language that escapes the subject in its structure and effects.

It is this ambivalence in signification—both in language and in human subject—that the psychoanalytic theory, just like other post-structuralist theories, strives to foreground. This ambivalence is nowhere better manifested than in the symptom. Freud and Lacan consider symptom as a signifying structure in which the signifier is not tied to the signified.
Symptom is a metaphor which inscribes itself in letters of suffering in the subjects' flesh. "The double-triggered mechanism of metaphor is the very mechanism by which the symptom in the analytic sense is determined."³ This is why in this symptomatic study we subject the texts to complex metaphoric readings. Only such a reading will help us to untie the knots of meaning.

The plays of John Osborne merit such as analytic study for various reasons. John Osborne began his literary career in the second half of the 1950s, which represents a transitional period in the history of English drama. The themes explored by Osborne are of perennial human interest. Osborne caught critical attention because he was an innovator in every respect. He has made his own contribution to the exploration of contemporary sensibility. As Michael Anderson puts it, "there is an authentic spark of contemporary pain in Osborne's rhetoric."⁴ His Look Back in Anger marked a turning point in post-war British drama. The eternal significance of Osborne as a playwright is not only that he inaugurated 'the theatre of anger' but also that he made a decisive break with naturalism to explore the darker and more irrational recesses of human nature. Osborne was a vociferous advocate of a theatre of feeling where emotions and human responses have primacy over thought. Osborne's own words testify this fact: "I want to make people feel, to give them lessons in feeling. They can think afterwards."⁵ His plays are peopled with characters like Martin Luther or Jimmy Porter who are rebels or neurotics or both. Like Pinter, the mindscape of his characters fascinates Osborne. His obsessive concern
with inner conflicts and their metaphoric presentations make Osborne’s plays particularly amenable to critical probe. But one feels that the psychological element in his plays has not received the attention it deserves. The proposed study aims at highlighting this neglected but important aspect in the plays of John Osborne. Another thing that makes Osborne critically relevant is the wide range of themes that he handles. *West of Suez* and *Sense of Detachment* grapple with concerns different from that of *Look Back in Anger*. The phrase ‘the angry young man,’ which is tagged on to his name has severely jeopardised any attempt at a proper assessment of his dramatic genius. Osborne’s plays bear ample testimony to the author’s own predilection for a psychological probe into the human psyche. *Luther* is a glaring example for such an investigation. It is Luther the neurotic and not Luther the historical character that fascinates Osborne. Osborne banks upon Erik H. Erikson’s psychological study *Young Man Luther* for the dramatic portraiture of his hero. As Hayman puts it,

Osborne leans heavily on the psychoanalytic interpretation *Young Man Luther* which was published 1959 and it is from this that he derives emphasis on psycho-physiological factors, explaining Luther’s revolution against the Church in terms of persistent identity crisis in which constipation, epilepsy and conflict with his father are interrelated.”

This abiding interest in the darker forces within the human mind is the keynote of all his plays. His important plays are *Look Back in Anger*

The proposed study is a reading of select plays of John Osborne. Every reading is a new text by itself because there is no text but only reading. This is the reason why the reading of the text is given precedence over the text itself in the proposed study.

This analytic study is designed in eight chapters. The first chapter outlines the scope of the study and the methodology followed. The second chapter attempts a brief explication of psychoanalysis, which is used as a critical tool in all the studies. There is an umbilical connection between literature and psychoanalysis as they have a common material-language. In psychoanalysis, word appears as symptom while symptom appears as word in literature. The reading strategy implicit in the theory of psychoanalysis is also briefly sketched. A psychoanalytic reading of literature is an exploration of language using language.

The third chapter states and interprets the psychoanalytic theories (mainly Freudian and Lacanian) in the context of the present study. These theories are critically validated by applying them in the study of one play or the other. Only those psychoanalytic theories, which have critical implications for the explication of the select plays, are taken for detailed study.
Psychoanalysis encodes a theory of history. It helps us to approach history as a text. This textual nature of history is explored in the study of *Luther*. The study of hysterical and neurotic symptoms is important because symptoms are structures of significations which speak a post-structuralist language. Symptoms which are structured like language give insights into the nature of language itself. This knowledge of symptom has facilitated the symptomatic reading of the plays selected for the study. The study of dream is especially relevant for a student of literature since dream itself is a *form of writing* which poses the question of the nature of the subject. A knowledge of dream has been immensely helpful in the explication of *Inadmissible Evidence*. The Derridean, de-constructive insights implicit in the theory of *trauma* can be fruitfully employed for literary study. The theory of *trauma* has been very useful in explaining how meaning is precipitated in the dream text of *Inadmissible Evidence*. Lacan's theory of the mirror-stage and his formulations about the Real, Imaginary and the Symbolic have much bearing on literary studies as they shed light on how the subject gets written in language. Lacan underscores the paramount importance of language because the unconscious itself is structured in the form of language. This linguistic insight into the genesis of the human subject has been employed in the study of *Look Back in Anger*.

The symptomatic study of Osborne's *Luther* proposes to give a new reading of history based on the new historicist insights encoded in the theory of psychoanalysis. The study shows how history is mediated through language or how history becomes textual. In *Luther*, history
becomes text, metaphorically structured in the language of Martin's neurosis. History becomes the deferred meaning of Martin's neurosis. Luther is a fertile field for such an analytical study because Martin's neurosis takes centre stage in the play. Osborne gives a psychoanalytic reading of history through the portrayal of the neurotic Luther.

The study of Martin's neurotic symptoms is a textual study because Freud and later Lacan have taught us that neurotic symptoms are structured like language. "Symptom resolves itself entirely in an analysis of language because the symptom is itself structured like a language." Martin's neurotic symptoms are found to be frozen verbal equivalents that speak the language of history. Every symptom is a historical scar. History thus becomes the text and historical Luther the textual Luther.

It is with this view that we read back the narrative of Martin's personal life and undertake an elaborate psychoanalytic probe into the infantile period of his life. This narrative doesn't imply a presentation of Martin's past as it really was, so much as a reconfiguration that gives meaning and direction to the present. What is important is not the events that happened but the events narrated. The word of the past replaces the world of the past. It was Martin's past that wrote his present. The text of Luther bears testimony to the psychoanalytic premise that adult personality is shaped by infantile experiences. Martin's childhood forms a history within history. His childhood was a saga of suffering and an acute sense of wrested childhood haunts him.
He failed to forge a meaningful relation with his father and the introjection of the harsh father image led to an over sensitized conscience that gave birth to a feeling of guilt. "His terrible sense of insecurity can be seen as stemming from an unsatisfactory filial relationship." Martin couldn't negotiate the Oedipal conflict successfully and this is at the root of his rebellion against the Church. This is why Martin's infantile life holds the key to the religious chapter.

History is a repetition; so is Martin's neurosis. Martin's religious life is also a neurosis that repeats his infantile life. The same kind of obsessive rumination and anxiety that mark his infantile life are repeated in his monastic life also. God is only a magnified Hans and Martin's relation to God is marked by the same ambivalence that characterises his relation to his father. This is why Martin's God is an angry God. Martin puts it thus: "From childhood on I knew I had to turn pale and be terror-stricken when I heard the name of Christ; for I was taught only to perceive him as a strict and wrathful judge."

The study of *Look Back in Anger* attempts to give a new reading of the text of the play and the character of Jimmy. Most traditional criticism of the text and the character commit the illusionist fallacy of treating them as mimetic representation of reality outside. The proposed study is an attempt to read the text and character metaphorically—on the figural rather than the literal level. Some basic insights in the Lacanian formulation of the 'symbolic' are made use of for such a reading. The text and character are sought to be explicated
as verbal constructs—linguistic artefacts. The text and character are subjects written by language. It is language that speaks them. "People are not just producers of language, but are themselves constructed by the linguistic structures within which they function."10

Text and character appear as split subjects because entry into language brings about a split within them. There is a repressed part in the subject—an unconscious in the form of a censored chapter—which language fails to represent. The repressed part within the subject comes to the fore in the form of symptoms. This is why the study focuses on the symptoms exhibited by the text and character.

In this study the text is treated as a character and the focus is not on what the text says but what it leaves unsaid—"the 'unsaid' that lies at the holes of the discourse."11 It is a probe into the textual aporias—that part of the text which shows resistance to signification. The text behaves like a neurotic patient and the symptoms exhibited by the text deserve special study. One is the animal imagery which the play abounds in. The others are the metaphorical crossings within the text and Jimmy's imaginary role-play. As in a typical neurosis, the symptoms in the text show a tendency for regression from the symbolic to the pre-symbolic.

The study of the character is also undertaken from the Lacanian linguistic angle. The study deconstructs the traditional view that Jimmy is a disenchanted youth always at odds with the society. Here Jimmy is taken as a piece of language. Jimmy is not the author of his own
language, but language writes him. This is why the character is treated as a text. The subject becomes a mere signifier, occupying a subject position that is assigned to him by language. But this brings about a disjunction within the subject because there are some hidden areas within the self which fail to be represented. “Mediated by language, the subject is irretrievably divided because he is at once excluded from the signifying chain and ‘represented’ in it.” The innermost core of his self which fails to be represented erupts symptomatically. Jimmy’s rhetoric of anger is one such symptom which says the ‘unsaid’ in his character. The character also exhibits many such symptoms which repeat the textual tendency for regression to an antecedent stage. Jimmy’s resistance to the symbolic is found to be firmly anchored in his special relation to his own father.

A conventional reading of *Inadmissible Evidence* never takes us to the heart of the play because the form is here more important than the content. In this play the form speaks the content. This is why Michael Anderson observes that Osborne substitutes a kind of linguistic structure in *Inadmissible Evidence*.

There are enough indications in the play suggesting that the play is structured like a dream. This necessitates a new reading strategy, which is why dream analysis is applied in the explication of the play. In the symptomatic reading the focus is more on highlighting the textual problems that the study raises than on the explication of the particular play. The study is an attempt to track down the subject of the play, Bill Maitland, and explore the question of how meaning is precipitated in the play as a dream.
Like the subject in a dream, the subject of the play Bill Maitland is a split sign. The dream, according to Freud, is the disguised fulfilment of a repressed wish. A character or image in a dream is a composite figure, which expresses as well as represses the wish. “The site occupied by the subject is driven by divergent drives, since no wish is unconscious without at the same time being fractured and split by a striving incompatible with it.” As a subject, Maitland thus becomes a paradigm for the crisis of the sign.

Another textual question that is posed by the drama as a dream is the relation between the author and the text. The play traces the relation between the subject who dreams and the subject who is represented in the dream. What is the relation between Maitland the dreamer and the Maitland who is the subject of the dream? The Maitland who figures in the dream does not represent the Maitland who is the subject of the dream. The subject in the dream doesn’t represent a subject that is anterior to the dream. The dream itself splits the dreamer from what is dreamt. Dream is a form of writing in which the subject is born with the text. It is the language of the dream that creates him. The subject is contemporaneous with the writing, being born with it. The dream thus becomes a form of writing in which the writer is not present in his work. This is analogous to Barthes’s much discussed statement that the author is dead.

The temporality that is operative in dream proves conclusively that the subject doesn’t exist as full presence in the present. The dream
writes the future because the ‘wish’ that the dream fulfils is future-orientation; but the future that is represented in the dream is a replica of the past. “... the wish makes use of an occasion in the present to construct, on the pattern of the past, a picture of the future.”15 So in a dream, the future and past meet and unwrite the present. The subject is present in the present only as a cipher. The traditional view of subjecthood is thus deconstructed.

A theory of reading inhere in any analysis of a dream because it is only during interpretation that the dream yields its meaning. Interpretation is a form of reading. As a drama in the form of dream, the meaning is not a self-presence but is retroactively born during the act of interpretation (reading). This retroactive generation of meaning contains de-constructive insights which are implicit in the Freudian theory of trauma. In Freudian theory of ‘trauma’ there are two events separated by a time interval and the first event remains a non-event unless it is given signification belatedly by the advent of the second event. Like the second event in the concept of trauma, it is reading that precipitates the meaning of what is structured in the text.

*Entertainer* is a play in which an actor is the main character, Archie Rice being a music hall comedian. He is an entertainer who has ceased to entertain, being a failure both on stage and in life. The proposed study of the play is centred on the text as stage performance. The study attempts to formulate a theory of drama on the basis of which stage performance can be de-constructed. Archie’s failure is
sought to be explained in theatrical terms using some semiotic insights encrypted in the Lacanian theory of the mirror stage. The study proposes to analyse how reality is constructed on the stage and the Brechtian theory of drama is also referred to since it has much in common with basic Lacanian insights. It is an attempt to evolve a critical strategy that can be applied to the reading of drama in general.

Lacanian formulation on the mirror stage is a semiotic reading, not only of the birth of subjectivity, but of the construction of reality as well, theorising how the subject becomes a sign. According to Lacan the child becomes a subject when it identifies with its own specular image that is reflected back to it from the mirror. The image of its body represents its body to the child. The child constructs reality fictively by substituting the image for its own body so that the subject loses itself in its own representation. The subject represses its own body as the signifier represses the signified in a metaphor. This brings about a disjunction between body as body and body as image.

Something analogous happens when drama becomes a theatrical text. The actor on the stage lends his body to present a character who is absent. The actor has to blot out his own body so that a character comes alive. The actor makes an image of his body. The actor's body on the stage can have two significations. It can stand for itself (body as Real) and can stand for another person thus annihilating itself (body as image). A successful actor is one who metaphorically transforms his body—who makes his own body absent—so that a character who is
virtually absent is made present. The failure of Archie is the failure of metaphor. He fails in the *metaphorisation* of his body so that there is a clash between the figural and the literal. This is manifested in the play in the form of the tension between the character and the man. Archie's experiences as a man erupt through his discourse on the stage as a character, thereby disrupting the symbolic text of the narrative on the stage.

It is not only the character that is subjected to a conflict between the Symbolic and the Real. The stage and the audience are also exposed to such a split. In the theatre the stage becomes a symbolic space—the body of the stage signifies another space. This is how the illusion of reality is created on the stage. But the symbolic reality of the stage may be subverted by the intrusion of the literal so that we are reminded of the fact that the stage is only a stage thereby shattering the illusion of reality. The audience in *Entertainer* is also subject to this kind of a split. The audience also occupy a symbolic space in the theatre because it is their gaze that frames the reality on the stage. The conflict between the symbolic and the real extends to the audience also. There are times galore when the audience lose their symbolic status as we are reminded of the fact that they are "real people" in real life.

In a work of this nature, the usual practice is to arrange the critical studies in the chronological order of the publication of the select plays. But the present work has deviated from this practice and the studies are arranged in a different order. This arrangement may be
taken as symptomatic of the fact that all the plays are not equally amenable to a psychoanalytic probe. The critical studies are arranged according to the scope afforded by the plays for this kind of an enquiry. It is due to the application of this criterion that *Luther* gets a preferential treatment in the present dissertation.
Notes

1 'Post structuralism' is used in this dissertation in a very general sense as a theory betraying anxiety about language. It views reality as textual and meaning as subject to constant slippage.


5 John Osborne, "They Call it Cricket," Declaration, ed. Tom Maschler (New York: Kennikat P, 1972) 64.


Lacan, "Function and Field of Speech and Language," *Ecrits* 93.


13 Michael Anderson 19.
