The New Movement in the British Drama actually began on the night of May 8, 1956 when John Osborne’s ‘Look Back in Anger’ opened at the Royal Court Theatre in London, and fell like a bombshell on the consciousness of the theatre goers and television viewers. A new voice was heard after Bernard Shaw in the British Theatre after the staging and screening of the play. It was the real breakthrough of the New Drama in the British Theatre. It gave the biggest shock to the system of British Drama since the advent of Bernard Shaw. A. Nicoll wrote, “The first night of John Osborne’s ‘Look Back in Anger’ at the Royal Court Theatre on May 8th, 1956 was a turning point in the history of the modern British Theatre.” ‘Look Back in Anger’, observed Kenneth Tynan “presents the Post-War youth as it really is, with special emphasis on the non U-intelligentsia who live in bed-sitters and divide the Sunday papers into two groups, posh and wet.”

John Osborne is the Marlowe of the mid-twentieth century British Drama, and his play ‘Look Back in Anger’ holds a key to the period from 1945 to 1970. The British population born
after the Second World War was under twenty-five by 1970. It was too young to remember the first Post-War Labour Government. The oldest of them were readying for eleven plus at the time of Suez and Hungarian Revolution. No past was so imaginatively remote as this recent past.

The victory of the Labour Party in the 1945 elections signalled the beginning of a new era. In the past was India, the raj, the imperial tradition; ahead was a socialist utopia outlined and promised by the Labour Party. Though Britain and its allies had won the War yet it had to face a lot of Post-War domestic problems. The War had cost Britain one-quarter of her national wealth. The bomb damage had to be repaired. Foreign trade had to be rebuilt. Large occupation forces had to be maintained in the conquered areas. Momentous decisions had to be reached regarding India, Egypt and Palestine. Peace treaties had to be made. The solution of these domestic problems was sought in nationalization. The nationalization of banks, insurance companies and other prime industries converted Britain into a socialist state but it increased the number of state employees, the taxes and the cost of production of the British goods. These increases partly offset the benefits to the workers of their higher income. A drought
in 1946, the cold and floods of 1947, the continuing demands of labour for shorter hours, higher pay, and more free services - all added to the pool of national troubles.

In order to build up its dollar balance, the government cut down imports not only of luxuries but also of necessities. Most of the War time rationing of food, tea, sweets, soap, domestic fuel, petrol and clothes was continued in 1949, and in some cases beyond that. Even bread which had not been rationed during the War was restricted from 1946 to 1948. Though the Labour Government had introduced system of social security and made Britain a Welfare State, yet the young idealists were still left feeling that there must be something more. All should be right with the world, and yet some how it was not. The young men and women felt frustrated and disillusioned and lost their faith in the Labour Government. In 1951, the Labour Government was defeated at the polls and the conservatives were back in power. The new Government immediately set about dismantling the Welfare State. The food subsidies were reduced. People felt that strong and energetic leadership was needed to pull Great Britain out of political and economic doldrums into which it had drifted after the Second World War. By September 1953, the Labour Party felt that
public ownership had brought little profit to the workers. Hence the leaders of this party also lost interest in further nationalization. The intelligent young men and women felt that their fate would not be different whosoever was in power or out power. Jimmy Porter outlines the situation of impotent anger of the youth in one of the most famous speeches in ‘Look Back in Anger’, when he says: “I suppose people of our generation aren’t able to die for good causes any longer. We had all that done for us in the thirties and forties, when we were still kids. There aren’t any good, brave causes left.”

There were causes for agitations and organized protests but people did not look to the sufferings of others. 1956, the year of the opening of ‘Look Back in Anger’ was rather rich in causes for agitation but there was no organized protests anywhere. John Russell Taylor writes:

“In Hungary, the people rebelled against their Russian imposed Communist Government, and Russia put down the revolt in an imperialist way by sending in tanks, while the rest of the world looked on and did nothing.”

It was the state of indifference, helplessness and meaninglessness of their existence in society that troubled the
young men and women. Jean Paul Sartre’s Existentialism and Albert Camus’ Absurdism also influenced the thinking of young men and new dramatists. The Absurd, for Albert Camus, is the absence of correspondence between the mind’s need for unity and the chaos the mind experiences. The obvious response is either suicide or a leap of faith. The feeling of Absurdity, says Camus could strike any man in any street corner. This feeling of Absurdity struck the Post-War youth of Great Britain and found its expression in the Angry or Absurd Drama initiated in England by John Osborne, Harold Pinter, Arnold Wesker and John Arden. The New Plays turned out by them were given all sorts of labels. The drama of the 1956 was called the Absurd Drama, The Experimental Drama, The Kitchen-Sink Drama, The New Drama, the Drama of Non-Communication, the Dark Comedy, the Drama of Neo-Realism, etc.

Jimmy Porter in ‘Look Back in Anger’ was ideally constituted by John Osborne to be the all-purpose hero of the dissatisfied, disintegrated and angst-ridden youths of the Post-War period. His attitudes “were strategically situated between those of the cynics and those of the committed idealists.” “You can hear”, writes T.C. Worsley “the authentic new tone of the nineteen-fifty-
desperate, savage, resentful and, at time, funny.” John Russell Taylor rightly remarks:

“In Jimmy Porter, one is confronted with a man whose anger undoubtedly starts in human idealism, and the desire that men should be more honest, more alive, more human than they normally are.”

Thus, John Osborne’s plays like ‘Look Back in Anger’, ‘The Entertainer’ and ‘Inadmissible Evidence’ reflect the sickness of the Post-War society and the wistfulness, idealism, cynicism and the unresolved quarrel of the Post-War youths with society and the universe.

Harold Pinter’s ‘The Birthday Party’ proclaimed the sea change that had occurred in the English theatre. It was symptomatic of the great social changes that had taken place, “perhaps the first bubbles of a mighty volcano”. Pinter being the representative playwright of the period reflected anxiety and inarticulated rage of the Post-War youths in his plays. The battle for the survival is the underlying theme of ‘The Birthday Party’, ‘The Caretaker’ and ‘The Homecoming’. Pinter’s picture of society is a ruthless battle for territory and power. The battle is often waged in the language of veiled politeness, but it contains
beneath its surface a message of aggression. In each play, an outsider comes into a fixed family setting and disturbs the fragile equilibrium of relationships. Pinter’s characters are mysterious and unknowable because they are presented without their past history.

Arnold Wesker’s Trilogy – ‘Chicken Soup with Barley’, ‘Roots’ and ‘I’m Talking about Jerusalem’ broke new ground in the British Drama. It tells the political history of Britain from 1936 to 1960 through the eyes of a Jewish family completely broken and disintegrated but re-asserting and re-animating at the same time. It encompasses the political life of a generation. It begins in 1936 with Fascist blackshirt’s marching through the East End of London and deals with the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War and the Holocaust. It terminates with the failed attempts of the re-asserting daughter of the family to set up a kind of rural socialism in Norfolk.

Thus, the New Drama which emerged in the Post-War period deals with the disintegration not only of the individuals but also of family life, hatred of religion and Fascism and disillusionment with Communism which was considered to be a panacea for all social, economic and political ills of the world. It also reflects the sagging mood of a common Britisher after Great
Britain was relegated to the back seat in international diplomacy after the breaking away of India Malaysia, China and Israel from the British imperil hold, the Suez Canal Battle and the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution. Since the drama of this period reflects not only the mood of the British nation out also the values which the British industrial society cherished in the Post-War period, the present study is relevant and significant.

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