CHAPTER IV

THE DISINTEGRATION OF FAMILY LIFE

The Post-War social and economic conditions in England in the fifties were so bad that they disintegrated not only individuals and made them new Hamlets shouting and protesting in impotent anger against the rotten social and economic structure of Great Britain but also the families big or small, old or new. Whether it is Osborne’s ‘Look Back in Anger’ or ‘The Entertainer’ or ‘Inadmissible Evidence’, or Pinter’s ‘The Homecoming’, or Wesker’s ‘Trilogy’, the story is same everywhere. The family is on the focus in all these plays.

In ‘Look Back in Anger’, Jimmy Porter, a howling impotent intellectual has a broken home on account of his own political ideology and enthusiasm for social and economic reforms. Instead of fighting the rotten society, he fights his own wife because he thinks that his wife is his natural enemy because she belongs to the upper middle class which he hates most. He married Alison in order to take revenge on her and her parents
representing the upper middle class. He, therefore, keeps her as a hostage. Alison, Jimmy Porter’s wife tells Helena:

I felt as though 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. Mummy has always said that Jimmy is utterly ruthless, but she hasn’t met Hugh. He takes the first prize for ruthlessness-from all comers. Together, they were frightening. They both came to regard me as a sort of hostage from those sections of society they had declared war on.¹

Alison is a conventional girl of an upper middle class origin. Her father, Colonel Redfern commanded the army of an Indian Maharaja in the pre-Independence period. Alison is well-bred, highly educated, sophisticated and cultured. Alison married Jimmy Porter at her own sweet will against the wishes of her parents. When she met Jimmy Porter in a party, she was immediately drawn to him. She made up her mind to marry Jimmy Porter in spite of the fact that her mother dissuaded her strongly from leaping in dark. Alison was unmoved. When she married Jimmy Porter, the latter was jobless and penniless. So they passed their wedding night in the flat of Jimmy’s friend, Hugh Tanner. It was here that she discovered that both Jimmy and his
friend were ruffians. She learnt from their behaviour that Jimmy had married her for seeking vengeance on her.

All of a sudden something happened and a wall stood between them. The warmth of love was gone. Jimmy Porter started snubbing, humiliating and abusing her. He taunted her with all sorts of invectives. He always tried to irritate and provoke her but she went on suffering without saying or doing anything against her husband. While talking to Cliff Lewis, Alison and Helena Charles, Jimmy Porter exposes his mind and attributes some motives for his being angry with his wife.

Four years had rolled over since their marriage but Alison knew no peace with him. During those four years, Alison was ruthlessly bullied, humiliated and taunted with all sorts of unqualified adjectives. But she never answered back to her husband. She said nothing; she did nothing but suffered all because she had none to fall back upon in her distress. From the very beginning of the play, we see Jimmy Porter provoking and irritating Alison by saying all sorts of foul things about her mother and brother, but she never opens her lips. She remains neutral and detached like a saint. She suffers the indignity silently. She is a battered, punched, brow-beaten and trampled-on girl, who says
nothing and does nothing in reply, but goes on ironing, ironing with a look of blanched sorrow on her face, which is white and exhausted as if after a hundred sleepless nights, tormented by a hundred ceaseless headaches.

If Jimmy Porter is a Hamlet, Alison is his poor Ophelia born to be scolded and castigated for the sins of her mother. The scenes Jimmy makes with Alison have the same candid brutality that Hamlet showed Ophelia. In both cases, the frenzied mockery springs from an expectation of betrayal of faith. Ophelia is felt to be an ally of the corrupt court with the murdered king as its head, of her brother Laertes, and her father Polonius. In ‘Look Back in Anger’ Alison’s brother Nigel is Laertes and Alison’s mother is cast in the role of Polonius. The fact that Alison is secretly exchanging letters with her means that she is in communication with the enemy. Like docile Ophelia, women cannot be trusted because they do not understand that such an act is treachery. They do it in all innocence.

Guy Dumur rightly points out that ‘Look Back in Anger’ deals with “the problem of marriage between young people of different classes. A worker’s son, embittered and magnetic; a colonel’s daughter, pure and conventional. Petit
bourgeois against petit bourgeois”. After their marriage, Jimmy Porter and Alison had never lived happily. Alison had been ill-treated and humiliated by her husband in the worst possible ways. She had a feeling that Jimmy married her just for seeking revenge or letting out his anger on her for those things for which she was responsible in no way. She tells her father that her husband is another Shelley. She calls him a sort of spiritual barbarian who has thrown down the gauntlet at her:

Oh yes. Some people do actually marry for revenge. People like Jimmy, anyway. Or perhaps he should have been another Shelley, and can’t understand now why I’m not another Mary, and you’re not William Godwin. He thinks he’s got a sort of genius for love and friendship-on his own terms. Well, for twenty years, I’d lived a happy, uncomplicated life, and suddenly, this-this spiritual barbarian-throws down the gauntlet at me. Perhaps only another woman could understand what a challenge like that means? ..................

When the play opens, Jimmy Porter is seen grumbling and fretting against Alison. He has been trying to find fault with her and provoke her so that he could get a response from her and make it an excuse for a family quarrel with her. He uses abusive language against her mother, father and brother so that Alison is provoked. He tells Cliff that so far as Alison and her
brother Nigel are concerned, “They’re what they sound like-sycophantic, phlegmatic and pusillanimous.” He tells Cliff in the very face of Alison that his wife is a very clumsy woman because she is seen doing the same things every night. She jumps on the bed as if she were stamping on his face. She is very destructive in everything. She acts like a person launching a battleship:

She’s so clumsy, I watch for her to do the same things every night. The way she jumps on the bed, as if she were stamping on someone’s face, and draws the curtains back with a great clatter, in that-casually destructive way of hers. It’s like someone launching a battleship.  

Though Alison has never slept with him or anyone else before her marriage yet her integrity is suspected by her husband. Though she is untouched yet her husband feels as if he had been deceived by her. He always taunts Alison for her virginity. Alison exposes her pain to Cliff saying:

And, afterwards, he actually 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.  

Jimmy Porter, in fact, is a sadist who seeks his pleasure by inflicting pain on Alison. The more Alison suffers,
the more happy he is. His hatred and anger for Alison do not get catharised unless and until Alison suffers the pains of child-birth and loses her child before it sees the light of the day. When Alison returns from her father’s house and meets Jimmy Porter, she tells him that she has made a mistake in being neutral and saintly:

*It doesn’t matter! I was wrong, I was wrong! I don’t want to be neutral, I don’t want to be a saint. I want to be a lost cause. I want to be corrupt and futile!*\(^6\)

She further tells him that when she was in pain during the delivery of her child, she always thought of him only to see her how stupid, ugly and ridiculous she was because that was what he had been longing for her to feel. When all passions are spent, Jimmy and Alison feel relaxed and they propose to play bear and squirrel and sing songs about themselves:

*We’ll be together in our bear’s cave, and our squirrel’s drey, and we’ll live on honey, and nuts-lots and lots of nuts. And we’ll sing songs about ourselves-about warm trees and snug caves, and lying in the sun. And you’ll keep those big eyes on my fur, and help me keep my claws in order, because I’m a bit of a soppy, scruffy sort of a bear. And I’ll see that you keep that sleek, bushy tail glistening as it should, because you’re a very beautiful squirrel, but you’re none too bright either, so we’ve got to be careful. There are cruel steel traps lying about everywhere, just*
waiting for rather mad, slightly satanic and very timid little animals. Right? 

Osborne’s next play, ‘The Entertainer’ is a study of a British family having its precarious existence in the Welfare State and living mainly on the hope for the return of its good old days. It is a study of three generations of people of the same family living together. The family is disintegrated and it is more like a mad house where no body is at peace. Billy Rice is the grand father and the head of the family. He is a successful music hall comedian of the Edwardian times. His son Archie Rice is a failed music hall comedian. He is also a failed family man. His daughter Jean Rice returns home after breaking her engagement with her fiance, Graham Dodd. His son, Mick is taken as prisoner of War in the Suez Canal battle. His brother, Frank immigrates to Canada in search of a better life because the British Isles are too small to hold his big dreams. Thus, the house of Billy Rice is a divided and broken house on account of the crushing blow dealt out by the Post-War conditions.

Osborne’s ‘Inadmissible Evidence’ is a study of the dissolution of the institution of marriage and the need for divorce in the Post-War period. It was on account of job
insecurity and financial hardships that a lot of married women sought legal divorces from their husbands with the help of Law Society and made claims for maintenance and alimony in the law courts. It was Bill Maitland who took up the divorce cases as a counsel and fought for the settlement of the claims of the divorcees. Mrs. Garnsey, Mrs. Shirley, Mrs. Tonks, Mrs. Anderson, and Mrs. Hilda are some of the family women whose cases are taken up by Bill Maitland in the law court. Thus, the whole play is focused on the study of the divorce cases of married women indicating the chaos in the family life in the Post-War period.

In the full-length plays of Harold Pinter, the broken family life with all its perversities has been exposed. In ‘The Caretaker’, we hear from Davies that he deserted his wife because she was a dirty woman. She used to keep a pile of her unwashed under clothing in a vegetable pan. This offended him and he left her just after fortnight of their marriage:

I’m clean. I keep myself up. That’s why I left my wife. Fortnight after I married her, no, not so much as that, no more than a week, I took the lid off a saucepan, you know what was in it? A pile of her underclothing, unwashed. The pan for vegetables, it was. The vegetable pan. That’s when I left her and I haven’t seen her since.\(^8\)
In ‘The Birthday Party’, Stanley Webber is accused of killing his own wife and living in the boarding-house under a false name to avoid his arrest. Goldberg and McCann interrogate Stanley Webber about the killing of his wife:

**GOLDBERG.** Where was your wife?

**STANLEY.** In -

**GOLDBERG.** Answer.

**STANLEY.** What wife?

**GOLDBERG.** What have you done with your wife?

**MCCANN.** He’s killed his wife!

**GOLDBERG.** Why did you kill your wife?

**STANLEY.** What wife?

**MCCANN.** How did he kill her?

**GOLDBERG.** How did you kill her?

**MCCANN.** You throttled her.

**GOLDBERG.** With arsenic. He is also charged with lechery and eliciting relations with Meg. He is accused of lechery and contamination of human kind. Goldberg and McCann question him on this issue also:

**GOLDBERG.** Where is your lechery leading you?

**MCCANN.** You’ll pay for this.

**GOLDBERG.** You stuff yourself with dry toast.

**MCCANN.** You contaminate womankind.
It is in ‘The Homecoming’ that the need of integrated family-life headed by a woman of quality and feeling are highlighted. Max who is the head of his family tells his son Teddy that it is marriage that makes life worth living:

I’ve been begging my two youngsters for years to find a nice feminine girl with proper credentials – it makes life worth living.  

Lenny who is one of the three sons of Max has a feeling that he is living in a close and integrated family. He tells his brother, Teddy that though his father is a less rich man, they live a closer life and make up a unit:

No, listen, Ted, there’s no question that we live a less rich life here than you do over there. We live a closer life. We’re busy, of course. Joey’s busy with his boxing, I’m busy with my occupation, Dad still plays a good game of poker, and he does the cooking as well, well up to his old standard, and Uncle Sam’s the best chauffeur in the firm. But nevertheless we do make up a unit, Teddy, and you’re an integral part of it.

However, after the death of his wife, Max’s family life was broken. Max’s father was a number one butcher of his time, and he learnt how to carve a carcass well from his father. Max’s mother was bed-ridden. All his brothers were invalids. It was a crippled family he looked after. He looked after his own family
also - three young sons and his wife. His wife was the backbone of the family. She was the woman with a will of iron, a heart of gold and a steadfast mind. She taught her children the moral code they lived by. Max himself worked as a butcher all his life to keep both the families in comfort. He worked twenty–hours a day in his shop and went all over the country to find meat. He even entered into negotiations with a top–class group of butchers with continental connections. He told Uncle Sam how devotedly he worked to keep his family together:

I worked as a butcher all my life, using the chopper and the slab, the slab, you know what I mean, The chopper and the slab! To keep my family in luxury. Two families! My mother was bed ridden, my brothers were all invalids. I had to earn the money for the leading psychiatrists. I had to read books! I had to study the disease, so that I could cope with an emergency at every stage. A crippled family, three bastard sons, a slutbitch of a wife ..........

Max was a man who was whole – heartedly devoted to his family. He suffered for the sake of his mother and brothers. He tells Lenny that once he was offered the job as a horse trainer by a Duke but he turned down the offer because of his family obligations:
Many times I was offered the job—you know, a proper post, by the Duke of ............... I forget his name............... one of the Dukes. But I had family obligations, my family needed me at home.\(^\text{14}\)

He worked very hard to keep his family in comfort. His wife Jessie, too, worked hard to run the house properly. His wife, in fact, was the backbone of the family. She was a woman with an iron will and of golden heart and mind. Max tells Teddy and Ruth about his wife and her qualities:

That woman was the backbone to this family. I mean, I was busy working twenty-four hours a day in the shop, I was going all over the country to find meat, I was making my way in the world, but I left a woman at home with a will of iron, a heart of gold and a mind.\(^\text{15}\)

But after the death of Max’s wife, his family was disintegrated. For the past six years, Max has been running his kitchen and home. The pinching effect of the War and the Post-War conditions is clearly visible in Max’s family. Uncle Sam was dismissed from army after the War. His eldest son, Teddy migrated to America in search of a job. His second son Lenny was working as a pimp. His youngest son Joey was learning boxing in order to be a boxer. The source of his income was nil. Max was hard up for money. He depended for his family expenses mainly
on his savings and the little amount earned by his son Lenny. He was in need of a woman of quality and feeling to run and integrate his family. When Teddy comes back home from America accompanied by his wife, Ruth, Max feels very happy but he was shocked at the same time to learn that his daughter-in-law was a whore. He tells Teddy:

I’ve never had a whore under this roof before. Ever since your mother died. My word of honour. Have you ever had a whore here? Has Lenny ever had a whore here? They come back from America, they bring the slop bucket with them. They bring the bedpan with them. Take that disease away from me. Get her away from me.\(^\text{16}\)

Nevertheless, Max has a feeling that Ruth would be able to manage the house and keep the family together. When Teddy tells his father that his wife, Ruth is a very good cook, he is highly delighted and hopes that his daughter-in-law would prove another Jessie:

Well, it’s a long time since the whole family was together, eh? If only your mother was alive. Eh, what do you say, Sam? What would Jessie say if she was alive? Sitting here with her three sons. Three fine grown-up lads. And a lovely daughter-in-law. The only shame is her grandchildren aren’t here. She’d have petted them and cooed over them, wouldn’t she,
Sam? She’d have fussed over them and played with them, told them stories, tickled them – I tell you she’d have been hysterical.¹⁷

But Max’s hopes and dreams were shattered when Lenny proposed to use Teddy’s wife as a prostitute to raise money to mete out the family expenses. While going back to America, Teddy left his wife with his father to look after the family but Lenny objected saying that she would be an extra mouth to feed, and she would also need extra clothes. He asked his father if they could find money for all that from any source. Joey was willing to detain Ruth; so he said that he would save a certain amount for her from his wages. Max suggested that they would make a donation to meet out her expenses.

Lenny said that keeping Ruth with them would be an expensive affair because she would need clothes of latest fashion showing her off at her best. Max said that besides economic considerations, there are human considerations also. She was his daughter-in-law and she had to be kept in the manner she was accustomed. Lenny suggested that if Ruth were taken to Greek Street, everything would be solved because she could earn the money herself just by spending four hours a night. Lenny further said that she would bring a good sum as he had a good
clientele. Ruth agreed to that proposal but demanded a flat with three rooms and a bathroom. Her demand was accepted by Lenny. Teddy also gave his approval to his proposal. It was also agreed that during the day, she would cook, sweep the floor and keep everyone company. As Teddy was about to depart for America, Max gave his photograph to him to show it to his grand children. Teddy left for America leaving his wife behind to enter in the flesh trade market.

The play clearly indicates that prostitution was the family business of Max. His wife Jessie was a whore. His son, Lenny was a pimp and he had a good clientele. Before her marriage, Ruth was also a whore. After her marriage, she must have caused a lot of harassment to poor Teddy on the campus. He felt relieved when his wife Ruth agreed to stay in the family and inaugurate her new adventure in the flesh trade.

Thus, Pinter brings to light the perversities along with financial hardships which ruined not only the individuals but also the established family-life.

Arnold Wesker highlights the point how the emergence of individualism and the changing political situation of the world adversely affected the ideal of brotherhood and good
family-life. Wesker’s vision of a happy human brotherhood and unified and peaceful family life sharply contradicts the contemporary situation prevailing in Great Britain. The Wesker’s ‘Trilogy’ is a significant exploration of the impact of the Communist Movement on a working-class family in the East End of London through two generations, from 1936 to 1959. ‘The Trilogy’ studies the effect of this political movement on the East End Jewish family of the Kahns highlighting the role of the family in the Anti-Fascist Spanish Civil War during the emergence of the Labour Government and the Welfare State. ‘The Trilogy’ traces the forces of disintegration not only in the movement but also in the family and the individual. The playwright grapples with the question of genuine human relationship in the family in an industrial society.

In ‘Chicken Soup with Barley’, there are a variety of characters united for a common purpose. They have a sense of family solidarity as Jewish families often have. They have political zeal for heralding a new world. Their commitment to their political ideology keeps them and their families united. Sarah is the central character caring about everybody, fussing about everything and taking upon her shoulders every responsibility of the family. It is the period when all the world was a communist, and these
working-class characters seemed to have no doubt that something great was going to happen very soon. They had a purpose in life, were sure of the direction of their struggle and were happy in their consciousness of dedicating themselves to the cause of class struggle in a capitalist system. Harry’s congenital lethargy and Sarah’s vigorous but ineffective attempts to make him more active are skillfully interwoven into the hubbub of political idealism and youthful eagerness.

To the Kahns family in the East End of London, words like ‘democracy’, ‘freedom’ and ‘brotherhood’ had a very deep meaning. They offered to all the members of the family a sense of purpose of living together in a family. The Kahns family headed by Sarah and Harry remained united so long as the members of the family kept themselves engaged in the battle against the Fascists. The Kahns family joined the ‘Battle of Cable Street’ of October 1936 unleashed by the British Union of Fascists headed by Sir Oswald Mosley. When the Fascist demonstration with a show of artillery and guns with police on horseback wielding batons was held in the Cable Street, Sarah, Harry, Dave, Monty and other trade union workers made a plan to stop it on the way. Mosley’s political demonstration on their doorsteps was opposed
tooth and nail by them though they were charged with batons and some of the young boys and girls opposing the Fascists were severely injured. The victory was won by them but the Fascists counterattacked a week later when they threw several people through windows and attacked Jewish property. While Dave and Monty and their supporters kept throwing stones and bottles at the Fascists, Harry went on waving his red flag. The Battle of Cable Street was an anticipation of Hitler’s War and the challenge to be thrown by his Nazi party to the Jews. However, the neutrality of the British government during the Fascist demonstrations under the very nose of the British government shocked all those who regarded fight against Fascism as a crusade. Monty tells Prince and Hymie that the British government was licking the feet of the Fascists in order to please Hitler:

I bet we have a revolution soon. Hitler won’t stop at Spain, you know. You watch him go and you watch the British Government lick his arse until he spits in their eye. Then we’ll move in.18

When the Spanish War broke out in 1936, Dave and Monty joined the War as crusaders. They were encouraged and supported by the Kahns family. In the same way, both these boys participated in the Second World War but Sarah’s
son Ronnie and Dave and Monty lost faith in socialism after the crushing of the Hungarian revolution under the iron heels of the Soviet Union. With the loss of their faith in the communist ideology, the Kahns family was broken and it lost its purpose and direction. Ronnie tells his mother how her great ideal has exploded in front of her eyes and how her family has disintegrated:

"You wanted everybody to be happy but you wanted them to be happy your way. It was strawberries and cream for everyone—whether they liked it or not. And now look what’s happened. The family you always wanted has disintegrated, and the great ideal you always cherished has exploded in front of your eyes."  

Though the boys and girls have left Sarah, and Harry is permanently crippled, Sarah does not lose her faith in the ideology which has warmed and energized her since her childhood. She tells Ronnie that socialism is her life and light and she would never give it up:

"But all my life I’ve fought. With your father and the rotten system that couldn’t help him. All my life I worked with a party that meant glory and freedom and brotherhood. You want me to give it up now? You want me to move to Hendon and forget who I am? If the electrician who comes to mend my fuse blows it instead, so I should stop having electricity? I should cut off my light? Socialism is my light, can you understand that? A way of
life. A man can be beautiful. I hate ugly people—I can’t bear meanness and fighting and jealousy—I’ve got to have light.20

Thus, the Pre-War and Post-War social and political milieu had a very crushing and damaging effect not only on individuals but also on the family life of individuals. This point has been highlighted not only by Osborne but also by Pinter and Wesker in their plays.
REFERENCES


5. Ibid. P. 30.

6. Ibid. P. 95.

7. Ibid. PP. 96.


10. Ibid. P.61.


12. Ibid. P.81.

13. Ibid. P.63.

15. Ibid. P.62.

16. Ibid. P.58.

17. Ibid. P.61.


20. Ibid. P.67-68.