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## | RESEARCH ARTICLE

### Anger as Psychological Identity in John Osborne's Look Back in Anger

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#### | ABSTRACT

This play by John Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, was published in 1955. It premiered at the Royal Court Theatre in 1956 and was a landmark in the New Drama movement in British theatre. It focuses on Jimmy Porter, whose burning anger symbolizes the problems confronting the disenchanted lower classes of Britain in the 1950s to 1970s. As a result, Jimmy's anger at social injustices and his use of aggressive language make the play one of the greatest works of mid-20th-century literature. This article argues that feelings of anger are not just an emotional state, but can become a significant part of Jimmy's psychological makeup, stemming from intense frustration with his working-class roots and the conflict between his intellectual ambitions and the upper-class values he encounters. It explores how feeling angry alters Jimmy's self-image, influences his marriage and friendships, and portrays an identity shaped by anger. Research highlights how anger reflects inner conflicts, insecurities, and unmet needs; it also explains how individuals construct meaning in an alienated, hypocritical society, and ultimately how anger can be relevant for asserting existential identities in the modern era.

#### | KEYWORDS

British theatre -John Osborne -Post British society -Angry Young Men -Jimmy Porter -Anger- Psychological Identity

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#### 1- Introduction

John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956) is widely regarded as a landmark of later British theatre as it reflects contemporary social and political issues, provides realistic depictions of middle and working-class characters, and demonstrates authentic settings and dialogue, marking an early departure from established literary styles. John Taylor Russell (1968) describes the play as "The beginning of a revolution in the British Theatre, while Emi Roy (1972) affirms that "British Drama renewed its claim on literary eminence with the premiere of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*. Britain's international power declined considerably in the wake of World War II. The year 1956 was a year of significant international and domestic crises, such as the Suez Canal crisis and complications with the implementation of the Mass Education Act of 1944. Social class disparities were also widening as more educated young men were unable to find jobs at a time when there was growing public dissatisfaction.

This play is associated with two major movements: The Angry Young Men and the Kitchen Sink Drama. Adopting playwrights who hailed from working-class backgrounds in the wake of post-World War II society, Angry Young Men critics expressed their dissatisfaction with government policies and traditional society in their narratives. Famous plays were written by John Osborne, John Braine, and Allan Sillitoe. A significant contribution of these writers was bringing a new heroic figure into the fold one who is portrayed as a lone character suffering from alienation, often depicted as a despondent and disillusioned individual, both in how he criticizes established systems and in the thoughts and actions of state-educated intellectuals; yet he becomes an outcast from the communities as a result of the mismatch between what

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had befallen their parents and what they had accomplished in school.

Moreover, *Look Back in Anger* exemplifies Kitchen Sink Drama, a cultural movement that arose in the 1950s and 1960s aimed at demonstrating the hardship of working-class people. Works of this type usually addressed domestic themes while dealing with issues of poverty, class struggle, religious revolt, and dissatisfaction with life, in particular, a move quite distinct from the early stage in which these themes were developed to address new social criticism. Osborne's play reinforced the transformation in British theatre while significantly influencing societal perceptions during its time. Alan Carter (1969) noted that "*Look Back in Anger* represents Osborne's greatest accomplishment in depicting everyday dilemmas alongside an appropriately contemporary hero. Jimmy Porter encapsulates key elements of the Angry Young Men movement, a symbol emblematic of societal disenchantment during its time. According to Russell (1968), who stated, "*Look Back in Anger* became representative of frustrations prevalent throughout society at that point; Jimmy serves as an embittered protagonist mirroring post-war youth disappointment towards preceding generations' failures, within this narrative framework exists Jimmy, a university graduate managing a sweet stall alongside friend Cliff Lewis, despite academic credentials compelling him into small business ownership merely for survival purposes.

Contemporary generations are divided into two groups: one consists of soldiers like Colonel Redfern (Alison's father), who fought in the war and see themselves as champions of traditional values and societal norms, versus post-war generations raised after the war, who believe many standards are meaningless. This division is especially reflected in Jimmy Porter, who feels deeply alienated. He seeks an identity amid indifferent surroundings that seem to lack purpose and relevance to life. In fact, this Identity loss or internal struggle often leads to emotional turmoil, which can cause harmful effects, either directed at himself or affecting his loved ones.

Many scholars have taken great care in defining what anger is. Professor Kassinove (2006) described anger as "a complex response that occurs when a person realizes that a threat is present and that danger has many sources throughout life. Ajit Kumar Jha (2013), for example, states that "Anger is a state of negative feeling and is largely linked to hostile thoughts, physical arousal, and maladaptive behaviors". Thus, while anger can destroy the self and the environment, it can also provide an individual with an encouraging nudge to solve problems. Anger shifts from a simple impulse to a psychological construct of a human being. The primary change relates to a person's desire for growth, which is often a key aspect of the change itself. As Jimmy consistently navigates these challenges, he encounters new difficulties that have been examined over many years.

## 2- Literature Review

Psychological identity encompasses an individual's internal perception of self, shaped by their beliefs, emotions, values, and interpersonal connections. This identity develops through the interplay of personal experiences and social environments. Erik Erikson (1968) stated that the theory of psychosocial identity is "a sense of personal sameness and historical continuity. "When this sense of stability is jeopardized by factors such as social alienation, moral disillusionment, or emotional loss, a person may undergo an identity crisis, prompting a struggle to define themselves in a world perceived as meaningless or indifferent.

Jimmy Porter serves as a prime example of Erikson's notion of an identity crisis, fluctuating between feelings like anger, compassion, and despair. His anger not only signifies his effort to assert his identity within a vast society that he claims lacks noble causes, stating, "There aren't any good, brave causes left" (Osborne, 2002, p.78), but it also offers him an alternative purpose amid societal vacuity.

A related concept that connects anger with psychological identity is Existential identity. The French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, during his lecture titled "Existentialism is a Humanism," argues that existence comes before essence. This assertion highlights the notion that a person's identity is not predetermined but is shaped by their own decisions and experiences throughout life. From an existentialist viewpoint, one's identity emerges from individual decisions. As for Jimmy Porter, his anger is integral to his being; it acts as a vehicle for establishing his identity in an uninspired society. In this light, anger replaces belief systems and political ideologies as the core component of who he is. Jimmy asserts: "Nobody thinks, nobody cares; no beliefs, no convictions; no enthusiasm" (p.11).

The third and most significant theory for this study is the Psychoanalytic view of anger. It can be seen as a defense mechanism. According to Sigmund Freud, a defense mechanism is an unconscious psychological strategy used to deal with reality and protect self-image by denying unacceptable thoughts or feelings. Anna Freud (1937), in her book "*The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense*," noted that defense mechanisms shield a person from the anxiety of confronting personal weaknesses and failings. They help the mind find and compromise solutions to conflicts it cannot fully resolve. As she introduced, there are eight types of defense mechanisms: denial, repression, displacement, projection, reaction formation, regression, rationalization, and sublimation, all of which may be associated with Jimmy's character. Denial, repression, and displacement are likely the most relevant in Jimmy's case. Denial occurs when a situation or fact becomes

too overwhelming, leading a person to refuse to acknowledge it to avoid facing negative consequences. Repression involves completely suppressing the situation from consciousness, burying disturbing memories or thoughts in the subconscious to prevent painful or dangerous feelings from surfacing. Displacement involves shifting emotions from the source to another person or situation to avoid frustration. A noteworthy comment on these defense mechanisms and Jimmy Porter's character is Walworth's (1968) argument: "Jimmy's biting sarcasms are, in a sense, really directed inwardly against himself in the manner of a guilt-ridden Dostoyevsky hero who tortures himself by torturing others. It is not love he had envisioned; it is self-laceration.

Various studies are relevant, for example, Yerebakan (2010), who argued in his article that language determines characters' status. Their language is quite identifiable in terms of class. Osborne makes his characters speak according to the social position they hold. Jimmy, for example, uses common speech; he never controls his speech but rather uses angry language to reflect his inner conflicts and disaffection. Cliff, Jimmy's friend who acts as a foil, uses similar common speech, but his vocabulary is limited, and his accent is typical of his working-class background.

Unlike both Jimmy and Cliff, Alison uses a sophisticated, genteel language; also, Helena, Alison's friend, speaks eloquently, matching her middle-class status. Yerebakan concluded that in *Look Back in Anger*, individuals are divided along class lines, and their class background significantly influences their relationships. Using such controversial characters, Osborne expresses his contempt and distrust for the ruling class, the entrenched institutions of contemporary Britain, and, above all, the sense of isolation and disaffection created by the division of post-war British society. This study helps explain Jimmy's behavior, particularly how his education and working-class roots place him in a no-man's land. It is relevant in illustrating Jimmy's social class identity of anger.

Another relevant study is Naz & Jamil (2015), which analyzed Osborne's character Jimmy Porter and his identity crisis from a psychoanalytic perspective, highlighting Erikson's theory. Jimmy is constantly complaining about society's corruption, injustice, and chaos, and he is always angry, never showing satisfaction. Instead, he is like "a wolverine stone Hamlet, unable to lessen this anger nor able to take any actions," which heightens his frustration. He believes society has robbed him of his goals, values, and purpose in life. Additionally, Jimmy longs for companionship with anyone with whom he can share his ideas and feelings about institutions like society, religion, and politics in his search for identity and validation. His early childhood trauma, especially the death of his father, played a crucial role in shaping his personality and feelings of insecurity. Jimmy's ongoing struggle for identity deepens his insecurity and causes him to view women negatively, viewing them as predatory, selfish, ignorant, and insensitive. Because his wife comes from a higher social class, he fails to ignite warm feelings of love in her. The study concludes that Jimmy's quest for identity and acceptance in a society hostile to him was unsuccessful, leaving him angry and alienated not only from society but also from his loved ones.

### **3- Discussion**

#### **3.1: Anger as Jimmy's Psychological Identity**

In John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, the character Jimmy Porter's entire psychological identity is rooted in his anger. This emotion is not merely transient; rather, it constitutes the core of his psychological makeup. Anger framework represents the interplay between Erikson's identity crisis, Existential assertion, and psychoanalytic defense. To start with, anger is Jimmy's way of self-definition. Self-definition is demonstrated through various facets, all of which will be examined in this discussion. As for Jimmy, anger is a sign of life in a crippled society. Jimmy declared that he learned at an early age what it meant to be angry, angry, and helpless. And he can never forget it. "I knew more about love ... betrayal and death, when I was ten years old than you probably know all your life" (*Look Back*, 52). In this way, Jimmy linked his anger to childhood trauma over his father's slow death. Jimmy recalled caring for a dying father during adulthood. This experience left him feeling helpless. So, instead of processing grief or despair, Jimmy transforms it into hostility. Anger thus becomes his psychological refuge, his way of asserting existence.

Also, anger serves as a social identity. At this point, it is useful to point out Henri Tajfel and his Social Identity Theory. Social Identity Theory was developed in the 1970s by Henri Tajfel and his colleague Turner. Social Identity Theory is a crucial aspect of identity. It is part of self-concept and is derived from the knowledge that one belongs to one or more social groups, such as political or religious groups. Social Identity Theory aims to specify and predict the circumstances under which individuals think of themselves as individuals or as group members. Jimmy Porter has no social privilege; anger is the tool through which he can assert himself within a complacent society.

His psychological identity is built around not belonging to any group, and this intensifies his sense of alienation. As he said, "Nobody thinks, nobody cares. No beliefs, no convictions, and no enthusiasm. Just another Sunday evening" (p.11).

Furthermore, he mocks Alison's background to highlight the gap between his working-class roots and her privileged upbringing. Jimmy said, "They're either militant like her mummy or daddy. Militant, arrogant and full of malice. Or vague. She's somewhere between the two" (p.13). His anger reveals that he is a person who still experiences emotions profoundly, in contrast to those in his vicinity. In addition, Jimmy wields anger in such a way to show that he is alive and capable of deep feelings. Considering his educational background, Jimmy feels that he is superior to others: "I am the only one who knows how to treat a paper or anything else in this house" (p.6), or in another comment, "It's pretty dreary living in the American age, unless you are an American, of course. Perhaps all our children will be Americans" (p.11). Jimmy recognizes that the essence of his identity is rooted in the depth of his emotional experience; he cried, "There aren't any good, brave causes left" (p.78).

Furthermore, Jimmy may be considered a representative of the Angry Young Men in this play. Osborne made Jimmy speak on their behalf to reflect their frustration with class barriers and lack of opportunities. Jimmy embodies the angry young men's generational frustration. He said, "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 the forties, when we were still kids." (p.78). Jimmy often sees himself as a product of Britain's great past. In the past, he saw a noble and fulfilling state of being. The present, on the other hand, is an unfulfilling time in which a "dreary" American age has replaced the British age. Thus, his anger becomes his substitute for the lost ideals of earlier generations. "A few more hours, and another week gone. Our youth is slipping away. Do you know?" (p. 9).

Another noteworthy fact about Jimmy is that his self-definition is rooted in his disillusionment. His aggressive tirades may be his way to define himself against a world that he feels has failed to offer him meaning or connection. His anger becomes a substitute for personal fulfilment and also a way to assert his existence.

Second, anger arises from feelings of estrangement and disposition. Jimmy feels out of place among his peers, constantly directing his frustration at others. However, the truth is that he is ultimately venting his rage at himself through outbursts aimed at his wife, Cliff, and Helena; he refuses to accept things as they are. He wants to change everything around him, but neglects to change himself. As a result, he feels socially marginalized by both the working class and the middle-class elite. This marginalization fuels his psychological bitterness, leading him to use anger as a way to assert his existence: "Nobody thinks, nobody cares, no faith, no conviction, and no enthusiasm. Just another Sunday evening." (p.11). or when he said, "The injustice of it is almost perfect! The wrong people going hungry, the wrong people being loved, the wrong people dying." (p.88).

Third, anger functions as a psychic defense. At the beginning of the play, Jimmy is described as "a disconcerting mixture of sincerity and cheerful malice, of tenderness and freebooting cruelty, restless, importunate, full of pride, a combination which alienates the sensitive and insensitive alike" (p.4). Beneath this harshness and mockery lies a deep sensitivity. His sudden outbursts of anger act as a shield, hiding his feelings of grief, insecurity, and helplessness. Often, Jimmy's rage masks his true tenderness. Although he finds it hard to express his emotions, he struggles to show his love for his wife. As someone from the working class with intellectual dreams, he feels strong resentment toward her upper-middle-class status. He often resents her privileges and criticizes her for being emotionally distant and unable to understand his pain. He admitted, 'She was moved long ago into another world. Too far away from me to see her. Jimmy accuses Alison of being emotionally cold, and he tries to awaken her through his cruelty. He said, "Don't think I could provoke her. Nothing I could do would provoke her" (p.13). Furthermore, Jimmy compares Alison to a snake swallowing him alive, "She has the passion of a python, she just devours me whole every time as if I were some oversized rabbit" (p. 31). Also, Jimmy attacks her parents. "They are either militant like her mummy and daddy. Militant, arrogant, and full of malice. Or vague. She is somewhere between the two" (p.13), and in return, her family disapproves of Jimmy. Thus, in this way, Jimmy intensifies the tension between him and his in-laws and heightens the class division. His anger against Alison's family represents his rejection of her class privilege.

Further, anger shapes his intimate relationships. In fact, Jimmy and Alison's relationship is built on both passion and hostility. Jimmy loves his wife tenderly, but he expresses his tenderness through cruelty and emotional aggression. Alison, in return, is passive and detached. She only sits down silently, enduring his tirades rather than openly confronting him. He wanted her very much to suffer in order to learn. He said, "Oh, my dear wife, you have so much to learn. I hope you learn it one day. If only something, something happened to you and woke you out of your beauty sleep. If you have a child and they would die: (p.31). Also, in his comment ' You seem to have a wonderful relaxation of spirit. You have got to be really brawny to have that kind of strength, the strength to relax. To relax, you have to swear your guts out (p. 89).

Moreover, his relationship with both Alison and Helena dramatizes the tension between his emotional need and self-assertion. Many critics, such as Ruby Cohn (2001), suggest that Jimmy's inability to love stems from ego insecurity. He fears intimacy because it threatens the fragile identity he has built around defiance. He seems to be very weak even to confess his love.

#### **4-Conclusion**

John Osborne does not deny that anger is an important part of psychological identity in his play "Look Back in Anger." Not only does this emotion give Jimmy Porter a way to express himself, but also a way in which to prove his own existence, or to challenge the oppressive despair that so much of postwar British society has been suffocating as a reality. Beyond that, though, Porter's bitterness serves as a broader indictment of societal frustration, but it is more than that; it holds the meaning of existential fear, the extent of his unresolved pain being an internal struggle that is haunted by the inability to realize that he and all those who came before him have become lost in the ocean. This anger is a longing to live in a world that has completely ceased to be genuine, honest, and appreciative of passionate living. Even more than that, anger acts as both a manifestation and a representation of personality in "Look Back in Anger." Jimmy has a fragility and insecurity in the eyes of the world, an unfeeling world that he can feel the loss of everything. Anger is a telltale sign of Jimmy's true self.

Finally, John Osborne shows how anger, however destructive though it is, is a cry for help, a kind of psychological act of survival.

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