

“She is tuned in a different key”: A Short Note on Alison’s Character in *Look Back in Anger*

Arpan Adhikary

(Assistant Professor in English, Government General Degree College at Kaliganj, Nadia, W.B.)

John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* dramatizes the anxieties, crises and discontents of a particular generation of the post-war Britain – of which Jimmy Porter is a representative figure. Jimmy’s wife Alison is always the soft target of her husband’s vehement and angry tirades directed against the upper-middle class of the then British milieu whom Jimmy apprehends to be hypocritical, nonchalant and reactionary. Temperamentally, as well as culturally and ideologically, Jimmy and Alison are poles asunder. Unlike Jimmy’s working-class ethos and somewhat revolutionary stance, Alison has the refined sensibility and values of the upper class – which, however, are castigated and ridiculed by Jimmy. Except in their passionate emotional intimacy, nowhere does Alison have any affinity with Jimmy, and Osborne drives home this aspect of Alison’s character in the very initial stage direction of the play where he says that Alison “is tuned in a different key”. Significantly, her key is that of “well-bred malaise” as set in contrast with and even “drowned” by the “robust orchestration” of Jimmy and Cliff.

Unlike the angry diatribe of Jimmy, Alison’s discontent finds expression in her melancholia which she bears with patiently. And it is precisely this very patience of Alison that irritates Jimmy, since he wants everybody around him to be as expressive and offensive as he is. All the same, Alison is to a certain extent nonchalant, apathetic and oblivious to her husband’s anger and anxiety because she cannot feel Jimmy’s personal woes with her sophisticated upbringing, and her apparent expression of tolerance is not exactly suggestive of acceptance of the rowdy and boorish attitude of Jimmy, but rather of her contempt for it. It is for the obvious disparities in between the two that it shocked all of Alison’s relatives and especially her parents when she declared she was going to marry Jimmy. And it often seems awkward to the reader how such a relationship can provide for the amount of affection and love that both Jimmy and Alison have for each other.

Jimmy astutely defines Alison as Lady Pusillanimous: in his view her character covers all the significations of the epithet provided in dictionary, as he reads out. However, Alison is not quite “mean spirited” or “cowardly”. Had she been so, she would not have dared to marry Jimmy in the face of familial opposition and stark reality about Jimmy himself. Nor is she one “having a little mind”. In fact, Alison is quite broad-minded and uninhibited to approve of Jimmy’s pre-marital promiscuity and his staying together with Helena in her absence. The only reason why she cannot orchestrate with Jimmy temperamentally is her indispensable association with her class-specific cultural sophistication – which is essentially at odds with Jimmy’s anarchic expression of his anger.

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