



Deprived Childhood: A Study of Jimmy in *Look Back in Anger*.

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This paper purports to discuss the influence of Jimmy's deprived childhood on his later behaviour. In this paper special focus is placed on Jimmy's problematic relations with women, his obsession with suffering and loneliness, and the problem of his maladjustment.

One of the widely aired views about Jimmy is that he is "a cruel and even morbid misfit in a group of reasonably normal and well-disposed people."¹

According to A.E. Dyson:

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, and more human than they normally are... Jimmy's sense of outrage is so little controlled by either selflessness, stoicism or any clear discipline of the mind that it readily degenerates into moods profoundly destructive to life. The alarming juxtapositions in his make-up, with a holy crusade against stupidity on the one side, and a neurotic shrinking from in-laws and church bells on the other, cannot be escaped. His motives are hopelessly mixed. One can never be sure whether his anger with Alison centres in a genuine desire to save or in an ugly type of possessiveness heavily disguised.²

From this observation by Dyson we can collect that Jimmy is angry, dissatisfied, and restless. He is not able to make harmonious relationships with anybody. His attacks on his friend and on his wife are inconsistent. He criticizes Cliff both for not reading the *New Statesman* and for reading it. He taunts his wife for being well-educated and he taunts Cliff for his ignorance. From the very beginning, it is clear that he has not acquired the normal techniques for accepting the fact of suffering. In fact, he seems obsessed with the sense of suffering. He represents the self-tormented solitary in "self-inflicted exile from the world, drawing strength from his own weakness and joy

from his own misery."³ He is dissatisfied and is always railing. He is always angry, protesting, anxious and lonely. He is always complaining and he compares his predicament with that of a "lonely bear."

Jimmy's personality has, however, been treated by John Osborne, the playwright, in a critical manner and we are provided insights into the causes of his behaviour and attitudes. His anger arises from the disparity between his own working-class origin and the upper-middle class to which his wife belongs. Another reason for his dissatisfaction is that he is leading a routine life that offers no excitement or even variety. He hates Sundays because Sundays depress him by their sameness. This is how he grumbles about the monotony of Sundays: "Always the same ritual. Reading the papers, drinking tea, ironing. A few more hours, and another week gone. Our youth is slipping away."⁴ Yet another reason for Jimmy's bitterness is that he finds both his friend Cliff and his wife Alison to be completely devoid of any kind of enthusiasm. This is how he states the case: "Oh heavens, how I long for a little ordinary human enthusiasm. Just enthusiasm that's all" (p.15). A little later he complains thus: "Nobody thinks, nobody cares. No beliefs, no convictions, and no enthusiasm. Just another Sunday evening" (p.17). He feels irritated by the general apathy and mental inertness of Alison and Cliff.

But when examined closely, all of his dissatisfactions and grumbings seem to be rooted in his childhood experiences. After birth, a child is exposed to numerous environmental forces. These forces have a decisive impact on the physical, emotional, intellectual, and moral development of a child. The child can develop into a balanced human being only when provided with suitable opportunities and atmosphere. The attitude and behaviour of members of the family go a long way to shape and determine both a child's concept of self



and his outlook on life. The elements of a family conducive for the healthy development of a child were absent in Jimmy's family. There was no love, no care, and no mutual respect in his parents' relationships with each other. He was deprived of these basic goods of life right from his childhood. As Jimmy himself points out, "I learnt at an early age what it was to be angry - angry and helpless" (p.58). He further tells Helena, "I knew more about - love...betrayal... and death, when I was ten years old than you will probably ever know all your life" (p.58). Parental love, especially the mother's love is the most powerful and most typical expression of the feeling of attachment. A mother's love and affection are the most important factors in developing a child's behaviour and general attitude toward life. But this love and affection were missing in Jimmy's lot. His mother was keen to associate herself with the upper middle class only. This was not all. She was emotionally cold also. She had no genuine feelings for her husband and for her little child. So, Jimmy, in want of motherly affection was emotionally disturbed right from his childhood and above all, at that tender age, he had to see his father's slow death, his suffering, and his despair. A.D.Choudhuri rightly points out, "The failure, despair, and bitterness of his dying father may be a contributory factor to the sense of instability and futility he demonstrates throughout."⁵ This traumatic experience of his childhood made him a bit morbid in thinking and developed in him a powerful sense of isolation and belief in nothingness. He says:

For twelve months, I watched my father dying - when I was ten years old. He'd come back from the war in Spain, you see. And certain god-fearing gentlemen there had made such a mess of him, he didn't have long left to live. Everyone knew it- even I knew it. But, you see, I was the only one who cared. His family was embarrassed by the whole business. Embarrassed and irritated.... The family sent him a cheque every month, and hoped he'd get on with it quietly, without too much vulgar fuss.... Everytime I sat on the edge of his bed, to listen to him talking or reading to me, I had to fight back my tears. At the end of twelve months, I was a veteran.... All that that feverish failure of a man had to listen to him was a small, frightened boy....He would talk to me for hours, pouring out all that was left of his life to one, lonely, bewildered little boy, who could barely understand half of what he said (pp. 57-58).

His observation of his father's death, his suffering, and his despair made Jimmy bitter, frustrated and disillusioned. The apathetic and

indifferent attitude of his father's family members made him feel lonely and bewildered. His father's family's responsibility was only up to sending him cheques. There was no one else to care for him except Jimmy. After his acquaintance with such emotionally sterile people, Jimmy starts believing in the philosophy of nothingness. The experience is rendered even more bitter by the indifferent and apathetic attitude of his mother toward his father. Jimmy says, "My mother looked after him without complaining, and that was about all" (p.58). She had no real emotions, no real feelings for her dying husband. She was "... all for being associated with minorities, provided they were the smart, fashionable ones" (p.57). Being frustrated with her own disappointment at being unable to associate with the fashionable set she must have been utterly incapable of sharing in her husband's agony or abating it in any way. This complete lack of sympathy between husband and wife leaves Jimmy with a warped view of husband-wife relationships.

His mother's callous behaviour strikes Jimmy as nothing less than a betrayal. From then onwards, he was always haunted by a feeling of an emotional vacuum that his mother's emotional coldness has created in him. He was always in search of affection, love, and enthusiasm which his mother lacked. The absence of motherly experiences forced him to seek a mother surrogate who could fill up his emotional vacuum. His relationships with Madeline are rooted in that emotional craving. He sought from Madeline that emotional solace that his mother couldn't give him. Her enthusiasm and her awareness about life made him attracted to her. Madeline was almost his mother figure. As Cliff points out, "She was nearly old enough to be his mother. I expect that's something to do with it!" (p. 71). The very fact that he sought Madeline as his mistress, though she was ten years older than him, makes us believe that he was longing for motherly care. Although Madeline was his mistress, she mothered him in the sense that she gave him that warmth that his own mother couldn't provide him.

For Jimmy "Just to be with her was an adventure. Even to sit on the top of a bus with her was like setting out with Ulysses" (p.19). Madeline's curiosity about things and people attracted Jimmy. For him "with her, it was simply the delight of being awake, and watching" (p.19). Her curiosity, awareness, and enthusiasm were a source of mental and emotional satisfaction for Jimmy. She was thus to some extent a mother surrogate for him. As Alison points out, "He wants something quite different from us. What it is exactly I don't know - a kind of cross between a mother and a Greek



courtesan" (p.91). Madeline fits in this description though Alison could never give him both of these things. It might be an unconscious step of Jimmy but the fact remains that his making Madeline a mistress has its roots in the deprived emotional life in his childhood.

Jimmy's childhood was emotionally deprived is further evident from the fact of his seeking a working-class mother substitute in Mrs. Tanner over whom he tear-jerks unashamedly. The sentimental nature of his relations with Mrs. Tanner appears vividly when he recalls how she was carried away emotionally when he first showed Alison's photograph to her: "She looked at it, and the tears just welled up in her eyes, and she said: 'But she's so beautiful! She's so beautiful!' She kept repeating it as if she couldn't believe it. Sounds a bit simple and sentimental when you repeat it. But it was pure gold the way she said it" (p.62). This is no doubt Jimmy's emotional lapse, who believes that the "simple and sentimental" is purified by its proletarian source. Again, Jimmy's concern and love for Mrs. Tanner is clear from his attitude when he gets the message of her getting a stroke. He is shocked and prepares to leave at once as if she was his own mother and later on, he performs all the funeral rites of Mrs. Tanner like her own son. But Alison's attitude towards that old lady is entirely different. Instead of going with Jimmy, she goes with Helena to the church. Jimmy has always loved Mrs. Tanner not only because she happens to belong to the poor class of society but more because he finds in her that mother image that he missed in his childhood. He wants Alison too, to respect her and be considerate to her. But Alison, on the contrary, has always ignored her and doesn't even send flowers at her funeral. How badly he feels about Alison's disrespect for Hugh's mother is explicit in his following speech:

For eleven hours, I have been watching some one I love very much going through the sordid process of dying. She was alone, and I was the only one with her. And when I have to walk behind that coffin on Thursday, I'll be on my own again. Because that bitch won't even send her a bunch of flowers - I know ! She made the great mistake of all her kind. She thought that because Hugh's mother was a deprived and ignorant old woman, who said all the wrong things in all the wrong places, she couldn't be taken seriously (p.73).

When Alison doesn't send flowers to Ms. Tanner's funeral Jimmy takes it as Alison's lack of emotional allegiance. He seeks complete emotional allegiance from her without asking. But after this incident, there is a complete emotional break

between the two of them. Neither of them is capable of satisfying the emotional needs of the other. When Jimmy is unable to find complete allegiance from Alison, he feels all the more lonely. He later protests to Alison, "You never even sent any flowers to the funeral. Not - a little bunch of flowers. You had to deny me that too, didn't you?" (p.94). His loneliness, further, finds a touching expression when asks Alison,

Was I really wrong to believe that there's a - a kind of burning virility of mind and spirit that looks for something as powerful as itself? The heaviest, strongest creatures in this world seem to be the loneliest. Like the old bear, following his own breath in the dark forest. There's no warm pack, no herd to comfort him (p.94.).

So, it is obvious that Jimmy is totally alienated from the world after Alison's this type of behaviour, thinking of himself to be a "lonely bear" with nobody to "comfort him". In fact, the death of Hugh's mother reminds Jimmy of his own father's death and Alison's apathetic attitude towards Hugh's mother reminds him of his own mother's attitude towards his father. In many ways, Alison is a portrait of his own mother. She resembles his mother in the sense that she belonged to the upper middle class to which his own mother belonged. This was not all. She like his mother was emotionally cold also. Though Jimmy wants her complete unquestioning love, she betrays him. He expects this complete allegiance all the more from Alison as she comes from that very class to which his own mother belonged. As Alison says,

It's what he would call a question of allegiances, and he expects you to be pretty literal about them. Not only about himself and all the things he believes in, his present and his future, but his past as well. All the people he admires and loves, and has loved. The friends, he used to know, people I've never even known - and probably wouldn't have liked. His father, who died years ago. Even the other women he's loved (p.42).

But Alison is unable to provide Jimmy the allegiance that he seeks from her. As she herself says, "But I still can't bring myself to feel the way he does about things. I can't believe that he's right somehow" (p.42).

Jimmy's resentment for Alison mounts when he finds that though she has married him, yet she remains mentally and spiritually in the world of her parents. He feels that Alison is allied to the upper middle class, his enemy, and her secret exchange of letters with her mother is viewed by



him as communication with the enemy. He finds Alison cherishing the values of that society, he has declared war on. While he wants Alison to be completely devoted to him and to his cause he finds her inert to his emotional needs. Lack of any emotional solace in his life right from his childhood makes him such that he is unable to appreciate anything which doesn't have some element of human pain and suffering. There is nothing like sheer joy to him. He is so much obsessed with the sense of suffering that he wishes even his own and Alison's child to die. He feels that through this she would come to know what suffering is.

Jimmy's obsession with suffering is pointed out by Alison also when she tells Helena, "Oh, don't try and take his suffering away from him - he'd be lost without it." (p.54). Though this statement is a bit ironic yet there is some truth in it. Jimmy would actually be lost without the sense of pain and suffering. Right from his childhood suffering has been his sole companion. His life as a child was devoid of any real joy, any real warmth, or affection. He had seen and known only pain and suffering, loneliness and death and these things have overshadowed his life.

Thus, the problems of Jimmy - his maladjustment in life, his anger, feelings of loneliness and suffering, and his problematic relations with women are greatly rooted in his childhood which was deprived of the experiences of parental love, warmth, care, and protection. He is not the epitome of an "angry young man" but a very exceptional individual, a tortured soul at war with itself and with the world too. His view about himself and his attitude toward others have been conditioned by his exposure to pain and suffering resulting mainly from human apathy. Thus, when viewed from the perspective of childhood experiences, Jimmy emerges as a more realistically drawn human being winning our sympathy and understanding of his predicament. This invests the play with more than topical significance and lends to it a timeless and universal human relevance.

REFERENCES

- [1]. A.E.Dyson, "General Editor's Comments," *Look Back in Anger: A Casebook*, ed. John Russell Taylor (1968; rpt. London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1975), p.23.
- [2]. *Ibid.*, p.26.
- [3]. John Russell Taylor, "John Osborne," *Look Back in Anger: A Casebook*, P.77.
- [4]. John Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* (1957; rpt. London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p.15.

All subsequent references to the text of this play are from the same edition and page numbers in all such cases have been given within parentheses immediately after the quotation.

- [5]. A.D.Choudhuri, *Contemporary British Drama* (New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1976), p.27.