

## Osborne's Look Back in Anger: Lamenting the Downfall of the British Empire

*Dr. Abdulla A. Bukeir*

Associate Professor of English Literature,  
Dean, Faculty of Arts and Humanities  
Alandalus University, Sana'a, Yemen

### Abstract

The main objective of this research is to study John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* (1956) and to investigate the implicit theme of lamenting the downfall of the British Empire that resides in the external and obvious theme of anger and discontent that the play is replete with.

The research comprises two main parts: the first part is a prelude about the historical period in which the British Empire began to degrade. There is also a brief summary about Osborne's drama that elucidates, in a way or another, the theme of the downfall. The second part of the research is devoted to the analysis of the play and to present how the theme of lamenting the downfall is manifested through Jimmy Porter's and Colonel Redfern's sense of nostalgia to the Edwardian flourishing era; comparing to the then post-war period in which Great Britain comes to lose its national identity as well as its supremacy as a leading world power.

The research comes to conclusion that the play is considered as a turning point in the history of the mid twentieth century British drama. It stands as an elegy to lament the downfall of the British Empire. It could be classified within the post-colonial literature.

Keywords: Lamentation – Nostalgia – National Identity – Colonialism / postcolonialism – Supremacy

### المخلص

يهدف البحث الذي بين أيدينا إلى دراسة مسرحية "انظر إلى الخلف بغضب" للكاتب المسرحي البريطاني (جون أوزبورن)؛ وتقصي فكرة رثاء سقوط الامبراطورية البريطانية الكامنة ضمناً في فكرة الغضب والاستياء التي تشكل فكرة أساسية واضحة وجليّة وطافية على السطح.

والبحث يتضمن جزئين أساسيين: أولهما مقدمة عن الفترة التاريخية التي بدأت فيها الخطوات الأولى لانحدار الامبراطورية البريطانية. بالإضافة إلى خلاصة موجزة للأعمال المسرحية للمؤلف (أوزبورن) والتي تظهر فيها، بشكل أو بآخر، فكرة الانحدار والسقوط.

أما الجزء الثاني فهو مكرس لتحليل المسرحية وإبراز فكرة رثاء سقوط الامبراطورية من خلال الشعور بالحنين إلى الماضي في شخصيتي (جيمي بورتر) و (الكولونيل ردفيرن) مقارنة بفترة ما بعد الحرب العالمية الثانية والتي بدأت فيها الامبراطورية البريطانية تفقد هويتها الوطنية وتفقد مكانتها السيادية كقوة دولية رائدة.

وتوصل البحث إلى خاتمة أن المسرحية تمثل نقطة انعطاف في تاريخ المسرحية البريطانية في منتصف القرن العشرين، وتشكل مرثاة تندب انحدار الامبراطورية البريطانية وسقوطها، كما يمكن أيضاً تصنيف هذه المسرحية ضمن أدب ما بعد الفترة الاستعمارية.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الرثاء - الحنين إلى الماضي - الهوية الوطنية - الاستعمارية / ما بعد الاستعمارية - السيادة

## Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*

### Lamenting the Downfall of the British Empire

#### Towards a Fading Empire:

When Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* was first performed in May 1956, Britain was still suffering of the aftermaths of the Second World War that ended in 1945. The general political atmosphere was that of a falling back Empire from the first great world power into a vulnerable state, experiencing serious crises both at home and abroad.

Sickness could be seen in the figures of the state. In the Royal Family there was the sudden grave illness of King Georg VI and his death early in 1951. In the Cabinet, the Prime Minister Sir Wenston Churchill had a serious stroke in 1953. He was succeeded by Sir Anthony Eden as an acting Prime Minister, who was himself sick. "The Government was haunted by ill-health. Bevin, Cripps and Attlee himself fell ill" (Thomson 228). This seems to be an evil omen to the British Empire.

Furthermore, the country had to face economical and financial crises that pushed the government to raise up both taxes and prices. "Inflammation crept on, encouraged by the cuts in food subsidies which inevitably raised the cost of living" (244). However, the government had to solve some crises within itself; and some problems with the Parliament.

The British Empire was in momentous troubles with its overseas colonies. They began to call for their outright freedom and independence; and the British government had to yield to their national will. India was at the forefront of these colonies to obtain its independence in 1947. This formed a great loss to the British Empire; since then many other colonies in Asia and Africa, during the fifties and sixties of the twentieth century called for their freedom.

During these two decades, British foreign relations with European and Commonwealth States "could be seen as a series of overlapping circles" (235). Thus the British government had no other alternative but to face what Thomson states: "A series of profound dilemma: to lean towards the Atlantic alliance, and especially the United States, or to the new evolving Commonwealth, with its large neutralist Dominions now led by India" (241).

While Great Britain started its descent into a second-rate world power. The United States of America started its firm steps to be indisputably the first world power. Britain gradually began to lose its imperial status and influence on the international community and to be a mere humble satellite in the diplomatic orbit of the United States. The British Minister of Health Aneurin

Bevan protested against this approaching Americanism saying his thunderous statement "We have allowed ourselves ... to be dragged too far behind the wheels of American diplomacy" (Qtd. in Thomson 240).

In July 1956, Egyptian government declared the nationalization of the Suez Canal Company. This act aroused the fury of the British government to its uttermost. Losing its mind, Britain decided to invade Egypt in October of the same year; in an alliance with France and the Zionist entity in Palestine. It was considered an illegal military aggression, condemned by the international community, including the United States of America who "backed the United Nations in condemning Britain for its aggression and forced Britain to both lose face and Canal" (Prasad xxv). Britain felt that its dignity had been injured, and its formal position and status as a dominant world power had been seriously damaged. In fact, this situation caused a deep wound to the already sick body of the senile British Empire.

The opposition against that military aggression was not restricted to the international community represented by the United Nations only; but there was also opposition inside the parliament of Great Britain and its government. Thomson regards this unjustified aggression as "a diplomatic blunder of the highest order" (255). He goes on to argue about the question of the Empire saying that the whole historical period in Britain was "of troubled national conscience and moral doubts: doubts about industrial strife at home, colonial repression, nuclear power and finally Suez" (257).

Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, thus, came to the stage in this critical period to lament the downfall of the British Empire, and to look back in anger and grief to the 'good old days' of the Empire when the sun was all the time shining on its wide-ranging territories eastward and westward. This theme of the downfall of the Empire, though less explicitly seen, yet it is also there in some of Osborne's succeeding plays of the fifties and the sixties of the twentieth century. These two decades of the mid twentieth century witnessed the emergence of the Angry Young Men drama. This "new wave" of writers and their plays, as the theatre critic Kenneth Tynan states, are distinguished as by a new sort of a hero, "a lower class intellectual with ribald sense of humour, a robust taste for beer and sex, and attitude of villainous irreverence towards the established order" (9).

It is not only the heroes who form a distinct group of characters, but also the playwrights themselves constitute a distinct group who detest the establishment.

In his second play *The Entertainer* (1957), one can feel a sense of nostalgia to the old bright days of the Edwardian period where everything was British: the style, the songs and the language. But now it is different where Britain has lost its national identity. The character of Archie Rice,

as Chiari suggests is "a decaying, corny, stale comedian who is obviously the epitome of the decaying society and entertainment world in which he lives" while his father Billy Rice "represents the Edwardian age" (111).

According to John Elsom, Archie Rice represents the frustrated and desperate post-war generation of a decayed state and society. Through this play, Osborne "considered the decline of Britain through the dead eyes of a stand-up comic, Archie Rice, and the loss of ordinary dignity, in private and public life, leads to a personal despair" (Elsom 78).

In his "Concluding Remark" about the 'Contemporary Drama' of the fifties and sixties, Chiari concludes that Osborne's *Luther* (1961), though a historical play, yet "it still carries with it a good deal of irritation against the established order which is found in *Look Back in Anger*" (210).

Many critics of drama agree that the most successful play after *Look Back in Anger* is, by no means, *Inadmissible Evidence* (1964). It is a play in which Osborne goes back to treat vehemently the political question of the fading British Empire. Maitland, the protagonist of the play, has more than one thing in common with Jimmy Porter, the central figure of *Look Back in Anger*. Harold Clurman in his book *The Naked Image* argues that Jimmy Porter "was bitter about England after the war. It had lost its ancient stature." Maitland, however, is another post-war British "angry young man" in whom many English men see themselves. Maitland is lost as Britain, his country, is lost. English people, says Clurman "honor Osborne for articulating their inner distress ... their concealed wounds, their soul sickness." He concludes his argument saying that "Maitland is an image of a festering England" (102 – 103). *West of Suez* (1971) is another play in which Osborne exposes the decline of the British Empire after the Second World War. Unable to see his Great Britain fading, he has to look back to the old good days of the Edwardian period with a sense of "self-loathing" as Elsom puts it; adding that it is a play "about the decaying colonial heritage of Britain" (80).

Among his television plays, *Very Like A Whale* (1971) stands as a good example to reveal the theme of patriotism and falling back of the post war British Empire; especially in "its anti-Americanism and its sense that the best of England's life is over" (Anderson 32)

Many critics of drama regard the performance of Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* in 1956 as a turning point in the British drama of the mid twentieth century and the most conspicuous play to open "the floodgates for the emergence of remarkable and diverse group of young dramatists" (Roy 99). The play aroused both the emotions and the sense of the British, especially the young,

towards the socio-political issues of their country; and above all the matter of the decaying Great Britain.

### **From Supremacy to Downgrade: Lamenting the Ailing Empire**

The incidents of the play *Look Back in Anger* take place in a tiny one-room flat in a Midland town in Britain. The time is the mid-fifties of the twentieth century; about ten years since the end of the Second World War. The whole incidents of the play take no more than several months in a very tiny flat. So, if this flat stands for Britain, as some critics suggest; therefore the vast areas of the colonial Empire are reduced to their minimum, after losing many of the prosperous colonies in Asia and Africa. Britain's imperial and international power is also reduced to give way for other world powers to emerge. The flat from within is described by Osborne as dusky as the fading glow of the colonial Empire. Smoke is everywhere in this tiny flat coming from the pipe of Jimmy. "Clouds of smoke fill the room ... the room is still, smoke filled ..., all cloud shadows" (LBA 10).

Human and social life in this close flat reveals uneasiness and unrest. There is no sign of delight and gaiety among the inhabitants: Jimmy, Alison and Cliff. There is no impression of "ordinary human enthusiasm" as Jimmy Porter puts it. Jimmy asks his fellow mates in a very sarcastic way "Let's pretend that we're human beings, and that we're actually alive. Just for a while" (15).

The young generation, presented in the character of Jimmy, suffers a state of distress and agony. The general psychological temper of both young and old generations is overspread with discontent. People seem to lose hope in everything since the country comes to lose its blaze as a leading international power.

Great Britain comes to lose its national identity, which is another symptom of the ailing senile Empire. For many decades, Britain had its fingerprint mostly in everything in the world politics, economics and culture. Even at home now everything seems foreign trade, and rarely one can find something which is originally British. Literature and culture is no more than reverberation of the French. Jimmy comments with anger and discontent "I've just read three columns on the English Novel. Half of it's in French" (10). English writers have nothing creative to give to their readers; the only thing they can do is repeating themselves; "Even the book reviews seem as the last week's. Different books same reviews" (10 – 11). One of the main ways to estimate the culture of a society is through its literature and press. Decades ago Britain had its distinctive literature and leading press According to Jimmy, this historical fact seems to be something from the past. However, the only thing that satisfies him now is to listen to some music by Vaughan Williams, the brilliant composer of the early twentieth century. The one who

composed music that bears real English scent. "Oh, yes. There's a Vaughan Williams. Well that's something, anyway. Something strong, something simple, something English" (17).

Osborne refers to this allusion to highlight the theme of losing national identity. To lose national identity means to lose the essence of one's national existence. What was going on in the mid twentieth century could be considered, as John Elsom states, "symptomatic of decline, of loss of national purpose which resulted in a decay of personal moral fibre" (73).

This theme is vehemently elaborated through Jimmy's bitter sarcasm of discontent. "Somebody said – what was it – we get our cooking from Paris (that's a laugh), our politics from Moscow, and our morals from Port Said" (17). This statement leaves nothing bright in British culture, since everything is imported from abroad. Britain has lost its morals by its aggressive act, preparing its invasion of Port Said in Egypt. Jimmy is wailing the falling down of Great Britain as a great world power in the new world order of the post war. Britain seems to accept forcibly the supremacy of Americanism. Jimmy asserts this historical fact in a sarcastic manner saying "I must say it's pretty dreary living in the American Age – unless you're an American of course. Perhaps all our children will be American" (17).

While Osborne, through Jimmy's rails, laments the downfall of the British Empire; he, at the same time, warns the English people of the dangers of Americanism hurling towards them. Saugata Mukherjee states that "The role reversal in the world politics for Britain was disconcerting for people. From being the colonizers they were virtually getting colonized, culturally and perhaps economically as well" (133). Mukherjee elaborates further this idea of losing both national identity and world power, arguing that

Jimmy does believe that the English are a superior race and is petrified that America may soon dictate English culture. This sense of loss, both of identity and power, makes Porter an insecure soul. It is perhaps, here where he acts as the mouthpiece for the entire British nation. (134)

Osborne, nonetheless, does not hesitate to glorify European colonialism through British colonialism in India. This seems evident in Jimmy's disputation with his wife, Alison, when he speaks about her father, Colonel Redfern, and the best days they had passed there.

The old Edwardian brigade do make their brief little world look pretty tempting. All home-made cakes and croquet, bright ideas, bright uniforms. Always the same picture: high summer, the long days in the sun, slim volumes of verse, crisp linen, the smell of starch, what a romantic picture. (LBA 17)

Porter, as a mouthpiece for Osborne and even 'for the entire Britain nation' looks back in anger in a nostalgic angry mood; he laments what he believes the 'shining past' of British Empire.

However, there is no sense of feeling towards the suffering of the Indians at those days. On the contrary, he glorifies, in a moment of despair, that past of the British Empire “If you’ve no world of your own, it’s rather pleasant to regret the passing of someone else’s” (17).

The lamentation of the downfall of British Empire is revealed through the character of Colonel Redfern and his nostalgic temper. He passed most of his youth in India as a commander of the Maharaja’s army. He left Britain in 1914 with a spirit of great dignity and enthusiasm, when Great Britain was in its uttermost glory. He was full of pride as an officer in one of the great imperial military forces in the world. Osborne introduces him on stage after Britain’s departure from India, losing one of the valuable pearls in its imperial crown. He is introduced as a man who “is often slightly withdrawn and uneasy now that he finds himself in a world where his authority has lately become less and less unquestionable” (63).

The Colonel returns back home in 1947; he is lost as his England is lost. He is left now to his reminiscence suffering the anguish of alienation and loneliness. Though the following speech is long; yet it is worthwhile to be quoted here:

The England I remembered was the one I left in 1914, and I was happy to go on remembering it that way. Besides, I had the Maharaja’s army to command – that was my world, and I loved it, all of it. At the time, it looked like going on forever. When I think of it now, it seems like a dream. If only it could have on gone forever. Those long cool evenings up in the hills, everything purple and golden.(68)

In this long statement, the Colonel seems to echo Jimmy’s wailing for the loss of the ‘purple and golden’ days of Great Britain in India. He has the same nostalgic sighs and the same feeling of pride. Again, as Jimmy, the Colonel extols the lost colonial power of the British Empire, giving no attention to the Indian people’s suffering.

However, the speech of the Colonel stands as a dirge lamenting the downgrade of the British Empire. It expresses the bitter passion of the agonized Colonel stricken by, what he may feel, the sudden loss of the British imperial power and colonial authority. The character of the Colonel stands, in a way or another, as an epitome of the senile Empire in a new world order led by the two super powers: United States of America and the Ex-Soviet Union. Emil Roy finds in the character of the Colonel a sympathetic and gentle person “Saddened by the passing of his world” (102).

Nandi Bhatia, on the other hand, interprets the Colonel’s sense of nostalgia accordingly “in the relation between the white British Colonizer and the colonized” (394). Both Jimmy and the Colonel lament this downfall. Jimmy realizes that the Colonel is “one of those sturdy old plants



left over from the Edwardian Wilderness that can't understand why the sun isn't shining anymore" (LBA 66).

Even when he comments on J.B. Priestley's essays in what he calls the dull Sunday papers, it seems clear that the whole concern is about the fading light of the British Empire. Priestly, the famous British writer of the century, in his writing is similar to the Colonel "still casting well-fed glances back to the Edwardian twilight from his comfortable, disenfranchised wilderness" (15). The Colonel, on the other hand, who exchanges the same sympathy with Jimmy, accepts willingly Jimmy's idea when he comes to confirm it as a certain reality, repeating almost the same words "Perhaps I am a – what was it? an old plant left over from the Edwardian Wilderness. And I can't understand why the sun isn't shining any more" (67). This, definitely, emphasizes the idea that both young and old generations realize the evident symptoms of the decline of their country. Both generations feel that they are left helpless to do anything. They lament what they believe the golden colonial and imperial past for their present decaying Empire.

In his elaborate "Introduction" to the Longman Study Edition (2006) of the play, professor G. Prasad comments on the sense of exchanging sympathy that relates Jimmy with his "class enemy" the Colonel, asserts that it "is brought about because of the sense of loss of what the older man had and the younger man can never have." (xv). Nandi Bhatia has a similar point of view suggesting that Jimmy "Exhibiting sympathy for the Colonel, he sighs about the end of the imperial dream" (391).

The theme of lamenting the downfall of British Empire overwhelms the whole world of the play through Jimmy's bitter rails. The "good, brave causes" that he is boasting with are in fact an echo to the fake slogan of the 'white man's burden' to enlighten and civilize the 'primitives' of Asia and Africa. The British Empire has lost its supremacy after losing its colonial existence in Asia and Africa. To wail the loss of the 'good brave causes' means to lament the downgrade of supremacy of the colonial British Empire. "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 kids. ... There aren't any good, brave causes left" (LBA 84). According to Jimmy such colonial acts of exploitation and plundering are "good, brave causes" while in fact they are against humanitarian principles and human rights.

### **The Senile Empire and Class Conflict**

Class conflict in the British society of the mid twentieth century is another symptom the fading Empire had to face. The play highlights this theme through Jimmy Porter and the offstage character of Hugh's mother in one side; and the Colonel's family members on the other side. Jimmy wages his fierce war against the middle-high class represented in the members of the

Colonel Redfern family. Excluding the Colonel from his attacks, Jimmy levels his arrows at Alison, his wife, and the two offstage characters of Nigel her brother and her mother. Jimmy's tiny and untidy flat becomes the battle field on which the labour class and the middle-upper class have to face each other.

From the very outset of the play, Jimmy wages his attack against Alison and behind her the upper social classes. He tries to provoke her to respond to his garrulity, but as usual she keeps silent and quite "you can talk, can't you? You can express an opinion. Or does the White Woman's Burden make it impossible to think" (LBA 11). As an exposed target for his darts, Alison is no more than a coward person of the middle-upper social class, since she ignores his assaults and avoids any kind of encounter. She and her brother Nigel "Sound like: sycophantic, phlegmatic and pusillanimous" (21). The word pusillanimous is not only an adjective to describe her but her name "Pusillanimous" is the word that Jimmy chooses to sum up Alison's character.

The whole British social and political establishment is taken as a target for Jimmy's assaults through Brother Nigel character. Nigel is a product of this upper social class, who has the opportunity to attend the famous Sandhurst training college for officers. However, he proves himself as a failure per excellence in all fields of knowledge. Nigel is "The Platitude from Outer Space ... And nothing is more vague about Nigel than his knowledge. ... The only thing he can do-seek sanctuary in his own stupidity" (20) Jimmy considers Nigel as a politician who lacks morals and another epitome of Great Britain's fading glory.

Alison's mother also is an offstage character; but she is always present in Jimmy's mind as the most disgustful of the Redfern family members. If Jimmy has some sense of sympathy with the Colonel, he has profound hate towards his wife. She is the real vehement social class enemy, who fights fiercely to "protect" her daughter from Jimmy the "ruffian". She has left no means to stop the wedding. According to Jimmy, she is a well-armoured warrior from the age of the "holy crusade." Jimmy loses his temper while talking about her; he goes too far to the extent that he loses his human moral decency to describe her "as a rough as a night in a Bombay brothel and as tough as a matelot's arm" (52).

In her paper about "The Role of Colonel Redfern", Salma Haque suggests that the class conflict of the 1950s in Britain "worries Jimmy greatly and he wants to root out the social disharmony created by it. In Jimmy's view, the upper-class members symbolize the fake aristocratic society which is incapable of genuine feelings for any human being" (33).

Ronald Hayman takes Jimmy as a spokesman for a disaffected generation; and his speeches throughout the play "were contrived to express the misgivings, the grievances and the impatience of almost everyone who resented the power and corruption of parents, Establishment, politicians,

and anyone with power, anyone who in 1956 could be blamed for the way Britain was drifting” (9 – 10). Class conflict, thus, in this play stands as another serious unseen bleeding wound to weaken the body of the senile Empire.

Osborne, like the other Angry Young Men playwrights of the post-war period, had realized this social phenomenon and treated it in their drama each in his own way of writing. Arnold Wesker's *Trilogy* (1957) is one of the outstanding examples of the angry drama to treat this theme of class conflict in general and the labour class critical circumstances in particular.

### Conclusion

When the play was first performed at the Royal Court Theatre in London, on 8 May 1956, it was enthusiastically hailed by most of British theatre critics. They considered it as a turning point in the history of the mid twentieth century British drama. It expresses a profound sense of anger and discontent of the post-war young generation.

The research, here, has attempted to manifest that the play bears within this sense of anger an implicit deep sigh of lamentation concerning the loss and the downgrade of Great Britain Empire. This theme is more evident in the nostalgic mood of both Jimmy Porter and Colonel Redfern. The essential historical matter that stirs Porter and behind him John Osborne and might be the whole nation, is the loss of supremacy of the colonial Empire. In this context the play might be considered and be classified within the post-colonial literature since the whole atmosphere of the play suggests this idea, though from the point of view of the colonizer.

Losing its supremacy as a great world power, Great Britain now is no more than a senile creature living its last decadent days as the play attempts to reveal. G. Prasad interprets the play as “a post-colony play, an end-of-the-Empire play. It is the growl and the whine of the wounded bear – the strong but now impotent, lonely and caged in a zoo bear – which we hear in the play” (xxiv)

The research also highlights the theme of “loss” that is seen through the eyes of the colonizer paying no attention to the colonized. Jimmy and the Colonel regret the ‘loss’ of the glory of their Empire with its old ‘shining days’ having no sympathetic feeling at the ‘loss’ of the colonized nations, throughout the decades of European colonization.

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