

Echoes of Disillusionment: Comparative Analysis of 'Look Back in Anger' and 'Aadhe Adhure' in Depicting Middle-Class Struggles

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine the social change that was occurring in the 1950s and 1960s in India and Britain by analysing two pivotal plays; “Aadhe Adhure” written by Mohan Rakesh and “Look back in anger” written by John Osborne. The plays bring forth the tumultuous times and its impact on the lower middle class families. Rakesh portrays a dysfunctional family whose spectres of the past still looms over it and amidst the financial instability, emotional drought and incompatibility they must seek their way forward. Meanwhile, Osborne's “Look Back in Anger”, presents a lower-middle-class family struggling to make ends meet in which the social class of members affects their daily life.

By reading both plays comparatively, focusing on the familial conflicts and the characters, this paper highlights what it was to live in the aftermath of consecutive world wars. And in a country which has newly gained independence and is still navigating its way through economic, political and societal stability. This paper contributes to the understanding of how dramatic literature reflects and interrogates broader social changes, offering insights into the lives of individuals navigating turbulent times in two distinct cultural contexts.

Keywords:

dysfunctional family; poverty; social mobility; post-war England; post-independence-India

Introduction

The mid 1950s were a troubling era for the world. The second world-war was just over and the world was trying to make sense of everything. The postmodern movement was getting into shape and humankind was delving deep into absurdities. The average human being of that time was either lost, angry or depressed. In the book "War and social change : British society in the Second World War", Harold Smith writes in the chapter "The promise of full employment" that there was a looming fear in the 40s that the people are not going to get jobs after the war. Because their experience with the previous war, World War I, foreseen that there are not going to be a lot of employment. (78-79).

The conditions in the English society following the Second World War were not ideal for it to thrive. The middle class especially were disillusioned and hopeless about the prospects of better employment even though many of them have an education from red brick universities as the protagonist of "Look Back in Anger". Talking about the post World War II England Morton Kroll in his article "The Politics of Britain's Angry Young Men" describes "A shrinking, faltering, crisis-ridden Britain in the 1950s, reflecting an admixture of values and a social structure these writers regard as oppressive, repulsive and antiquated is the social target of their dissent." (555-556). In such a time, the play "Look Back in Anger" is set, and its characters live in these miserable conditions. Jimmy Porter, the protagonist of the play, is the verisimilitude of "Angry Young Man" to be discussed later in the paper.

While England was struggling in the aftermath of two consecutive world wars, India, the setting of the second play the paper aims at analysing, was newly independent and a juvenile democracy. After 200 years of colonialism, according to economist Utsa Patnaik, India experienced a drain of wealth amounting to nearly £9.2 trillion between 1765 and 1938. With such a huge impact, India started its journey with a slow pace and the conditions of lower and middle class people were deplorable. The play Aadhe Adhure features a lower middle class dysfunctional family which is struggling to make ends meet in a slow economy where unemployment is rampant. Mahendranath, the protagonist of the play, is a failed businessman and does not work any more. His wife Savitri is the sole bread earner of the family.

This is the point where both plays intersect each other in their subject of discussion and the characters who are facing the wrath of an economic crisis and navigating their way through it. However, both plays are written in different corners of the world, their themes and dealing with the familial discord and resolution strikes similarities between the hardships and sufferings of the people. Both plays were written with the gap of 13 years, which is not much, but it would make an interesting analysis to see what made two authors write plays on such similar themes in different ways while living in different parts of the world.

While numerous papers have extensively analysed both plays individually, discussing various aspects and themes, there lacks a gap in literature, a lack of comparative study between these two plays. Being part of two influential literary movements, the “Nayi Kahani” or “New Story” in India and the “Angry Young Man” in England, both plays in consideration make a strong case for comparative studies. Through a comparative examination of these plays, a nuanced and potentially overlooked connection may emerge. Such an analysis has the potential to shed new light on themes and dynamics common to both movements, including the portrayal of societal change and individual struggles. The paper will bring new perspective to the scholarship regarding drama, “the angry young man” movement in England and insecurities in Indian families in the post-independence period. By bridging these two cultural and literary contexts, this study seeks to contribute fresh perspectives to existing scholarship.

Literature Review

Reetika Srivastava in her paper “Aadhe-Adhure: A Critique of Contemporary Domestic Life” talks about how Aadhe Adhure portrays a dysfunctional family on the verge of being disintegrated. The selfless efforts of Mahendranath and Savitri to run the family yet failing at it miserably. Reetika probes into the text while keeping an eye for the plight of a common family in post-independence India, where freedom is present, but contentment is absent. Talking about the absence of affection for each other in the Savitri-Mahendranath family, Reetika writes “The atmosphere in such a home is full of fire and fury, din and sound, distrust and disharmony, jealousy and ill will. The members of the house are torn by dissent.” (157)

Dr. Santoshkumar J. Mishra in his article “Changing Dynamics of Men and Women in Contemporary Indian Society With Reference to Halfway House by Mohan Rakesh” investigates the role of women and men in modern society. Mishra discusses the everyday struggles of urban middle-class individuals, with a special focus on women navigating the shift between traditional and modern norms. It delves into themes like the frustrations faced by working women dealing with unemployed family members, as well as the discomfort experienced by men as gender roles

evolve. Moreover, it looks at how materialistic pressures impact family dynamics. The study also zooms out to consider the wider societal context, examining how changing beliefs and practices are reshaping social norms and creating new spaces where traditional roles are being questioned.

Surabhi Saraswat's research "The Quest of Completeness: Mohan Rakesh's *Aadhe Adhure*" talks about the quest that the member of Savitri-Mahendranath family are on. Explicating on the question of quest of completeness, she writes -

"The quest of completeness is visible not only in Savitri but in all the characters, and they all look for their completeness in different ways, for instance Savitri's husband Mahendranath is shown to search for a new identity and reason behind his existence through his relationship with Juneja." (87)

In his doctoral thesis, Ibrahim Yerebakan analyses the class awareness in the play "Look Back in Anger"

"In fact, one can reasonably suggest that many of the causes of Jimmy's anger are related to conflicting class structures of modern society, its awfulness and consequently his inability to find himself a place where he can feel he fully belongs. In a traditionally class-conscious society, Jimmy is unable to identify with any of the social classes. His intelligence, the education he has received and the marriage he has made, put him into a different social environment from where he originally belongs." (181)

Anger is another crucial theme in the play "Look Back in Anger", Bhatia in his article "Anger, Nostalgia, and the End of Empire: John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*" analyses the connection between anger, nostalgia and the end of British Empire. Bhatia writes how Osborne was highly praised when the play was performed in 1956 and about the protagonist Jimmy Porter, who is a representation of a whole generation of disillusioned youth after the World War II. Talking about the nostalgia of the Colonel, Bhatia writes that -

The Colonel's nostalgia only reflects his belief in the relationship between the white British colonizer and the colonized. He recalls a relationship of unequal power - one of master and servant, officer and employee, with the balance of wealth, esteem and power all on the British side, as seen in their sprawling hill stations above the "crowded" and "suffocating" Indian world and the "dirty little train" at the railway station. Yet, representing India, as the Colonel does, as a land of opportunity and the fulfilment of colonial desires rather than a place of imperial plundering, the act of colonialism comes

across as legitimate. (394)

Michelle Gadpaille, in her article “Look Back in Anger and Popular Culture”, how successfully “Look Back in Anger” captures the popular culture of its time. Osborne portrays the age as accurately and as culturally accurate. In her research, she points out that the famous radio shows and situation comedies are in symmetrical to each other. Gadpaille specifically names the American sitcom “I love Lucy” as something which reflects the play, like the two member family and their constant fighting and loving.

Abdul Jaleel Fadhil Jamil's analysis of Jimmy's rage in “Look Back in Anger” portrays it as a symbol of rebellion against the societal malaise of British culture, emphasizing its significance as a potent expression of resistance to the established order. By interpreting Jimmy's anger as a response to the discontent and disillusionment prevalent in post-war Britain, Jamil highlights how it serves as a critique of the societal norms and values of the time. Jimmy's rebellious spirit is depicted as a manifestation of the broader frustrations and anxieties experienced by a generation grappling with the aftermath of World War II, positioning the character as a cultural symbol of defiance within British literature and theatre. (163)

By reviewing existing literature on both of the plays, we find ample research of every facet of the plays, however, there seems no apparent research where a comparative reading of the plays is available. This is where this paper tries to contribute, by reading both plays comparatively it will bring new perspective to a transnational phenomenon where similar themes emerged as points of discussion across literary genres. In the absence of existing scholarship of both the plays comparatively, there remains a gap to be filled, and this paper aims at that.

Methodology

I have selected the plays based on apparent similarity in their themes and characterisation. The families in both plays have striking similarities in their suffering and dealing with major political change. The aim is to analyse how, even in different social settings, people can suffer from similar afflictions. The analysis in this paper will focus on looking at the themes of the plays, setting and characterisation. By doing a comparative analysis, the paper will simultaneously look for similarities between the realities that the families are facing, what is the reason behind the dysfunctionality of the family. The historical background of the play, which plays a major role in the occurrence of the situation in which the families are currently involved, will also be comparatively analysed.

In the context of using various theories to analyse both plays, for example Marxism, feminism, cultural studies and psychoanalysis theories could be well applied to these plays and analysed on their specific grounds. This paper however does not utilise any theoretical framework as such and solely base itself on textual analysis and the various elements of the play.

Analysis

Twentieth century can easily be considered as one of the most tumultuous times in the history of humanity, Patricia Clavin in her article “Turbulence and the Lessons of History” written for the International Monetary Fund writes “History counters society’s perception that the challenge presented by this increasingly interconnected world is new. In the first half of the 20th century, the world reeled from one shock to another: World War I, the Spanish flu, communist revolutions, a Great Depression characterized by rival trade blocs, and a global geopolitical crisis generated by the Axis powers that resulted in World War II.” The aftermath of such high impact events are easily devastating for the people and in general the poor and downtrodden people because they are the people who have suffered the most in any calamity throughout history.

“Look Back in Anger” and “Aadhe Adhure” are such plays that display the shock of such events in the common peoples’ lives. Comparing both plays, the one emotion that overpowers others and relatively in focus in both plays is anger. The first attempt is to determine how in both plays, anger plays an important role in shaping the characters throughout the plays. In “Look Back in Anger” Jimmy who is highly educated and expects to have a respectable job, he fails to achieve this and now runs a sweet shop. Jimmy is disillusioned with society and the times, and thus he is angry all the time. He thinks the people like Alison, her mother and Helena present a “predatory, selfish, ignorant, and insensitive society.” (Weiss 4) Meanwhile, he has fond memories and care for his mistress Madeline and Hugh’s mother because they come from working class and thus are innocent, hard-working and selfless. Characters other than the protagonist are not that angry and remain calm.

In “Aadhe Adhure”, Savitri is the angry one, she is the sole bread earner of the family and is in constant stress of making ends meet. Her husband Mahendranath who is a failed businessman remains at home and does not help a bit, this is what infuriates Savitri even more. Savitri wanted a complete man as her husband, but Mahendranath is far from complete, and that is one of the many reasons why she is angry. (Sarasvat 87) There is the prevalent class

consciousness also that adds to the anger of Savitri, her husband does not earn, her son does not want to take a job, even though Savitri tries hard to help him to get one.

The dysfunctionality of the families in both plays is a highly discernible feature. "Look Back in Anger" and "Aadhe Adhure" both feature families which are hard to live with, and the result of this dysfunctionality is that a member of the family leaves the house. Jimmy is constantly angry and picks on Alison without any apparent reason. His malice towards the upper class people turns towards harming his own wife, Alison has become so used to his anger tirades that she considers it normal, only after the arrival of Helena that she realises that he is not healthy for her and that she should return to her family. There are communication gaps as well, which make the matters worse for Jimmy and Alison. When Hugh's mother gets admitted in the hospital, Jimmy expects Alison to come to hospital and to the last rites. Alison, however, influenced by the double-talk by Helena, goes to her home instead.

In "Aadhe Adhure" no one seems to understand what the other person is saying, Binni the elder daughter of Savitri and Mahendranath, eloped with Manoj and later married. In the play she has come home and complains that everything is not right in her marriage, and she suspects that her home and family has something to do with this. She thinks that the dysfunctionality of her family looms over her marriage with Manoj. The younger daughter Kinni has her own problems and no one in the family seems to understand what are they. Ashok, the only son of Savitri and Mahendranath, is infatuated with magazines and models. He has cut pictures of models from the magazine and left on the table to be cleaned by others. Ashok and Kinni seem to have a lot of disagreements, where Ashok catches Kinni talking adults' talk with her friend and Kinni catches Ashok with her female friend. There is clear lack of harmony among the members of the family. Mahendranath has failed in his business venture and now stays at home reads newspaper, drinks tea. Savitri goes to work and still holds on onto the failed venture of Mahendranath. She complains that his friend Juenja has made a fortune out of the same business, whereas Mahendranth has not a single penny.

Another point of convergence is their fight. Mahendranath and Savitri fight a lot more than Jimmy and Alison, their fights are different from Jimmy's and Alison's, in "Look Back in Anger", Jimmy's hate towards Alison's is solely based on the fact that Alison belongs to the upper-class. In "Aadhe Adhure" however, Savitri's bitterness towards Mahenranath is because of his unemployment and idleness. Jimmy's point while he's on his anger tirade with Alison is his despise for the upper-class people with which Alison also belongs. He thinks that the upper class people are responsible for the social inequality. There are some personal disdain of Jimmy's to

Alison's family, like how his family disliked the fact that Alison who is from upper class is going to marry a lower-class man who is unemployed and does not own a house. (Weiss 287). Jimmy hates Alison's family also because her mother doesn't mention him in her letters to Alison, even his name is a "dirty word" to her mother according to him. (Osborne)

Jimmy thinks that there is some conspiracy brewing behind his back between Alison and her mother. Jimmy speaks harshly with Alison and says that she, belonging to an upper-class family, has not experienced any pain or suffering as people from lower-class people have. Like Jimmy himself who has seen his daily die and sufferings of common people. He thinks that wrong people are getting all the love and wrong people are getting all the suffering. Jimmy thinks that Alison is too naive and is unaware of the horrors of the world, he thinks that only if something horrible happen to Alison then she will realise the harsh realities. He says, "Oh, my dear wife, you've got so much to learn. I only hope you learn it one day. If only something—something would happen to you, and wake you out of your beauty sleep! (Coming in close to her.) If you could have a child, and it would die. Let it grow, let a recognisable human face emerge from that little mass of indiarubber and wrinkles." (Osborne 37)

In "Aadhe Adhure", Savitri is angry with Mahendranath because of his failure in business. She was always attracted towards successful men and wanted financial stability, however, Mahendranath's inability to provide both has become the reason of her bitterness. When Juneja comes to the Mahendranath-Savitri house to discuss the issue that Mahendranath is at his house and his health condition is not okay, confronts Savitri regarding his considering Mahendranath not even a man and always pursuing someone different with more success and money. Juneja says, "The point is that if any of these men had been a part of your life instead of Mahendra, you would still have felt that you had married the wrong man. You would still have encountered a Mahendra, a Juneja, a Shivjeet or a Jagmohan and thought and reacted in the same way. Because the meaning of life to you is how many different things you can have and enjoy at the same time. One man alone could never have given them to you, so no matter whom you married, you Would always have felt as empty and as restless as you do today." (Rakesh 74)

The third and important point to be discussed considering the comparative analysis is the ending of the play. In both plays, one of the spouses left the house after it becomes unbearable to live any further. Alison, after some convincing by Helena, leaves with her father to her parent's home and lives there, and Mahendranath after being treated like a stranger and

an extra in his own house leaves the house to go to his friend Juneja's house. The thing to notice here is that both of these characters return to their partners after some time. Alison after facing a miscarriage of her first child unintentionally comes to Jimmy's house where now Helena has ironically taken her place considering that in the beginning of the second act, Helena hates Jimmy for his treatment of Alison. She comes home, accepts that she finally realised what Jimmy was trying to say to her, and they share a moment of intimacy and adoration. Alison realises that however bad Jimmy's anger tirades are, he is still in love with her and his hate is towards the upper-class and not towards her.

In the same manner Mahendranath also returns home at the end of the play, Juneja says to Savitri that Mahendranath loves her deeply, and he was a happy man before when Savitri was supportive of her and did not reprove him on his every action. However, Savitri disagrees with Juneja on this and says that Mahendranath was never a complete man in himself, he always identified himself with someone else's image. Savitri's point of view is also of importance here because to get the complete picture of the issue, it's important to hear both sides. As the play ends, Mahendranath is seen returning home, sick and feeble. This shows that even after what Savitri thinks of her, Mahendranath has a care for the family even after his failure and his idleness he is not stopped loving his family.

Conclusion

Plays such as these are written after some major upheaval in human history, record the rising sentiments of middle and lower classes. They are results of movements like "Kitchen-sink Drama", "Angry Young Man" and "Nai Kahani" which focussed mainly on the problems of the downtrodden people. "Look Back in Anger" and "Aadhe Adhure" are plays which display the disillusionment and sufferings of common people around the world. This paper tries to bring together two plays which are written in different cultural settings yet have striking similarity by the virtue of being written on the subject of middle-class people. The similarities range from being a dysfunctional family which mainly results from economic problems faced by them and, the disillusionment from society and state. After comparing both plays, it was evident that the families were in despair and this cause upheaval in their family, being written in different parts of world it is surprising that some piece of literature could be written with this much similarity.

Having outlined the basic similarities and differences in both plays, future research could be done to focus on more narrowed down approach in both plays comparatively, for example focusing on some specific characters or some scenes of the plays.

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