



COURSE CODE: MAEGD 302

COURSE NAME: MODERN BRITISH
DRAMA

**CENTRE FOR DISTANCE AND
ONLINE EDUCATION
TEZPUR UNIVERSITY**

MASTER OF ARTS

**ENGLISH
BLOCK II**



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MAEGD 302: MODERN BRITISH DRAMA

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BLOCK II

MODULE III: JOHN OSBORNE: *LOOK BACK IN ANGER*

UNIT 7: TRENDS IN POST-WAR ENGLISH DRAMA

UNIT 8: READING THE TEXT

UNIT 9: CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE PLAY

MODULE IV: : HAROLD PINTER: *THE HOMECOMING*

UNIT 10: READING THE TEXT

UNIT 11: CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE PLAY

MODULE V: CARYL CHURCHILL: *A NUMBER*

UNIT 12: TRENDS IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH DRAMA

UNIT 13: READING THE TEXT

UNIT 14: CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE PLAY

TABLE OF CONTENT

COURSE INTRODUCTION	1-2
----------------------------	------------

MODULE III: JOHN OSBORNE'S LOOK BACK IN ANGER

UNIT 7: TRENDS IN POST WAR ENGLISH DRAMA	4-12
---	-------------

- 7.0 Introduction
- 7.1 Learning Objectives
- 7.2 Drama before World War
- 7.3 Post War English Drama
 - 7.3.1 New English drama and West End theatre
 - 7.3.2 Theatre of Absurd
 - 7.3.3 Angry Young Man and Theatre
 - 7.3.4 Kitchen Sink drama

- 7.4 Summing Up
- 7.5 Assessment Questions
- 7.6 References and Recommended Readings

UNIT 8: READING THE TEXT	13-26
---------------------------------	--------------

- 8.0 Introduction
- 8.1 Learning Objectives
- 8.2 John Osborne: The Playwright
 - 8.2.1 Life and Works
- 8.3 Context of the play *Look Back in Anger*
- 8.4 Act wise Summary of the play
- 8.5 Summing Up
- 8.6 Assessment Questions
- 8.7 References and Recommended Readings

UNIT 9: CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE PLAY	27-47
--	--------------

- 9.0 Introduction
- 9.1 Learning Objectives
- 9.2 Influences
- 9.3 Characterization
- 9.4 *Look Back in Anger* as a “Kitchen Sink” Drama
- 9.5 “Angry Young Man” and *Look Back in Anger*
- 9.6 Nostalgia associated with the British Empire
- 9.7 Major Themes
 - 9.7.1 Class conflict in the play
 - 9.7.2 Theme of Alienation
 - 9.7.3 Masculinity and Misogyny
- 9.8 Language in Osborne’s play
- 9.9 Critical Reception
- 9.10 Summing Up
- 9.11 Glossary
- 9.12 References and Recommended Readings

MODULE IV: HAROLD PINTER’S *THE HOMECOMING*

UNIT 10: THEATRE OF THE ABSURD

49-59

- 10.0 Introduction
- 10.1 Learning Objectives
- 10.2 Harold Pinter and his plays
- 10.3 Act wise summary of the play
- 10.4 *The Homecoming*: An Overview
 - 10.4.1 Context of the play
 - 10.4.2 Characters
 - 10.4.3 Setting of the Play
- 10.5 Summing Up
- 10.6 Assessment Questions
- 10.7 References and Recommended Readings

UNIT 11 : CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT

60-70

- 11.0 Introduction
- 11.1 Learning Objectives
- 11.2 Plot of the Play
- 11.3 Critical Analysis of the play
 - 11.3.1 The Working Class and Pinter
 - 11.3.2 Territorial War in the play
 - 11.3.3 Collapse of the Familial structure
 - 11.3.4 The Homecoming of Ruth
- 11.4 Critical and Audience Response
- 11.5 Summing Up
- 11.6 Assessment Questions
- 11.7 References and Recommended Readings

MODULE IV: CARYL CHURCHILL'S *A NUMBER*

UNIT 12: TRENDS IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH DRAMA

72-80

- 12.0 Introduction
- 12.1 Learning Objectives
- 12.2 British Theatre since 1970: An Overview
 - 12.2.1 Theatre in the 1970s and 1980s
 - 12.2.2 Theatre in the 1990s and 2000s
 - 12.2.3 Documentary Theatre or Theatre of Fact
- 12.3 Summing Up
- 12.4 Glossary
- 12.5 Assessment Questions
- 12.6 References and Recommended Readings

UNIT 13: READING THE TEXT

81-90

13.0 Introduction

13.1 Learning Objectives

13.2 Caryl Churchill: Life and Works

13.2.1 The period of Radio-writing during 1960s.

13.2.2 The period for independent production to collaborative works: 1973-1979.

13.2.3 As a critic of capitalism, power and cultural practices: 1980-1999.

13.2.3 The post-modern Churchill: 2000-present.

13.3 Reading the play *A Number*

13.4 Summing Up

13.5 Assessment Questions

13.6 References and Recommended Readings

UNIT 14: CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE PLAY

91-107

14.0 Introduction

14.1 Learning Objectives

14.2 Major Themes in *A Number*

14.2.1 Technology, Cloning and Identity

14.2.2 Broken Family

14.2.3 Nature vs Nurture

14.3 Dramatic Devices

14.3.1 Minimalism

14.3.2 Dialogue

14.4 Summing Up

14.5 Glossary

14.6 Assessment Questions

14.7 References and Recommended Readings

BLOCK INTRODUCTION

Block II of MEG302: Modern British Drama has three modules in it which will cover three prominent playwrights, John Osborne, Harold Pinter and Caryl Churchill accordingly.

Module III: John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* has three units in it. **Unit 7: *Trends in Post War English Drama*** will give you a fairly good idea about the changes that took place in the world of dramatic writing since World War II. You will be able to know the experiments that characterized post war British drama and will familiarize yourself with the concepts like Angry young man and Kitchen Sink drama. **Unit 8: *Reading the text*** will acquaint you with the action of the play *Look Back in Anger*. Apart from giving you the detail summery of the play, here you will be introduced to the main characters of the play and you will be able to know the role played by them in the course of the play. **Unit 9: *Critical Analysis of the Play*** will focus on analysing the behaviour and the condition of the various characters. This will be done through a thorough study of the social, economical, cultural, psychological conditions around the family and how these aspects have shaped their current situation and helped creating an angry young man.

MODULE IV: Harold Pinter: *The Homecoming* consists of two units. **Unit 10: *Reading the text*** will present an elaborate summery of the text that will be really helpful for the learners to proceed to the next unit where various issues dealt by the playwright will be critically analysed. **Unit 11: *Critical Analysis of the Play*** will say how *The Homecoming* brushes on categories of Absurd drama, Kitchen-sink drama, Angry young men and draws on aspects of all these genres and paints a picture of a working class household which is struggling with finances and psychologically scar. This unit will also critically analyse issues such as morality, infidelity and motherhood being blurred against the backdrop of a proletarian household. The reading of this unit will help you to understand Harold Pinter as a working class playwright.

MODULE V: Caryl Churchill: *A Number* will introduce you to yet another unique play of contemporary times. **Unit 12: *Trends in Contemporary English Drama*** will try to familiarize you with the historical development of the British theatre during the last four decades of the twentieth century, as Caryl Churchill's career as an active theatre practitioner spans this time period. Further, we will also briefly refer to the prevailing trends of British drama in the first decade of the twenty-first century, for a fuller understanding of its contemporary features. **Unit 13: *Reading the text*** will not only discuss the text in details, but also trace the distinctive intellectual and theatrical tradition of the second half of the twentieth century which shaped Caryl Churchill's sensibility as a theatre practitioner.

Unit 14: *Critical Analysis of the Play A Number* will deal with questions like human cloning and the notion of identity and family in relation to human cloning. Major themes of the play such as the question of technology, cloning, and identity, the dynamics of broken family and the nature and nurture discourse etc. will be the prime focus of this unit.

MODULE III: JOHN OSBORNE: *LOOK BACK IN ANGER*

UNIT 7: TRENDS IN POST-WAR ENGLISH DRAMA

UNIT STRUCTURE

- 7.0 Introduction
- 7.1 Learning Objectives
- 7.2 Drama before World War
- 7.3 Post War English Drama
 - 7.3.1 New English drama and West End theatre
 - 7.3.2 Theatre of Absurd
 - 7.3.3 Angry Young Man and Theatre
 - 7.3.4 Kitchen Sink drama
- 7.4 Summing Up
- 7.5 Assessment Questions
- 7.6 References and Recommended Readings

7.0 INTRODUCTION

Post War England was marked by many changes in the order of political, social and cultural ideologies. Following the World Wars, a gradual declination is witnessed in the British Empire's international position. Despite unwillingness, Britain had to declare independence to almost all the colonies including the African colonies. Britain's dream and pretense of becoming a super power was destroyed by America's position in international politics. Between 1945 and 1990 there was a frequent change of Government in England headed either by Labour or Conservative parties. Amidst all these the shaping of an economic, social and cultural new order beyond the control of the politics and ideology of either of the political followers was well visible.

Theatre witness a decline after World War II as many of the theatres have been destroyed during war period. Contrary to that growing popularity of television and films too had impact on the shifting interest of the earlier theatre public. Many theatres were converted to Cinema halls. Amidst all these occurrences, in England it was seen that there was a renewed interest among the people for theatre. Drama after World War II abandoned traditional devices of the genre, "including logical plot development, meaningful

dialogues, and intelligible characters to convey modern humanity's feelings of despair, bewilderment, and alienation" (Sara Martín Alegre, *Post-War English Literature, 1945-1990*). Experimental playwrights such as Thomas Beckett had also arrived in the world of theatre. Samuel Beckett and 'The Theatre of Absurd' was typically a product of the effects of World War II. The boredom, fear of pain, shreds of love and hate experienced by the characters of Beckett in *Waiting for Godot* (1952) are all an effective version of the whole human condition in a tragic world of uncertainty. *Krapp's Last Tape* (1953) deals with nostalgia, the contrast between a lost past and the sour present. T.S. Eliot's verse plays were also written keeping the modern sensibilities in mind.

There was a process of evolution in drama with the coming of the film, radio, and television. Drama was solely under the domain of theatre that provided an insight into the everyday life of the people. The altering nature of the dramatic process is in fact discussed by Raymond Williams in *Writing in Society* (1979). Since the mid-twentieth century, it was also seen that the concept of seeing the audience as the patron had changed. Instead the aim was to shock the audience out of the state of complacency. It was also seen that during this period, society became more permissive and the early fifties saw a particular relationship on the part of young people with the whole world of fashion image style music, dance and youth culture.

John Osborne significantly contributed by creating the milieu of 'Angry Young Man' which was very appropriate to project the reaction of the age. The term "Angry Young Men" was applied to writers during the late 1950s to the plays of writers such as Arnold Wesker, Shelagh Delaney and John Osborne which portrayed working-class or lower middle-class with an emphasis on domestic realism. *Look Back in Anger* arrived at just the right moment....*Look Back in Anger* is the earliest example of a process which has frequently been crucial in the progress of the new drama..."(Taylor, 1962). The anger of its protagonist Jimmy Porter symbolized the general condition of Britain's lower middle class in the 1950s. The first performance of *Look Back in Anger* at the Royal Court Theatre in 1956 "marks the real break-through of "the new drama" into the British Theatre"(Innes, 1992).

In this unit we are going to discuss few break-through of the 'new drama' and John Osborne's place in them.

7.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to learn

- status of drama before World War II.
- development of post war English drama
- new trends in post war English drama

7.2 DRAMA BEFORE WORLD WAR

English drama cannot be said to have successfully created literary movement which could create a sensation in the theatre or convey a change in the socio-cultural and political lives of the people till the end of 19th century. After hundred years of dramatic output without much significance, towards the end of 19th century drama reappears as an important literary form and the next thirty years witnessed genius contributing to the demand of the theatre. These dramatists were practical and conscious to the problems of their age and consequently created live and realistic social scenes. An attempt was also made to revive poetic drama by poets like T.S Eliot.

In between the Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen and the Irish dramatist George Bernard Shaw, who can be called as major exponents of 'Realistic Drama' began to write emphasizing on social, domestic and personal problems. It was Ibsen's influence that brought Shaw to the field of drama. His is called the 'Drama of Ideas' where, in an entertaining but provocative and satirical tone, he presented his views on the abuses and contradictions of social order. Shaw was an anti-romantic and the primary intention of his plays was to educate his audience.

Like Shaw, John Galsworthy too did much to create awareness for social injustice and inequalities in social system. New psychological investigations led to the intensive study of character as distinct from plot. It aimed at the impartial presentation of real, contemporary life than history. Dramatists like Oscar Wilde and later, Granville-Barker, shared this emphasis on the social, often using comedy and working through distortion to make their points. Wilde's Lady Bracknell in *The Importance of Being Earnest* to

whom Jimmy in *Look Back in Anger* compares Helena, is almost a caricature of a certain social type, one example of such distortion.

After the World Wars theatre began to be used for propaganda. The function of plays during each war became to provide entertainment that was both escapist and patriotic. New playwrights who dealt with these developments satirically, emerged after both World Wars - Noel Coward in the 1920s and Christopher Fry in the 1950s.

Expressionism, which sought maximum expressiveness, became popular in the new form of drama and it gradually replaced the Naturalistic mode that relied on the cumulative effect of external detail reproduced as closely as possible.

The influence and inclusion of Irish and Scottish drama along with American drama in the British theatre is unique to modernism in British drama. Though both Shaw and Wilde were Irish, they belonged to the English tradition of modern, realist, prose drama. W.B Yeats and Lady Gregory practiced their hands in poetic drama. Apart from them John Millington Synge (*The Playboy of the Western World*, (1907) and Sean O'Casey (*Juno and the Paycock* (1924) were two other, influential Irish playwrights. Of course we must mention Samuel Beckett (*Waiting for Godot*) as the first Irish dramatist of international importance. About him we have discussed in Module II. J.M Barrie, the Scottish playwright was an extremely popular dramatist. His character Peter Pan, for which he is best remembered, became very popular because of its use of fantasy, away from realist conventions.

Thus, British drama in modern times is no longer restricted to English regionalism. The idea of 'British' drama gradually became a unified whole. In addition, modern British drama is seen as a product of number of patterns and movements with varied influences, rather than a single line of progress.

7.3 POST WAR ENGLISH DRAMA

7.3.1 NEW ENGLISH DRAMA AND WEST END THEATRE

We have already learnt about the changes that took place in the field of drama by dint of the drastic social changes brought about by the World Wars. Till then theatre became a popular and big industry that needed a lot of management and innovations. But the World War II placed theatre industry in a crucial position. Many theatres had been destroyed and there was a shortage of both actors and managers, which led to many theatres being converted into cinemas.

In the midst of these unwanted developments, the post-war drama uniquely placed itself in two ways. One, the very innovative ways with which the new plays were brought to the stage and secondly, the skills that were required in the acting and management of theatre due to new trends in plays. Interestingly, both these developed independently but compensated each other in the drastic change brought about by new theatre. Thus, in both the form and the content contemporary drama was a new emergence.

The main innovations in drama came from amateur clubs, instead of the professional theatres like West End Theatre. It happened because of the flexibility they could enjoy in comparison to the pressures of business undergone by the professional theatres. Professional theatres indulged in so-called conventional 'well-made' plays dealing with the crisis of an upper-class hero, his progression from ignorance to knowledge and a plot fixed by the unities of time, place and action. By the 1940s, the well-made plays received reactions against artificial and contrived ending of the play. Simultaneously naturalism, added by Henrik Ibsen and G.B Shaw was gaining ground. By 1950 again it was believed that 'realism' alone cannot sufficiently represent the modern predicaments and the existential shock brought about by the Second World War. The insensible use of atom bomb on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, and the ghastly realities of the Nazi death camps added to this sense of increasing meaninglessness which needed an accurate representation on the stage. The seeming lack of cause and effect in the outer world is translated into an unconnectedness between the people on the stage and the event in which they participate. It is the theatre of absurd that perfectly represented this modern dilemma.

7.3.2 THE 'THEATRE OF ABSURD'

We had already discussed in details about Absurdist drama in the previous module. Learners are advised to refer to Unit 4 to know about the theatre of Absurd and characteristics of this school of drama. As said before, the term, 'The Theatre of the Absurd' was coined by the critic Martin Esslin for the work of a number of playwrights, mostly written between the 1950s and 1960s. It is derived from an essay by the French philosopher Albert Camus in 'Myth of Sisyphus'(1942), where he first defined the human situation as basically meaningless and absurd. The 'absurd' plays by Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter and others have the common view that man inhabits a universe with which he is out of key. Its meaning cannot be deciphered and his place within it is purposeless. Man is bewildered, troubled and obscurely threatened. These types of plays also owe its origin to the disillusionment that followed the World Wars. Impermanence of life and values also gave the plays its theme.

7.3.3 "ANGRY YOUNG MAN" AND POST WAR THEATRE

The literature produced during the 1950s represented a critical and rebellious stance against the post-war British society. Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* best exemplifies this attitude. The term "angry young man" is derived from Leslie Paul's work *Angry Young Man* (1951). The term soon became a catch word and came to be applied by a number of British playwrights as well as novelists in the mid-1950s such as Kingsley Amis, Alan Sillitoe, John Wain and Colin Wilson whose political views were considered radical or anarchic. These writers focused on the different forms of social alienation. Post World War-II there was a shocking overturning in the socio-political, cultural, economic and psychological conditions in England, manifested in an entire generation of men and women who took a nosedive into no longer having solid ground under their feet. The reading of *Look Back in Anger* will make clear to you how this generation of young men, also women but never discussed in literature, found reasons to be dissatisfied with their surroundings of anything and everything. Consequently, they became the cause of frustration for those living with and near them. But the term received great

popularity because of the affinity young people experienced by witnessing it in the theatre.

7.3.4 KITCHEN SINK DRAMA

As we have already mentioned how by the mid-twentieth century the genre of realism had become tired and unimaginative in British drama and was considered insufficient to portray the actual situation of a world divested by the world wars. It was Osborne who specially addressed the post-war youth culture and innovatively captured the anger and alienation that resulted in the British working classes, more particularly, the anger of middle class young generation that festered just below the surface of elite British culture.

The 1950's through the 1970's saw the rise of one of the most important movements in modern British theater: the Kitchen Sink drama. Kitchen Sink drama is a term used to denote plays of playwrights such as Arnold Wesker, Shelagh Delaney, and John Osborne, which portrayed the working class or more specifically the lower middle class, emphasizing on the domestic realism. This style of theater was given the name "Kitchen Sink" because of its focus on the interior domestic and emotional lives of ordinary people. In case of *Look Back in Anger*, the kitchen is literally an important part of the settings having great symbolic significance as well.

The kitchen is supposed to be a center of the realm of the domestic life. Interestingly, though kitchen is a domain of women and female servants, very less attention was given to the emotions of the female characters in Victorian drama. Rather these types of plays were presented from masculine point of view. A strong power dynamics which is often masculine is common to such views. Women are often assumed to serve the men of their household and, when conflicts do arise, it is often the man who is portrayed as the suffering protagonist.

These types of plays had several characteristics that distinguished them as a break from the forms of theater before them. They can be compared against theatrical movements such as *Avant Garde Theatre*, or the theatre of the Absurd, characterized by the plays of authors such as Samuel Beckett.

This new form of drama focused on working class people as contrary to the wealthy ruling class of Victorian stage. Thus, they were leftist in ideology. They threw light on the lives of ordinary working class people caught between struggles of power, industry, politics, and social homogenization. Social inequality is a primary theme of Kitchen Sink plays. Characters expressed their unvarnished emotion and dissatisfaction with the ruling class status quo. Osborne's play is a study in how this pent up frustration and social anger can wreak havoc on the ordinary lives of the British people.

7.4 SUMMING UP

In this unit we have elaborately discussed the patterns, variations, thematic concerns of British drama primarily preceding the World War II. Apart from that few key terms that became Catch words in the world of drama are tried to be defined with examples for the benefit of the learners. Learners are advised to study the socio-political changes that took place during this period for better understanding of the dramatic condition of post war English drama.



7.5 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. What is Realism in drama? How are they different from Victorian drama?
Briefly write on the contribution of the dramatists that helped in the rise of realistic drama before world war.
2. Write on the contribution of Samuel Beckett and John Osborn to modern drama.
3. Write short notes on the following
 - a. Theatre of Absurd
 - b. The catch word 'Angry young man'
 - c. 'Kitchen sink' drama as bearer of social class conflict.
 - d. Contribution of Irish dramatists to British theatre.
 - e. Expressionism



7.6 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS

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UNIT 8: READING LOOK BACK IN ANGER'

UNIT STRUCTURE

8.0 Introduction

8.1 Learning Objectives

8.2 John Osborne: The Playwright

8.2.1 Life and Works

8.3 Context of the play *Look Back in Anger*

8.4 Act wise Summary of the play

8.5 Summing Up

8.6 Assessment Questions

8.7 References and Recommended Readings

8.0 INTRODUCTION

John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956) was written as a reaction against the drawing-room comedies and middle-class drama of Noel Coward and Sir Terence Rattigan. During the fifties the general attitude became rather complacent. Britain was well on the way to becoming an affluent, consumer society.

In *The Angry Decade* (1958), Kenneth Allsop wrote that this group of writers of the late 1950s as "irreverence, stridency impatience with tradition, vigour, vulgarity, sulky resentment against the cultivated". These feelings were founded in the sense of betrayal and futility which succeeded the exalted aspirations generated by post-war reforms.

A study of *Look back in Anger* demands a consideration of the social, economic, political and cultural changes that Britain underwent in the period immediately following the Second World War. These changes include the establishment of the Welfare State, its functioning under successive Labour and Conservative governments, an economic crisis followed by relative stabilization, a weakening of the rigid hierarchies or class, and the beginnings of the disintegration of Empire.

8.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This unit will introduce you to one of the most prominent dramatists of the twentieth century, John Osborne. This unit you will make you able to:

- Know the life, works and the place of John Osborne in post war English drama
- Understand the plot and structure of *Look Back in Anger*
- Comprehend the thematic concerns, characterization, and critical reception etc. of the play.
- Familiarize yourself with catch terms such as *kitchen sink drama*, *angry young man*, etc. popularly associated with the twentieth century theatre.

LET US STOP AND THINK



Sir Noel Coward (1899-1973): He was an English playwright, actor, and composer best known for highly polished comedies of manners. His classic comedies include plays such as *Fallen Angels* (1928), *Private Lives* (1930) and *Design for Living* (1933).

Sir Terence Rattigan (1911-77): English playwright and a master of the well-made play, Rattigan had early success with two farces, *French Without Tears* (1936) and *While the Sun Shines* (1943). Rattigan's works were treated scornfully by some critics who saw them as unadventurous and catering to undemanding, middle-class taste.

Arnold Wesker (1932-): English playwright of Jewish origin who was closely associated with the English Stage Company and Royal Court. He is known for the plays such as *Chicken Soup with Barley* (1958), *Roots* (1959), *I am talking about Jerusalem* (1960). The play *The Kitchen* (1959) shows the stress and conflicts of life behind the scenes in a restaurant, and it was considered a highly innovative work that was closely associated with the kitchen sink drama.

Shelagh Delaney (1939-): Playwright known for the play *A Taste of Honey* that was written at the age of 17, as a reaction against the Terence Rattigan's play *Variations of a Theme*. It is considered a very important work in the school of kitchen sink realism. The play was adapted into a film in 1961. Delaney, later went on to write for television and cinema.

8.2 JOHN OSBORNE: THE PLAYWRIGHT

8.2.1 LIFE AND WORKS

John Osborne was born in London, England in 1929 to Thomas Osborne, an advertisement writer, and Nellie Beatrice, a working class barmaid. His father died in 1941. Osborne used the proceeds from a life insurance settlement to send himself to Belmont College, a private boarding school. But accused of attacking the headmaster, he was expelled from school after a few years. Though he received a certificate of completion for his upper school education, he never attended a college or university. After returning home, Osborne worked several odd jobs before he found a niche in the theater. He began working with Anthony Creighton's provincial touring company where he was a stage hand, actor, and writer. Osborne died in 1994 in Shropshire, England.

John Osborne began writing plays during the period when he was working as an actor in provincial repertory theatre. Initially he began co-writing plays with other people, and before the success of *Look Back in Anger*, he had already authored five plays. The first play that he wrote was *The Devil Inside Him* (1950) under the mentorship of Stella Linden who also directed the play for Theatre Royal, Huddersfield to be staged in the same year. Osborne's second play *The Personal Enemy* was co-written with Anthony Creighton and the duo also wrote *Epitaph for George Dillon* which was staged at Royal Court in 1958. The play tells the story of Kate Elliot's unhappy suburban South London family and the domestic chaos brought about when she decides to adopt George Dillon as a surrogate son. Some of the themes typically seen in the writings of John Osborne's plays include religion, the deception of everyday life, scorn towards earlier forms of theatre and representation of the working class. In the play, the protagonist George Dillon is an intelligent man who fails to find his place in the world and his position is similar to Jimmy Porter in *Look Back in Anger*.

Look Back in Anger, which after numerous rejections became a West End and Broadway hit, was largely autobiographical, based on his married life with Pamela Lane (his first wife) in cramped accommodation in Derby whilst she cuckolded him with a local dentist. The play, written in a short period of only

a few weeks, was summarily rejected by the agents and production companies to whom Osborne first submitted the play. It was eventually picked up by George Devine who placed a notice in "The Stage" in 1956 for production, with his failing Royal Court Theater. Both Osborne and the Royal Court Theater were struggling to survive financially and both saw the production of *Look Back in Anger* as a risk. The play received mixed reviews. Theatre critics rejected the revolutionary play until Kenneth Tynan, the most influential critic of the period declared: "I doubt if I could love anyone who did not wish to see *Look Back in Anger*". Gradually many critics considered the play to be the turning point in postwar British theatre and Osborne was soon pronounced to be one of the most promising young playwrights in British theater. Osborne's protagonist, Jimmy Porter, captured the angry and rebellious nature of the postwar generation, a dispossessed lot who were clearly unhappy with things as they were in the decades following World War II. Jimmy Porter came to represent an entire generation of *angry young men*.

In his next play, *The Entertainers* (1957), Osborne continued to examine the state of the country. In this play he used three generations of a family of entertainers to symbolize the decline of England after the war. The play also metaphorically explores the decline of the British Empire through the lens of a failing music hall. Laurence Olivier played the lead role, a struggling comedian, in the production and the play received critical acclaim. Most critics agreed that it was an appropriate follow-up to the wild success of *Look Back in Anger*. After *The Entertainer*, Osborne continued to have a productive career, writing seventeen more stage plays, eleven plays for television, five screen plays (including *Tom Jones*, for which he received an Academy Award), and four books, including two volumes of autobiography. *A Better Class of Person* (1981) is an autobiography based on Osborne's childhood and early life; it ends with the first performance of *Look Back in Anger* at the Royal Court Theatre in 1956. A sequel, *Almost a Gentleman*, was published in 1991.


A Patriot for Me is a 1965 play by Osborne, based on the true story of Alfred Redl. When the Royal Court Theatre produced the play in 1965, it was forced to change from a public theatre to a private members' club. It was done because the play was considered sexually transgressive by the Lord

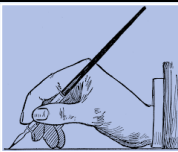
Chamberlain's Office, and so it was denied a license for performance. The Royal Court suffered a considerable financial loss because of this denial.

After this, however, the quality of Osborne's output became erratic. Although he produced a number of hits including *Luther* (1961), a play on the life of Martin Luther and *Inadmissible Evidence* (1964), the study of a frustrated solicitor at a law firm, it was equally true that he produced a chain of irrelevant works. Critics began to accuse him of not fulfilling his early potential, and audiences no longer seemed affected by Osborne's rage.

Osborne continued to work in the artistic and entertainment worlds through the 1970s and 80s. He wrote plays, but also ventured into writing screenplays, television adaptations, and autobiography. Osborne made several appearances as an actor during this period. He starred in several popular Hollywood films including *Get Carter*. Later in life, he received numerous awards for his work including a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Writer's Guild in Britain.

LET US STOP AND THINK

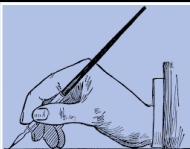
	<p>Plays by Osborne that are made into films:</p> <p>Look Back in Anger The Entertainer Inadmissible Evidence</p>
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	<p>CHECK YOUR PROGRESS</p> <p>1. Name two other dramatists whose works belonged to the genre of Kitchen Sink drama.</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p> <p>2. Write a brief note on the major plays of John Osborne. (70 words)</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p>
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8.3 CONTEXT OF THE PLAY

Britain in the mid twentieth century witnessed many changes. The two World Wars had badly affected the economy of Britain, and so in order to cut the costs, many of its colonized Asian and African countries under the British imperial rule were given independence. Other events such as the Suez Canal crisis and the rise of America as a superpower superseding the dominance of Britain had affected the psyche as well as the economy of the British society. In the process, the resentment among the youth belonging to the upper classes and the middle classes increased with the loss of the Empire. This was because most of the youth belonging to these classes were educated and prepared in such a way that they could serve as colonial governors, district administrators, civil servants, law officers, and other numerous professions in the erstwhile colonies. The condition of the society was reflected in the subject matter of this new emerging form of drama. Unlike the earlier plays where the “theatrical illusion of a neat, stratified society” (595, Sanders) was created, Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* represented disillusioned, antagonistic characters quarrelling with one another and with what was seen as polite society. Jimmy’s rage and anger is his expression of long withheld emotion and his need for life in a world that has become passive and uninteresting. That anger became a symbol of the rebellion against the political and social malaise of British culture. His anger is destructive to those around him and the psychological violence of the play received a great deal of criticism. Critics today agree, however, that the play is central to an understanding of British life in the twentieth century and, thus, a crucial piece of literature in the British canon.

In his review of *Look Back in Anger*, Kenneth Tynan rightly said that the play contained ‘evident and blazing vitality’ and found Porter ‘simply and abundantly alive’ (1964, 41). Raymond Williams praised the new movement for its vitality (1961, 26, 33). Osborne identified ‘vitality’ as *Look Back in Anger*’s ‘principal ingredient’ (1993, viii), and prefaced *The Entertainer* with the hope that using the music hall device has helped make his play ‘immediate, vital and direct’ (1998, 3). Devine, announcing plans for the English Stage Company, anticipated a ‘vital, living, popular theatre’. Most of the playwrights, from 1950s to the 1970s such as Arnold Wesker, David Hare, Tom Stoppard and others also have acknowledged the significance of *Look Back in Anger* in bringing about a change in the British theatrical tradition.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Describe the initial reaction of critics to Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger*.

8.4 ACTWISE SUMMARY OF THE PLAY

In this section of the unit, a detailed summary of each of the Act has been given for your benefit and understanding.

ACT ONE

The First Act begins with a minute description of the set up. While reading the play you will observe that the clustered middle class life of a

British family has been described here. The playwright makes us know that the play is set in a one-room apartment in Midlands, England. We also come to know that the large room is home to Jimmy Porter, a twenty five year old man and his wife Alison. Jimmy's Welsh friend, Cliff lives in a separate room across the hall. The emotional condition and temperament of each of the characters is revealed through their position in the house. Jimmy is described as a sharp, acerbic character. From his conversation with the other characters, it is seen that Jimmy is highly critical of the higher social status of his wife. His friend, Cliff is depicted as an easy going and sensitive person. You will also notice that Alison's position is sharply contrasted with that of her husband. She is wearing his red shirt and busy with domestic chores. It soon becomes clear that Alison didn't really get what she expected from life.

When the first scene opens, the playwright describes a Sunday afternoon when Alison is ironing clothes while Jimmy and Cliff are smoking cigars and reading Sunday newspapers. The different activities the three characters are involved in, is also a reflection of the stereotypical gender roles – the men are concerned with the intellectual activities while the woman takes care of the household needs. You must also note that the stage set up of the play is significant as it reflects the domestic turbulence that is present in Jimmy and Alison's relationship, and this friction is caused by the gap between the two's temperament – Jimmy has a sharp, acerbic nature while Alison is passive and meek. The playwright gives us a description of the room which is small and filled with simple, sparse furniture. The room is in a disorderly state and is filled with items such as "books, neckties, and odds and ends, including a large, tattered toy teddy bear and soft, woolly squirrel". Osborne symbolically uses the one-room apartment as a reflection of 1950's domesticity. This is representative of the characters and the characters' lifestyle. Jimmy, Cliff, and Alison have literally been put away in an attic, out of sight from the upper class culture like a piece of unused or old furniture,. Their emotions and ambitions do not fit in with the upper class world and this causes a great amount of consternation for Jimmy who expects much more from life. The cramped space contains all of the trappings of a meager domestic life. Jimmy's political and social ideology becomes evident here as well when he mocks a faux column in the paper written by the "Bishop of Bromley." He considers

himself unconventional and untied to traditional British politics and even declares that no political party would want him. Though his politics often align with the Liberal party, he is also a bit of an anarchist as he is opposed to any kind of organization whether it is politics or religion.

It becomes apparent that there is a huge social gulf between Jimmy and Alison. Her family has a military background and they are upper-middle-class, perhaps verging on upper class. On the other hand, Jimmy, although educated, belongs to a purely working class background. He particularly detests Alison's brother, Nigel who is a Member of Parliament. This is because Nigel managed to hold a powerful political position purely on the basis of his social standing. We also come to know that Jimmy had to fight hard against Alison's family to win her. He also expresses that when Alison and her mother writes to each other, they never mention him. This shows that Jimmy is still not considered family by Alison's mother. The protagonist, however, has some respect for his father-in-law who returned from India and is thoroughly a product of the Empire. In the first act, we also learn that the sole family income is derived from a sweet stall in the local market—an enterprise that is surely well beneath Jimmy's education, let alone Alison's social position.

As the First Act progresses, Jimmy become more and more malicious as he transfers his contempt for Alison's family onto her personally, generally belittling her to Cliff. The tirade ends with Jimmy and Cliff wrestling playfully and the duo falls down, resulting in the ironing board overturning and Alison's arm getting a burn. Consequently Alison shouts at Jimmy to leave the room and he exits to play his trumpet off stage, presumably in his own room.

Meanwhile Alison and Cliff try to reach out emotionally during which she confides that she's is pregnant and admits her lack of courage to break the news to Jimmy. Cliff urges her to tell him the truth. It is somewhat ironic that both Cliff and Alison seem to have an understanding that is absent in Jimmy and Alison's relationship. This is realized even by Jimmy when he observes the close proximity between them, and he teases them about it. In spite of this, Jimmy never expresses any jealousy or possessiveness.

Soon Cliff exits and Jimmy re-enters, and Alison reconciles with him. However she doesn't tell her anything about her pregnancy. Cliff returns and informs her that her friend Helena has called. After attending the call, Alison

announces that her friend Helena Charles, an actress by profession, is coming to stay. Here it becomes entirely obvious that Jimmy despises Helena even more than Alison. He flies into a total rage, and begins verbally abusing Alison, telling her that she has devoured his passion like a python devours an animal. Further he also maliciously tells her that he wishes that she should have a child and undergo the experience of losing it, as it would help her gain some perspective of the real world.

ACT TWO

The Second Act opens on another Sunday afternoon, with Helena and Alison making lunch. Alison gives a clue as to why she decided to be with Jimmy. She tells the anecdotes of the first time she met Jimmy, and when they decided to get married. Soon after their marriage, they moved in with Hugh, a friend of Jimmy and became his dependents as they had no source of earning. These acts were Alison's own rebellion against her upbringing. At the same time it was also her admiration of Jimmy's campaigns against the dereliction of English Post-War life. She describes Jimmy to Helena as a "knight in shining armour". The image of Jimmy as a knight is in keeping with the British concept of masculinity and chivalry. But then, Alison also confides about the duality in Jimmy's nature – that he was charming and noble when courting her, but equally brutal when he exposed the shams and hypocrisy lying beneath her family's culture. Alison also explains the significance of the bear and squirrel games that they play. It is by enacting the roles of these stuffed animals that they are able to show "uncomplicated affection" towards one another. Helena expresses that Alison must voice her opinion and if necessary fight him.

Jimmy enters, and Helena announces that they are going to the church. The two women put on hats and are about to go, and he feels betrayed. This is because of his ideology and beliefs regarding society and he expected that loyalty on Alison's part. He viciously humiliates Alison by speaking against her family and friends, and their "old favourites". He particularly mocks the ways of Alison's mother.

When he leaves to take an urgent phone call, Helena announces that she has deliberately forced the issue. She has sent a telegram to Alison's

parents asking them to come and “rescue” her. Alison is stunned but agrees that she will go. Here we see Helena attempting to take control of the domestic situation of Jimmy and Alison. When Jimmy returns, he informs that Hugh’s mother is very ill and he must go and see her. He also asks Alison to go with him as he feels he might not bear it alone but she strongly refuses. During the first scene of the second act, we see Jimmy’s vulnerability for the first time when he confesses how he had witnessed his father suffer and die. He felt that the experience had added depth to his life but it had also desensitized him as he failed to see the pain Alison was going through.

In the following scene of the Second Act, we see Alison is ready with her suitcase and her father, Colonel Redfern has come to take her back to her family home. The playwright makes us know that the Colonel is a man in his sixties, a much disciplined man but with an air of kindness around him. The playwright shows him as a sympathetic character who is disturbed by the domestic chaos in his daughter’s life. Colonel Redfern questions about his son-in-law, and during the conversation between Alison and her father, we come to know more about Jimmy’s past life. Jimmy is very close to Hugh’s mother, Mrs. Tanner as she was the person who had helped him in setting up the sweet stall. Jimmy had tried working in many different fields such as journalism, advertising and sales, but nothing seemed to make him happy. Colonel Redfern tells Alison that perhaps her mother’s behaviour towards Jimmy had been too harsh. But she replies that Jimmy has said unpleasant things about both of them and her upbringing. Colonel Redfern admits that Jimmy is right when he called him an old Edwardian as he feels totally out of touch with the modern world after his return from India, and he also fails to comprehend the complex emotions of the new generation. To this Alison replies that he is hurt because everything has changed while Jimmy is hurt because nothing seems to have changed. The dialogue between the father and daughter gives us a glimpse of the youths in 1950s England, a time when young men like Jimmy seemed lost and confused between the past and the present. For them the past seemed to have much more meaning in comparison to the futility of the present.

Meanwhile Helena arrives to say goodbye, intending to leave very soon herself. Alison is surprised that Helena is staying on for another day, but

she leaves, giving Cliff a note for Jimmy. Cliff in turn hands it to Helena. Almost immediately, Jimmy bursts in. He is filled with contempt at finding a “goodbye” note and he turns his rage on Helena again, warning her to keep out of his way until she leaves. Helena tells him that Alison is expecting a baby, and Jimmy admits grudgingly that he’s taken aback. However, his tirade continues as he tells her that he had to bear the sight of seeing Mrs. Tanner die and Alison wasn’t around when he needed her to be with him. Jimmy then transfers his anger to Helena and they almost come to physical blows. And as the curtain falls, Jimmy and Helena are involved in an act of passion.

ACT THREE

The third act opens as a deliberate re-enactment of the introductory scene of first act. However, this time it is Helena who is at the ironing-board, and is dressed in Jimmy’s red shirt. It becomes apparent that months have passed. Jimmy is notably more pleasant to Helena than he was to Alison in Act One. She laughs at his jokes, understanding their underlying meaning and the three of them (Jimmy, Cliff, and Helena) get into a music hall comedy routine that obviously is not improvised. Cliff makes an announcement that he is moving out of town as he is tired of the sweet stall, and of being a burden. Helena goes inside to clean and iron Cliff’s shirt, on being told by Jimmy. As Jimmy leaves the room to get ready for a final night out for the three of them, he opens the door to find Alison outside looking wane and sick. Instead of showing any concern for her, he looks over his shoulder and informs Helena casually that a friend of hers had come for a visit and then he abruptly leaves.

In the following scene of the Third Act, Jimmy is in Cliff’s room playing his trumpet. The two women have tea and discuss Jimmy. Alison, then, explains to Helena that she had a miscarriage and lost her child. On hearing this Helena feels guilty and she realizes that what she has done is immoral and she decides to leave. She summons Jimmy to hear her decision and he lets her go with a sarcastic farewell. Alison tells him that she is leaving to which Jimmy in an acerbic manner asks if she has brought the flowers for the funeral of Hugh’s mother. He wonders if he is wrong to believe that there is “a kind of burning virility of mind and spirit that looks for something as powerful as itself”. He also asks her if she remembers the night they met. He

tells her he admired her relaxed spirit and that he knew she was what he wanted. On hearing his words, Alison weeps and tells him that she has undergone all that pain and experience that he wanted her to have. Jimmy softens and tells her of the old bear going through the forest of life alone. The play closes with a sentimental reconciliation between Jimmy and Alison. They revive an old game they used to play, pretending to be bears and squirrels, and seem to be at peace.

8.5 SUMMING UP

In this unit much attention is given to provide the learners a considerably comprehensive understanding of John Osborne, his works and his position in post war era of English drama. *Look Back in Anger* is considered as a path changing drama of that time. Therefore, it is required for the learners to go through the every details provided in the elaborate actwise summery of the play discussed in this unit. Apart from that we have also provided few additional information related to the author or the play to increase knowledge in the line. “Let us Stop and Read” and “Check Your Progress” questions will enhance your learning process.

For better understanding of what we have given here, a thorough reading of the text is always suggested.



8.6 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. What impression do you get from the opening scene of *Look Back in Anger*?
2. Who is Colonel Redfern?
3. Give an account of the Act two.
4. Critically analyze the activities of Alison in the course of the play.



8.7 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS

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UNIT 9: CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE PLAY

UNIT STRUCTURE

- 9.0 Introduction
- 9.1 Learning Objectives
- 9.2 Influences
- 9.3 Characterization
- 9.4 *Look Back in Anger* as a “Kitchen Sink” Drama
- 9.5 “Angry Young Man” and *Look Back in Anger*
- 9.6 Nostalgia associated with the British Empire
- 9.7 Major Themes
 - 9.7.1 Class conflict in the play
 - 9.7.2 Theme of Alienation
 - 9.7.3 Masculinity and Misogyny
- 9.8 Language in Osborne’s play
- 9.9 Critical Reception
- 9.10 Summing Up
- 9.11 Glossary
- 9.12 References and Recommended Readings

9.0 INTRODUCTION

In the previous units you have been told how the first half of the 1950s the society was in drastic transition and begun to witness, among many others, the consumerist tendencies. *Look Back in Anger* sheds new light on these new tendencies of the society. The decay and displacement of the rural working class, long cherished cultural institutions, forsaking the drawing room for the kitchen etc. are highlight of this play. With the growing technological developments electronic gadgets and home appliances began to rush into the households of the middle and upper classes. The society became affluent, the family became a fundamental centre of consumption and women enjoyed more freedom in terms of work and time. Technology created greater isolation and alienation in micro and

macro level. In this unit we will learn these major issues reflected through the action and behaviour of the characters.

9.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to learn about:

- detail analysis of the characters
- the play's position among other Kitchen Sink and Angry Young Man genre of plays.
- major themes important to understand the modern situation
- critical reception the drama received

9.2 INFLUENCES

Look Back in Anger was chiefly influenced by the modernist European drama and the post-war British society. During the early 1950s, British theatre was still following the old theatrical form, where the only known genres were the light comedies and the upper-middle class drama. These genres were practiced by dramatists like Noel Coward and Terence Rattigan. Osborne was familiar with the writings of these playwrights but was more influenced by the theatrical tradition of G. B. Shaw and Henrik Ibsen. Also, there are certain aspects of the play that reveals that reflect the European theatrical culture and the modernity associated with it. For example, critics of the period observed that Osborne's play was similar to the works of Swedish playwright August Strindberg, in its treatment of marriage. Strindberg's plays such as *Miss Julie* (1888) and *The Dance of Death* (1900) showed similar struggles in sexual relationships and marriage between men and women.

The play has also a strong personal touch, drawing incidents from Osborne's own life. John Heilpern in his work writes that Osborne's first marriage with Pamela Lane was a decisive influence on the play. The marital conflict and domestic turmoil between them has been represented in the play. Pamela Lane belonged to an upper middle-class family like


Alison, and much like the Potters, Osborne and his wife made use of nicknames such as “teddy, squirrel, bear and nutty.”

9.3 CHARACTERIZATION

In this section, we will study the different characters of the play. Osborne wrote *Look Back in Anger* with a keen sense of binaries that interrelate the lead character, Jimmy, with the others throughout the play – he illustrates the struggle between nature and culture, and the past and the present through this angry young man. Osborne attempts to give definition to each character through an analysis of their physical traits and their emotional condition. As the curtain rises, the audience sees Jimmy Porter and Cliff Lewis seated in two shabby armchairs. They are reading newspapers which cover the top half of their bodies so that the audience can only see their legs. Jimmy is smoking a cigar and wearing a tweed jacket and flannel pants. The opening of the play gives detailed descriptions of the disposition of each character. Jimmy is about twenty five years old and 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.” Cliff, who is about the same age as Jimmy, is almost the opposite of Jimmy. He is easy going and can emotionally connect to others. Cliff has the capacity to attract other people’s love, while Jimmy mostly repels it.

Jimmy and Cliff argue over the day’s news, with most of the arguments consisting of Jimmy remarking on the absurdity of the present state of society. Although Jimmy is the more educated of the two, Cliff consistently strives for a reassuring sense of satisfaction regarding English culture. Jimmy comes off as rather primitive. He prefers to rely on his instinctive nature to alienate those close to him through his anger. There is a strong reason behind his anger: although he is educated and talented musically, he is forced to work in a candy stand to make ends meet. After Jimmy and Cliff indulge in a banal argument for some time, Jimmy eventually resorts to attacking Cliff physically. He overpowers Cliff in this manner and hurts Alison in the process, causing her to cry out, “Oh, it’s

more like a zoo everyday!” (Osborne,26). It is clear that Jimmy, with such animalistic tendencies, just should not be forced to live with others.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS	
	<p>1. Mention three influences of modernist European drama on <i>Look Back in Anger</i>.</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p>
<p>2. Write few salient features of Osborne’s art of characterization.</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p>	

JIMMY PORTER

Osborne seems to assert that Jimmy’s character has an essential contradiction; he can be quite vocal externally but internally he has more subdued and quiet feelings. The aggression that he shows is a sign of his insecurities, doubts and confusion. Jimmy’s feelings are central to the theme of the play. His feeling of loss is somewhere related to the loss of his father at an early age. As he says that watching his father die at an early age had taught what it is to be “angry – angry and helpless.” (Osborne, 58)

Jimmy Porter also belongs to the working class, although his University education places him in the middle class. The proletarian ideas that he expresses, also shows his rejection of the norms of the upper middle-class society. He finds himself drawn to classes that self-confident

and self-assured. He is nostalgic for a society and era that he never belonged but for which his father had fought for. He imagines the stability of the earlier era that he would never have. He also constantly needs the people around him to be attentive to him, and as such constantly argues and humiliates them if necessary: “Why don’t we brawl? It’s the only thing I am any good at.” (Osborne,53). Jimmy chooses to escape into his own fantasies when feeling crowded; aside from mourning the impending death of his musical career, he recalls memories of former lovers. He fails to deal with the natural passage of time as well as Cliff, the last of his schoolmates, despite his intelligence. However in spite of the aggressively masculine stance he takes, Jimmy seems vulnerable when he has to deal with certain situations. There is constantly a need for a strong maternal presence in his life. For example, when Mrs. Tanner was critically ill, he wanted Alison to be with him as he felt that he could not face the situation alone.

ALISON

Jimmy’s wife, Alison is described as an “elusive” personality by Osborne and a woman suffering from “well bred malaise”. She is of the same age as Jimmy. Alison belongs to a higher social class than Jimmy and was elegant and polite. At the onset, she is depicted as doing the domestic chores, dressed in her husband’s shirt. This shows her subservience to Jimmy. She is more passive and less vocal than Helena in expressing the truths to Jimmy. Her reluctance to admit about her pregnancy to Jimmy arises because she feels that he might not be ready for a new responsibility. Alison, like Jimmy, constantly looks back at the past life as a way of finding peace and comfort. Feminists have often criticized Osborne’s portrayal of Alison as she hardly opposes the brutal verbal assaults of her husband.

In contrast to Alison is her friend Helena Charles. She is represented as the antithesis of Alison. Vibrant and forceful, Helena has a mind of her own and strongly expresses what she feels. She strives to tell Jimmy what she feels about him. She is middle class not only by birth but also by instinct and conviction. She is responsible for Alison’s decision to leave

Jimmy on the one hand and also in forsaking Jimmy when Alison decides to return to her husband.

HELENA

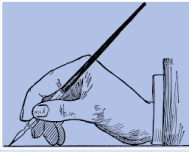
Helena is of the same age as Alison and is described as a young woman with a strong presence. The playwright states that “her matriarchal authority makes most men who meet her, anxious, not only to please but to impress, as if she were a gracious representative of visiting royalty.” (Osborne, 38) Helena is professionally occupied as an actress, and unlike Alison is highly confident of herself and she manages to get the respect of both men and women alike. She decides to take control of the household of Jimmy and Alison, and arranges for Alison’s father to come and take Alison away from Jimmy. However the motives of Helena remain rather ambiguous as it shows that either she was genuinely concerned for Alison, or she wanted to get rid of her from Jimmy’s life.

CLIFF

Cliff acts as the foil to the protagonist. He is described as a short, dark, Welsh man. Unlike his friend, Cliff was more sympathetic and socially approachable. However, he seems to be passive and lethargic in comparison to the protagonist. He belongs to a working class background and has never got access to University education. In spite of the lack of high education, he is not ignorant or foolish. He has the capacity to reach out to other people, a quality that Jimmy clearly lacks. Cliff is often overshadowed by the more dynamic personality of Jimmy but he brings about stability in his friend. It is seen that Osborne has shown a strong bonding between the two male characters.

COLONEL REDFERN

Colonel Redfern is the father of Alison who is a former military employee of the British Empire. He had spent a major part of his life in India and even after his return; he craves for the earlier England. Unlike his wife, he is more sympathetic towards Jimmy, and has understood the confusion that lies in the youth of the society. He even advises his daughter to speak to Jimmy and resolve their marital problems.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Mention few contrasts you notice in the characters of Jimmy Porter and Alison

2. How important is the role of Helena in the play according to you?

9.4 LOOK BACK IN ANGER AS A “KITCHEN SINK” DRAMA

We have already come to know the ideology depicted by the kitchen sink drama in bring back the realism to British theatre in a revived mode. Though many of the dramatists practiced it as an affective dramatic device, it was Osborne in *Look Back in Anger* very successfully used to depict middle class gender power play.

kitchen sink drama is, as mentioned earlier inclined towards leftist ideologies speaking of power politics, societal hierarchies, including the minority into the mainstream- expressing dissatisfaction with the status quo and finally bringing upon the stage the anguish of modern life.

“*The Porter’s one-room flat in a large Midland town. Early evening. April.*” marks the setting of the play. This ‘one room’ flat is a merger of

both public and the private having the Porter's kitchen in it. Osborne uniquely positions the kitchen of the Porters along with the living room in the same stage to merge the boundaries of intimate domestic and public life.

But the play seems to reflect the irony behind the symbolic significance of the kitchen through a reverse depiction of the situation. The kitchen is a space socially attributed to females. But sexist agenda of Jimmy, patriarchal power structure that constantly runs in course of the play seems to dominate this space too. The play too, like most others in the genre, revolves around a male protagonist and there isn't much scope given to the female characters, and they remain more or less one-dimensional throughout the acts. The power hierarchies between men and women are validated through Jimmy's relationship with both Alison and Helena. His manner is condemnable, yet his vulgarity intended to draw attention like a pervert strangely enough present him as a man who has grown deaf with the maddening silence, and he wants a chance to live (*Look Back in Anger* 9). Throughout the play Jimmy's sexism is treated in a way that we are fascinated by him, sympathize with his existential agony, we even justify his anger which basically stems from his class consciousness though we are fully aware that there is always an end to the line of longstanding patience which Alison or a Helena can bear with. One gets exhausted just by being around a person like him.

There is a message in these that women have had to endure generations of abuse, psychological or physical, at the hands of the socially superior sex. But what gives a twist to this male centric treatment is the women's silence which is used as weapon to hurt a man against whom no physical, verbal action can bring any result.

9.5 "ANGRY YOUNG MAN" AND JIMMY PORTER

Look Back in Anger captures the essence of its time through its protagonist Jimmy Porter. Jimmy Porter is a sharp, sensitive undergraduate, a victim of class disparity, spokesman of the under-thirties generation of post-war Britain. He is a bitter and angry man angry with a society which is a fallen one while young people like him, with his heightened sensibilities,

intelligence and education is left to bear the burden of the crudeness of the subsequent generation. Disillusioned, alone, rebellious Jimmy lashes out against the society, its evil misdeeds and an angry young man is born. The worst victim of this disappointment is Jimmy's wife Alison, whose only fault is of her upper class background which he resents. Jimmy hurls at Alison relentlessly, hoping to elicit any form of reaction from her.

The play becomes the diary of every sensitive individual, a document of his emotional contours. It is a text not only of historical interest but one that makes complexities of human relationships and communication cross-culturally contemporary. The complete collapse of permissive spaces contracted and shrank relationships and merged boundaries of values that characterized social structure before War. Alison and Jimmy's friend Cliff's relationship projects this as breakdown of values for people like Jimmy. Though not unnatural, something Jimmy fails to reconcile with owing to his uncompromising conventional nature. For Jimmy Cliff is his friend who should not have a playful bond with his wife Alison. Jimmy cannot bear their displays of affection, with underlying currents of sexual tension, yet he cannot bring himself to make any straightforward objection to their relationship. Jimmy connects it with his childhood condition where a fatherless child was left under carelessness by his carefree mother. All these accumulated in Jimmy to make him the most uncertain, unfocussed and disillusioned character. Though at many times we sympathise with him, it is really difficult to justify his anger as it is directed to anything and everything. Jimmy is "apparently angry at everything- Alison, the Sunday paper, church bells, brother Nigel, the noise women make, the H-bomb, the Bishop of Bromley ...and almost everything else under the sun, which makes him difficult to be taken seriously at all times. His anger therefore seems unfocussed and childish, lacking an agenda;..." (Chattaraj 5). Critics many a times find affinity in the behaviour of Hamlet and Jimmy Porter in their war on a rotten society. But both could not accept their normal place in the world in spite of a higher education. It is because they think too much and criticize too freely.

9.6 NOSTALGIA ASSOCIATED WITH THE BRITISH EMPIRE

The character of Colonel Redfern, Alison's father, represents the decline of and nostalgia for the British Empire. The Colonel had been stationed for many years in India and is a symbol of Britain's imperial reach into the world. The Edwardian age which corresponded to Britain's height of power, had been the happiest of his life. His nostalgia is representative of the denial that Osborne sees in the psyche of the British people. As such, *Look Back in Anger* was significant because it depicted a social and historical experience that was distinctively contemporary, marking the separation of 'then' (the domination of the pre-war symbolism of church and monarchy, the austerity of the postwar years) from 'now' (the sensibility of a newly engaged mid-fifties Britain). Further it occurred in a year that delivered a series of shocks to British self-confidence and complacency, both at home and abroad, notably the Suez fiasco, in which the loopholes in Britain's imperial reign was exposed by the reality of US power, and the Soviet invasion of Hungary.

Stephen Lacey contends in his essay that the narratives in Osborne's plays such as *Look Back in Anger* and *The Entertainer* pulls the audience towards the past since nothing seems to be good in the present. The protagonist finds that there is nothing left behind in contemporary British society to be admired or revered. The absence or incompleteness that is felt, as such, is filled up with reverence for the past. We see that Colonel Redfern confirms Jimmy's view of the centrality of the experience of empire in a speech that articulates his (the Colonel's) longing for India and sense of loss and dislocation when he was forced to return home.

The England I remembered was the one I left in 1914, and I was happy to go on remembering it that way . . . (Osborne, 67)

Alison's rejoinder to her father is that

You're hurt because everything is changed. Jimmy is hurt because everything is the same. (Osborne, 68)

[illegible]

The following are some of the relevant themes found in Osborne's play that will also guide you in understanding the major socio-political concerns of the playwright's time.

The play also displays the class conflict that arises out of the disillusionment of the age. His anger is directed towards the entire world but then he is more vituperative towards Alison's family and the culture that they represent. Alison's family is upper middle class, strongly connected to the empire through military service. However, it is not the family's former allegiance towards the empire that Jimmy criticizes, rather it is the way they use their social position (as in the case of Nigel and Mrs. Redfern) to gain an upper hand. Jimmy had as much of a good

education as Nigel, but then it was the latter who succeeded in becoming a diplomat through his connections. Jimmy, on the other hand, had to struggle throughout in search for employment.

Further, we come to know that Alison's mother, unlike her husband, was highly class conscious woman who was against the marriage of her daughter with Jimmy. Jimmy, for this very reason, speaks offensively against her. Jimmy's strong dislike towards Mrs. Redfern is sharply contrasted with the concern and love he has for Hugh's mother, Mrs. Tanner, a working class woman who had helped him set up the sweet stall. Osborne has also referred to the location of Jimmy's residence at Midlands, England which is more of a working class area, and is different from the posh London society.

9.7.2 THEME OF ALIENATION

The modern age is marked by a sense of dislocation and alienation both in micro and macro level. The uncertainty that the social and political happenings denoted, specially after the World Wars, particularly triggered this increasing sense of uncertainty in all spheres of life. Jimmy Porter came to represent the plight of many young men who felt the absence of meaning in the society. During this period, many young men from the working class background were denied any meaningful role in the society in spite of having a good education. This was because the powerful positions and good opportunities were given to the men belonging to the elites such as Nigel. Further, the alienation is also felt in the personal relationships wherein the protagonist fails to emotionally connect to the people around him. Critic Mary McCarthy in her essay, "A New Word" states, "To be actively, angrily, militantly bored is one of the few forms of protest open to him... At the same time it is one of the few forms of recreation he can afford; his boredom becomes an instrument on which he plays variations, as he does on his trumpet... But other people suffer ... he ought not to make other people suffer because he is unhappy... But this is unfortunately the way unhappy people are; they are driven to distribute their suffering." This sense of anger stems from his sense of isolation from

the society, and the reverse is also true. Jimmy desperately seeks companionship in Cliff, and more so in Alison, but his overwhelmingly powerful personality creates an almost atrocious aura about him, which makes him unapproachable. As a result, Jimmy withdraws within himself, creating an illusory other universe which interplays with appearance and reality, a trope deeply woven in modern drama

9.7.3 MASCULINITY AND MISOGYNY

In *Sex on Stage: Gender and Equality*, Andrew Wylie writes that the play expresses “the theme of masculine embitterment and impotent rage” (52). Britain’s role in the World War II, followed by undeniable proof of the ending of the British Empire, had generated great confusion in Britain’s national sense of identity. This had created certain masculine anxieties which are projected in the works of the playwrights of that period. Andrew Willie writes about the emergence of a new generation of young men who either failed to have acquired any sense of fulfillment by participating in the war in reality, or who sees the questioning of conventional gender roles as a threat to the long upheld patriarchal norms. Soon after the war, Britain was under the curb of a “stifling domesticity” (Willie, 51). In fact during the late 1940s, there was a campaign to engage the women solely in domestic affairs and increase the population of the country.

Jimmy Porter represents the frustration of those British young men who were too young to participate in the Wars, and yet were expected to participate in the “domestication process”, which to a large extent led to the misogynist outbursts that we see in our protagonist. The misogyny that we see in *Look Back in Anger* is also visible in other works produced during that period such as Kingsley Amis’ *Lucky Jim* (1954), John Braine’s *Room at the Top* (1957) and Allan Sillitoe’s *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1957).

Look Back in Anger also clearly contains elements of misogyny and sexism. Jimmy Porter’s anger is often vented out towards Alison. In the very beginning of the play, she is shown wearing Jimmy’s shirt while engrossed in the domestic chores. This has been used in a symbolic way by

the playwright. Alison tries to see things through the eyes of Jimmy, and it is done to the extent that she blames herself for the loss of their baby. Further Helena who is initially shown as a bohemian in her approach towards life, finds herself domesticated no sooner she takes the place of Alison in Jimmy's apartment.

Mary Luckhurst also writes that, "The central drama of the play is psychologically structured around the hatred of the male for the female and it's obviously expressed in misogynistic terms" (Luckhurst, 1). This can be exemplified by Jimmy's comments regarding women. The images of blood and violence in his speech which are used in relation to the women characters also highlight the idea of physical violence and blood. At the end of the play, we come to know that Alison has suffered a miscarriage, and she returns back to Jimmy. Here, Jimmy's self-centeredness is projected when he says, "It was my child too, you know. But it isn't my first loss." (Osborne, 98)

LET US STOP AND THINK



Dejavu (1992) is the sequel of *Look Back in Anger*, in which John Osborne revisits the character of Jimmy Porter who has grown old, and now speaks against homosexuality.

9.8 LANGUAGE IN OSBORNE'S PLAY

The plays produced during the 1950s rejected the language associated with the polite drawing room behavior in favour of a language that was much more sharp and acerbic. This new style was associated with the "kitchen sink drama" that attempted to show people as they really conversed in their real life. This form of drama assumed an important position alongside the absurdist plays of Beckett and Ionesco, and Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre.

During this time, there also emerged a new group of intellectuals who were termed the "New Left". This group comprised of intellectuals such as E. M. Thompson, Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall and Tom Milne.

The most significant among these critics was Williams who spoke highly in favour of the 'Kitchen Sink' drama for the "vitality and feeling" that it stood for. (Dorney, 108) Even, in K. Tynnan's review of the play, it has been asserted that it offered "evident and blazing vitality" and the characters' portrayal has been much more true to life. This was because the plays which are categorized as kitchen sink drama used a language which successfully bridged the gap between thought and feeling. The aim of the Post-War British drama has been to blur the boundaries between the spoken form of language and writing by imitating the "life-like speech" (3, Dorney). On reading the dialogues of the characters in the play, particularly Jimmy, you will see that there is no emotional restraint or artificial rhetoric in the language. He represents the voice of young men belonging to a despaired generation in a realistic way. There is a tendency to remove any kind of complacency or artifice. For example, in Jimmy's outburst against Cliff and Alison, he uses a mocking tone:

No one can raise themselves out of their delicious sloth. You two will drive me round the bend soon – I know it, as sure as I'm sitting here. I know you're going to drive me mad. Oh heavens, how I long for a little ordinary human enthusiasm. Just enthusiasm – that's all. I want to hear a warm, thrilling voice cry out Hallelujah! (He bangs his breast theatrically.) Hallelujah! I'm alive! I've an idea. Why don't we have a little game? Let's pretend that we're human beings, and that we're actually alive. (Osborne, 15). The rhetoric used by the protagonist expresses his fiery temperament and the conflict in his mind. At the same time it also shows that the protagonist is irritated by the lethargic attitude of the people around him. The lethargy and passivity is not specifically confined to characters such as Cliff and Alison, rather it is rooted in the society. Jimmy expects people to act, and if necessary in a brutal, anarchic way. This rebellious attitude is expressed through the language he uses.

Also, you will see that the characters in *Look Back in Anger* try to communicate with each other but they never really succeed in reaching out to the other persons. However, the only exceptions are seen in the case of Cliff's relationship with Alison who is far more at ease with him than with Jimmy, and in Colonel Redfern's conversation with his daughter.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Name the dramatist who is associated with the term Epic Theatre?

2. Who are the intellectuals termed as the 'New Left'?

2. What are the salient features of the use of language in *Look Back in Anger*?

9.9 CRITICAL RECEPTION

During the interwar years, the mainstream audience was seen as patrons. The managers of the repertory theatre tried to attract the growing middle class. There was division between the theatre goers. One group sought the melodramatic plays and musical hall comedies that followed the tradition of Victorian era England. And the other was a more genteel group that sought for new form of writings. It was on May 8th 1956 that the play *Look Back in Anger* opened at the Royal Court Theatre as the third production of the newly formed English Stage Company. The English Stage Company was founded in 1955 to promote the production of new plays by contemporary authors that could not find production in the

commercial West End theatre. The West End Theatre provided quality acting and high standards of production, but very little drama that related to life in contemporary England. Most plays of the time were generally innocuous light comedies, thrillers, and foreign imports—fourteen American shows in 1955 alone. Osborne had submitted copies of *Look Back in Anger* to every agent in London and to many West End producers and had been rejected by all. When the script arrived at the Royal Court, the Artistic Director George Devine and his young assistant director Tony Richardson knew it was exactly what they were looking for. *Look Back in Anger* was viewed as a play that would, as Devine later put it, “blow a hole in the old theatre.”

The critical reaction was mixed, but many of the critics, whether or not they liked the play, acknowledged its merits and those of its young author. Cecil Wilson in the *Daily Mail* assessed Jimmy Porter as a “young neurotic who lives like a pig,” whose “bitterness produces a fine flow of savage talk, but is basically a bore because its reasons are never explained.” But Wilson also said that the English Stage Company “have not discovered a masterpiece, but they have discovered a dramatist of outstanding promise, a man who can write with searing passion but happens in this case to have lavished it on the wrong play.”

Kenneth Tynan and Harold Hobson were among the few critics to praise it, and are now regarded among the most influential critics of the time. For example, on BBC Radio's *The Critics*, Ivor Brown began his review by describing the play's setting—a one-room flat in the Midlands—as “unspeakably dirty and squalid” such that it was difficult for him to “believe that a colonel's daughter, brought up with some standards”, would have lived in it. He expressed anger at having watched a something that “wasted [his] time.” On the other hand, Kenneth Tynan wrote a more positive review claiming that he “could not love anyone who did not wish to see *Look Back in Anger*”, describing the play as a “minor miracle” containing “all the qualities...one had despaired of ever seeing on the stage—the drift towards anarchy, the instinctive leftishness, the automatic rejection of “official” attitudes, the surrealist sense of humour (e.g., Jimmy describes an effeminate male friend as a ‘female Emily Bronte’), the casual

promiscuity, the sense of lacking a crusade worth fighting for and, underlying all these, the determination that no one who dies shall go unmourned.” Harold Hobson was also quick to recognize the importance of the play “as a landmark of British theatre.” He praised Osborne for the play, despite the fact that the “blinkers still obscure his vision.” Alan Sillitoe, author of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (both of which are also part of the “angry young men” movement), wrote that Osborne “didn’t contribute to British theatre, he set off a landmine and blew most of it up.” In spite of the tremendous critical excitement it generated, *Look Back in Anger* was not financially successful during its first run. Part of the problem was thought to be the fact that rotating repertory—a practice new to 1950s London—was confusing to audiences who were unable to determine when any particular play was being performed. It was decided in August to cancel the other plays and run *Look Back in Anger* alone for eleven weeks, but even then the ticket sales failed to meet expenses. A twenty-five minute excerpt from the play was broadcast by BBC on October 16, and following that the play sold out for its run and a three-week run in another theatre. A production of *Look Back in Anger* then toured England. It received the *Evening Standard Award* as best new play of 1956.

Look Back in Anger opened at the Lyceum Theatre on Broadway on October 1st 1957, with the original cast and received very strong reviews. It ran for 407 performances, had a second Broadway production beginning in November 1958, and toured the United States and Canada. It received the New York Drama Critics Circle Award as the best foreign play of 1957. It then played all over the world. It continues to be produced, both by professional and amateur theatre groups.

That *Look Back in Anger* still has the power to move audiences was shown by Judi Dench's 1989 revival of the play in Belfast, Northern Ireland, which starred Kenneth Branagh. Maureen Paton, in the *Daily Express*, commented: “This devastating study of a disintegrating marriage has never dated since it changed British theatre back in 1956.” Damian Smyth, in the *Independent*, declared: “At the point when Jimmy prescribes for Alison’s lack of authenticity that she should have a child and that it

should die, when he doesn't know she is already pregnant by him, there went up an instinctive gasp of shock. That's not bad after 33 years, and it is a testimony to the strength of this production in a city not unaccustomed to shock." Michael Billington, critic for the *Guardian*, asserted that "Good plays change their meaning with time; and it is a measure of the quality of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* that it now seems a very different work to the one staged at the Royal Court in 1956." Although to Billington the play "seemed less an incendiary social drama than [a Eugene] O'Neill-like exploration of personal pain," he went on to note that "what is slightly chilling is to realize how topical many of Osborne's ideas remain."

Look Back in Anger was adapted in 1958 as a film by John Osborne and Nigel Kneale. It was produced by Woodfall Films, a company formed by John Osborne and Tony Richardson. It was directed by Tony Richardson, and starred Richard Burton and Claire Bloom. A second film was made in 1980, directed by Lindsay Anderson (a former artistic director of the Royal Court Theatre). It starred Malcolm McDowell and Lisa Banes. The 1989 revival directed by Judi Dench for a very limited run in Belfast was filmed for Thames Television. The television version was directed by David Jones and starred Kenneth Branagh and Emma Thompson.

LET US STOP AND THINK



Royal Court Theatre: Built in 1888, it has a historic association with new writing. Initially it was managed by J.E. Vedrenne and Henry Granville Barker and it staged the plays of George Bernard Shaw, W. B. Yeats and John Masfield. But it was with the foundation of the English Stage Company in 1956, under the direction of George Devine that it became a centre of new writing. The production of Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* inspired and liberated other writers through its rhetoric and outspokenness.

English Stage Company: The English Stage Company was founded in 1956 by George Devine that presented modern plays and encouraged new dramatists. After the successful production of Osborne's play, it subsequently produced the works of Arnold Wesker, John Arden, Edward Bond, Christopher Logue, Samuel Beckett among others.

9.10 SUMMING UP

After reading this unit, you must have realized that John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* essentially revealed the turmoil of a disillusioned generation of British young men. Osborne was thoroughly British in the way he represents the life, conditions and emotional state of his characters. However, there is nothing overtly political about the play. Rather it is through the domestic set up of a middle class home that we are shown how the socio-political conditions of the contemporary society affected them in their marital life.

9.11 GLOSSARY

Misogyny: It refers to the expression of strong dislike or hatred towards women.

Epic Theatre: A term applied by Bertolt Brecht with reference to his plays. The epic theatre made use of a detached narrator and other devices to subvert the audience's sympathy with the actors (who are only seen as individuals enacting roles)

Bohemian: socially unconventional person, especially in the case of a writer or actor.

Proletarian: Working class, common, belonging to the masses, etc.



9.12 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

- 1) Discuss the concept of Angry Young Man with reference to *Look Back in Anger*.
- 2) Critically discuss the themes and plot of *Look Back in Anger* by John Osborne. What according to you are the causes of popularity of the play?
- 3) *Look Back in Anger* by John Osborne reflects the mood and temper of post-war England. Discuss in the light of the statement.
- 4) *Look Back in Anger* ushered in a new movement in British Drama. Discuss.

- 5) Comment on the use of language by Osborne in the play.
- 6) Write short notes on the following-----
 - a. British drama during twentieth century
 - b. Jimmy Porter
 - c. Women characters in *Look Back in Anger*
 - d. Kitchen Sink drama
- 7) Assess and evaluate the contribution of John Osborne as a dramatist in the light of *Look Back in Anger*.



9.13 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS

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MODULE IV: HAROLD PINTER: *THE HOMECOMING*

UNIT 10: READING THE TEXT

10.0 Introduction

10.1 Learning Objectives

10.2 Harold Pinter and his plays

10.3 Act wise summary of the play

10.4 *The Homecoming*: An Overview

10.4.1 Context of the play

10.4.2 Characters

10.4.3 Setting of the Play

10.5 Summing Up

10.6 Assessment Questions

10.7 References and Recommended Readings

10.0 INTRODUCTION

The Homecoming, now considered a masterpiece and an essential in Harold Pinter's canon was regarded as a complex and baffling play during its first production in England by the Royal Shakespeare Company at London's Aldwych Theatre, on 3rd June, 1965. Pinter wrote the play in Ambrose Place, Worthing, a coastal town in Sussex and completed it in six weeks. Directed by Sir Peter Hall and starring Pinter's first wife, Vivien Merchant as Ruth, the play enraged many critics for they found it to be inscrutable and puzzling. The Broadway production of the play garnered Pinter a Tony Award for Best Play in 1967 making it a universally acclaimed one. It was well received both in England and in America.

10.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This unit will focus on Harold Pinter's play *The Homecoming*, published in 1965 with the following objectives in mind:

- To understand the socio-cultural context in which the play was written which gives us a clear understanding of the characters' behaviour, motives and growth throughout the play.
- To identify the influences of contemporary drama of the fifties and the sixties on the play.
- To identify the grim view of a working class household.
- To understand that Pinter projects an absence of hope for the working class and how it is a degenerate condition, as projected by the male characters.
- To recognise the play as groundbreaking and unique in its own way during a time of experimental theatres.

10.2 HAROLD PINTER AND HIS PLAYS

Nobel Prize winning British playwright Harold Pinter is regarded as one of the most influential dramatists of all times with a writing career extending over half a decade. He is renowned for not only making his mark in drama, but also in movies as screenwriter, director and actor; as well as his work in radio and television. Pinter's working class fascination is reflective in his plays and has formed the basis of his dramatic oeuvre. His interest with the working class consciousness is reflective in majority of his plays such as *The Birthday Party*, *The Room*, *The Dumb Waiter*, *The Caretaker*, etc.

10.4 ACT WISE SUMMERY OF THE PLAY

ACT ONE

The play opens with a familiar scene in the house, with the verbal spat between the two dominant men of the house: Max and Lenny. The constant power struggle between the two men makes them tease each other in a very derogatory manner and feminize each other. Max brags about his youth when he along with MacGregor used to be the "worst hated men in the West End of London." Max also refers to his wife, Jessie and how she had to suffer a lot before dying and his dedication towards her. Lenny shouts him

down by calling him “stupid sod” and “demented” for Max is getting old. Max’s brother, Sam seems to be the only sensible man in the house with a job of a chauffeur. Lenny appears to be well read and street smart for his conversation with his Uncle Sam is reflective of his general knowledge. Max picks on Sam for having failed to get himself a bride and asks him to get his bride to stay with them so that they all have their own share of her. The nonsensical conversation goes on for some more time with the youngest son, Joey making his entry too. Joey is a boxer in training and cannot think of anything other than his boxing and women.

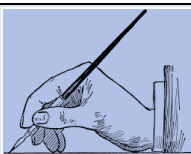
The first scene fades out to blackness before Teddy and Ruth’s arrival as the men continue with their gibberish. The blackness portrays the darkness that surrounds the household and the men’s distraught bleak future; two aging men soon to be out of jobs and money, Lenny’s inability and desire to do anything productive, Joey’s unsure future and the lack of a woman to look after the men, absence of a mother figure and wife to take care.

Teddy and Ruth arrive from America with their packed suitcases, summer suits and raincoats. Teddy tries on the lock and finds that the key worked signalling that the situation of the house has not changed over the years. Teddy fondly looks around the house and remarks that everything has been the same and that it is a big house and that it has always belonged to Max and Sam’s father. Initially Ruth is reluctant to stay in London for she thinks that their children might be missing them.

Teddy and Ruth’s arrival is not known to the rest of the family members in the house. There are instances in the play that shows Ruth is persistently getting more and more distanced from her husband Teddy. She moves away from him in order to “get some air”. She desires to go out exploring in the middle of the night for she is a restless soul who cannot find happiness with the sensitive and drab Teddy. After a short encounter with the two brothers, the lights go out. Lenny meets Ruth as she returns from her walk in the streets and they get introduced to each other. Lenny disregards the fact that Ruth is married to his older brother as she keeps repeating that both of them are married. He proposes to touch her, she complies. He

embarks on his rendezvous with a woman and engages in irrational monologues. This further leads both of them teasing each other sexually; she leaves him in the midst of a move from her side. Max is awakened from his sleep due to all the mutterings downstairs. Both father and son engage in a verbal spat as Lenny taunts his father for being so domineering and even refers to his mother in a disrespectful manner. The scene fades into darkness and when the lights are turned on it is the next morning.

Next morning, Max goes on about his usual business of picking out a verbal fight with the rest of the men in the house. In one of these tantrums with Sam, he claims that he gave birth to three grown up men all by himself. And after all that he has done for them and Sam, he gets disrespect from all of them. He constantly keeps insulting them. In the midst of Max's jabber, Teddy comes downstairs with Ruth to meet the rest of the family. Before getting a chance to introduce Ruth to his father, Max concludes that she is a prostitute and launches yet another of his tantrums. "I've never had a whore under this roof before. Ever since your mother died." (Act 1) He is infuriated that Teddy was here all the time without his knowledge with a prostitute. He asks the rest of the men to drive both Teddy and Ruth away from the house which obviously they chose to ignore. As he realizes his mistake, he tries to reconcile with his son and make do for his mistake and welcomes both of them home.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Who is Jessie? How is she important to the men in the household?

2. Is Teddy at odds with his family? Is his working class background

affecting his current position?

ACT TWO

The second act starts with a normal afternoon tea session whereby Ruth is shown to be mingling with her in-laws with quite ease. Max goes on about his dead wife, Jessie and how she used to be the angel of the house and the pearl of his eyes. Jessie is presented as a perfect housewife and an excellent mother who taught her boys all the morality they know of. This episode changes to another of Max's temper tantrums as he goes on hurling abuses at his brother and speaking of all the troubles he had to go through just to raise and provide for his family. In between he also calls his wife, a whore, contradicting his own statement of her as a good woman. Sam leaves the room as Max goes on with his ranting as he singularly picks on the former.

Next Max chats up with Teddy and Ruth and enquires about their marriage. We get to know that they got married in London without the knowledge of anyone from both of their families. Max remarks that Ruth is a lovely lady who makes a good wife and wishes for Lenny and Joey to find "nice feminine girl with proper credentials" which would make "life worth living". Teddy says that their lives in America is extremely fulfilling and his department is "highly successful" and "it's a very stimulating environment." Ruth is a "wonderful wife and mother. She's a very popular woman. She's got lots of friends." They are blessed with three boys.

As Lenny and Teddy engage in an intellectual discussion, we realise that Lenny, although not much educated unlike his older brother; he is highly intelligent. Teddy is unable to answer his questions as his profession is inadequate and is thus is the wrong person to answer Lenny's questions. Ruth talks in between and reveals that she was born in England, and six years ago they moved to America. She comments that America is full of "rock", "sand" and "insects"; it signals that there is a difference between her and Teddy's perspective of America. Max, Lenny and Joey leave for the gym leaving Teddy and Ruth alone.

Teddy asks Ruth to be ready for their departure to America but Ruth cross questions him by asking him if he didn't like it in his London home and his family. Teddy feels that she is definitely falling at ease with his brothers and father, thus makes efforts to make her long for their children and their home in America. Teddy reveals to the audience that Ruth often helps him out with his lectures in the university and that they went to Venice for a vacation. As Teddy goes off to pack, Ruth lies back and rests and Lenny appears and sits next to her and they start talking. It is revealed that Ruth used to be a "photographic model for the body."

After Teddy appears, he urges Ruth to get up and leave with him. Lenny asks Ruth to dance with him once before they leave. Max and Joey come in and find both Lenny and Ruth kissing and Joey calls her "a tart". All of a sudden Joey too starts kissing and embracing Ruth making the entire scene quite bizarre. Max tells Teddy that he shouldn't be ashamed that he married a woman beneath him because she is a "woman of quality", "a woman of feeling". The rest of the men except for Teddy all indulge in sensual kissing and caressing right in front of Teddy, yet he does not react to his brothers' manhandling of his own wife. Ruth takes the upper hand and demands a drink from Lenny making it obvious that it is now she who will hold all the keys. As Ruth asks Teddy to show his critical work to his family, he starts to express his anger and resentment by saying that his family is not intelligent enough to grasp his work and is nothing more than barbaric sensual animals without the shred of decency and morality. The next scene is of Lenny and Teddy in which they argue about a simple

cheese-roll, whereby pointing towards the mixed up priorities of the household.

As Joey climbs down from the bedroom upstairs it is suggested that he and Ruth had slept together. This further adds on to Teddy's chagrin and at the same time Lenny terms Ruth as a 'tease'. They also talk about their escapades which put both the brothers in bad light and as insensitive. As Max appears again, he too goes on calling Ruth, "the whore". Surprisingly Teddy has nothing to say or protest to what his family has to say about Ruth except for Sam who constantly asserts that she is Teddy's lawful wife. As it turns out Max proposes to keep Ruth in London instead of going back to America to her children and Teddy does not protest much. They also decide to pay her turning her into a prostitute, yet taking into account Ruth's high-end needs. As they argue about donations to be made for Ruth's keeping, Lenny also suggests that he will "put her in the game", making a prostitute out of Ruth on Greek Street, a place frequented by prostitutes. As Joey argues about wanting her all to himself, Lenny says that she will be in the market only for the "distinguished clientele" and argues about a proper name for her prostitute alter ego. They also ask Teddy for his suggestions about Ruth in bed and ask him to find suitable American clients for his wife.

As Ruth comes down and joins the gathering, Teddy breaks the news that she is invited to stay over and strangely he acquiesces to the whole arrangement. This scene is awkward to the audience as Ruth, Lenny and Max all start discussing business about her transformation into a prostitute whereby she demands all the luxuries that she can have without a shred of decency. Ruth makes her demands and establishes a business agreement as she would only stay if she is looked after and provided with all the amenities. As Sam has an attack and drops dead on the floor, the rest of the crowd does not even try to revive him and lets him lie on the floor. Teddy leaves for the airport without Ruth and is given directions by Max. As he bids farewell to the rest of his family, Ruth mixes up his name, calling him "Eddie" and asks him not to be a stranger. As he departs, the rest of the men gather around her and lie about her. And the curtain falls on the grim scene.

10.4 THE HOMECOMING: AN OVERVIEW

Pinter's two-act play *The Homecoming* written in 1964 concerns the homecoming of the eldest son and daughter-in-law of a family making it symbolic and metaphorical. *The Homecoming* is one of Pinter's early plays containing many elements that characterise his later plays such as a comic atmosphere yet full of menace, ordinary everyday small talk, a working class environment with subtle hints of politics, and a claustrophobic setting. *The Homecoming* is steeped deep in family politics and relationship drama bereft of any further contact with the external world.

10.4.1 CONTEXT OF THE PLAY

The 1950's were an English dramatic renaissance with naturalism and symbolism as the major influence on the dramas. The Angry Young Men were making waves in British drama with their brutal portrayal of the working class

English Working Class in the 1960s.

There was a huge wage gap between the social classes with the middle class earning more due to increased pay; the upper class remained indifferent to this widening gap. It comprised mostly of manual workers with little or no education.

and staged a vehement protest against traditional English social mores. This movement saw working class playwrights who were opposed to the orthodox English social life and questioned social relationships. Two prominent plays of the period were Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1955) and John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956). Beckett's play gave the world one of its first absurd plays, later came to be known as the Theatre of the Absurd; the play amounted to nothing more than irrational and absurd half lines which followed no sequence. When these kinds of plays are juxtaposed against a traditional well made play in the context of the western world of 1950s it becomes conspicuous that the post-World War Europe is bereft of any value system and there is no logic to follow.

Osborne's play reflected the working class angst in a plot of no significant action rather anger at the oppressive class structure which even

two world wars could not do away with. Pinter's plays come at such a time which addresses issues posed by both the plays; irrationality and working class anger. To this end *The Homecoming* should be read as a play addressing working class anger reflected in a more psychological manner which gives rise to illogical and bewildering actions which defies reason. In Pinter's universe morality is an ambiguous term which will be further analysed in the next unit.

10.4.2 CHARACTERS

Pinter based the play on the backdrop of North London with six characters of a distraught working class family. The five men of the family consist of the supposed patriarch of the family: Max, a butcher in his seventies, always cranky and morose. Sam, his brother is a chauffeur for a reputed car service company, a quiet and calm man in contrast to the other men. Max's three sons are Teddy, an American professor of Philosophy; Lenny, a pimp; and Joey, a boxer in training. The only female character and the heroine of the play is Ruth, Teddy's wife whose homecoming is the actual crux of the play. She is in her early thirties and also the mother of Teddy's sons. She is unhappy and unfulfilled in her life with Teddy which is basically barren. The rest of the family have not met Ruth before and initially react towards her in an unfriendly manner. Although it is stated that she was a model before she met Teddy, from more than one instance, it has become clear to the audience that she was a prostitute. The other female character is Jessie who died many years ago and whose roles are taken up later by Ruth.

As Naomi Garner says, "Pinter's power struggles occur at the level of charged dialogue." The characters are engaged in heated conversations, more of arguments with subtle hints of class conflict. Max, the butcher, the patriarch of the household is characterised by his brass and unrefined language and Lenny, the smooth talker appears to be a fine young man until his identity as a pimp is revealed. This is not to say that all of proletariats in Pinter's plays are marked by crass language; Lenny is reminiscent of Jimmy Porter, a young man who has a remarkable knowledge

of the world and is capable of giving his intellectual brother competition in refined dialogue.

The characters are not revolutionaries in their stance against the institutions of power rather they suffer inwardly. Their angst gets reflected in various other forms such as the inability to develop human emotions such as morality, love, motherhood, fidelity, etc. Their failure to develop healthy human relationships is more than reflective in their irrational and absurd behaviour.

10.4.3 SETTING OF THE PLAY

With the setting of an old shabby house in North London in the summer, most of the action happens in the living room of the house. This is the ancestral home mostly inhabited by the men of the household. The large living room extending to the width of the stage is filled with pieces of old furniture, indicative of the poor economic condition of the family. A hallway beyond the room leads to the front door and a crucial staircase which leads to the upper floor of the house. The house of Teddy and Ruth in America do not appear on stage, rather are referred to.

10.5 SUMMING UP

The aim of this unit was to understand the socio-economic background in which Pinter wrote the play. The play's unique style is meant to provoke and amaze amidst the wave of experimental theatre of the sixties. It fails to make sense in the beginning and Pinter does not aim to provide any answer to the audience rather documents the condition of the working class and women at the time. His concentration as a working class playwright is quite evident in the nature and exact depiction of a household crippled by the faltering economy, lack of motivation and absence of moral values.

The play shows us how the men of the household are fighting a territorial war for superiority and possession of the only woman who plays into their game happily. It also portrays the pathetic condition of women at a time when their emotional and economical needs are not given much heed

to. The unit also aimed at showing the reader as how Pinter is almost pessimistic in his outlook towards the condition of the working class as there seems to be no improvement to their situation, rather a decline in moral, economic and psychological conditions. Therefore it can be surmised that the play is unique in nature in which it has projected the plight of the proletariat and women and also at the same time the emasculation of the academician is commendable. This has opened up new vistas of looking at the play from multiple perspectives which will be explored in the next unit.



10.6 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Why were the 1950s a crucial period for English drama?
2. Why do you think Teddy is more at odds at his actual home in London?
3. Is Max senile or affected by his past? Why does he react to Ruth brashly at first?
4. Why is the family dysfunctional when almost all of the men in the house are healthy and intelligent enough to seek out a decent livelihood?
5. What are Pinter's intentions while projecting the dismal familial relationships of the household?



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UNIT 11: CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE PLAY

UNIT STRUCTURE

11.0 Introduction

11.1 Learning Objectives

11.2 Plot of the Play

11.3 Critical Analysis of the play

11.3.1 The Working Class and Pinter

11.3.2 Territorial War in the play

11.3.3 Collapse of the Familial structure

11.3.4 The Homecoming of Ruth

11.4 Critical and Audience Response

11.5 Summing Up

11.6 Assessment Questions

11.7 References and Recommended Readings

11.0 INTRODUCTION

As the previous unit deals with reading the play, this unit will focus on analysing the behaviour and the condition of the family. This will be done through thorough study of the social, economical, cultural, psychological conditions around the family and how these aspects have shaped their current situation. The ways in which the play borders on both absurdity and a kitchen sink drama is clear in the way the characters are behaving in a manner which is puzzling yet at the same time not very strange to the audience. The audience is invited to look at the changing dynamics and progression of each action in the play. By the end of this unit it will be clear that the politics of Pinter is to provide no absolute answers or solutions to the problems faced by the family, rather make a statement about the helplessness of the working class's condition.

11.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This unit aims at identifying and analyzing the following objectives which are essential for our understanding of *The Homecoming*. After going through this unit you will be able to:

- understand Pinter's work as a working class playwright and how it reflects in his play.
- analyse the symbolic importance of the eldest son and daughter in-law's homecoming and how it affects and disturbs the dynamics of the all-men household.
- read the play as a territory war between the men of the household.
- identify the absence of the mother-figure or the lady of the household as leading to elevation of Ruth's position.
- identify the actual homecoming of Ruth and recognize her triumph through her own victimization.
- critically analyse the issues such as morality, infidelity and motherhood being blurred against the backdrop of a proletarian household.

11.2 PLOT OF THE PLAY

The play talks about the homecoming of Teddy, who has been an expatriate living in the United States for several years. He brings along with him his wife, Ruth, an ex-model for photographers, to meet his working-class family. His parental house is the opposite of what Teddy and Ruth have had back in America; the academic atmosphere of their American home is more at odds for Ruth who finds familiarity in her husband's London home. The arrival of a woman in the distraught household throws off the dynamics of the home jeopardizing not only Teddy's claim over her but also the male hierarchy of the house. Ruth finds her empowerment among the men as they sexualize her, disregarding the fact that she is Teddy's wife. She not only teases the younger men but Max too, her father-in-law, leading to a lot of sexual tension and struggle for power. In the end,

Ruth decides to stay back in London where she meets actual gratification and Teddy returns to America.

The sexual power that Ruth experiences in London is in opposition to the arid academic atmosphere of America. At any cost she refuses to let go of that power and realizes the extent to which she can exercise dominance over the men in the family. Metaphorically she is the absent mother, Jessie. She is the woman who pleases the men sexually at the same time dethrones Max's position in the house. By the end of the play, the audience can see with absolute clarity that the actual homecoming is that of Ruth's who not only decides to stay back but also comes to terms with her elevated position as the head of the family.

11.3 CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE PLAY

The Homecoming paints a dystopian world, a result of a self-destructive post-war worldview; bereft of harmony and logical actions. This is reflective in the characters' psychological turmoil which is evident in their irrational behaviour. The ideal social order is questioned and twisted by Pinter; reflective of the tumultuous period for the proletariats. The characters of the working class household are all trapped in their alienated minds and their thoughts are increasingly turning dark. Yet Pinter does not provide us with clear cut answers and we are left with conclusions of our own. To a great extent Teddy's homecoming is marred by his wife's actual homecoming whereby she realises her true worth and finds herself more at ease than with her husband.

Pinter's world is bereft of any direct stark engagements with political order; yet the presence of class politics is unmistakable. Although the different classes hardly have altercations relating to class, their conversations are highly charged with implied class conflicts. The tension is more of a psychological kind and bourgeois hegemony is often tested and questioned in the play.

11.3.1 THE WORKING CLASS AND PINTER

Leonard A. Stone in his essay “Harold Pinter and the Fragmentation of Working-Class Consciousness” says, “Working-class consciousness in the hands of Pinter has become separate, single and individualist in preference to the common interest. Consciousness exists as a distinct entity to the exclusion of others. What exists now is *private consciousness*. In terms of solidarity it bears none of the hallmarks of class loyalty and by de facto antagonism toward the bourgeois 'higher class'. Pinter's depiction of working-class consciousness is far removed from collectivist rhetoric. His conception of working-class consciousness is one of fragmentation, of particularism. They also lack any form of political consciousness. Working-class characters in Pinter's plays are oppressed.” Stone further points out that the working class consciousness of Pinter's characters are more of “an antisocial and apolitical consciousness”.

Pinter does not allow his characters to escape the situation they are trapped in and offers no salvation. There is no escape from the class oppression that they suffer from and emancipation is a far cry. Stone says, “Pinter the pessimist offers no hope for working-class liberation. Any notions, for instance, of solidarity have been ditched. Any notions of altruism or class solidarity are completely absent. Instead a selfish 'pragmatism' rules the day.”

This kind of psychological suffering is visible in the play as the working class characters are engaged in a class war with the eldest son who has climbed up the social ladder and has settled himself in a bourgeois state. Yet he cannot escape his origins and has to agree to the oppressive class rules. Ruth too agrees to a business proposition which is also a blow to Teddy's dream of moving up the class ladder. The working class men are vehemently disappointed by the eldest son's rejection of a low life and his desire to move on to academics. They feel betrayed and dissatisfied with his success in America and try to take it out on his wife. Interestingly Pinter denies Teddy the power to disapprove the business proposition made between his family and wife; in a way hinting at the powerlessness of the bourgeois on the face of the proletariats.

11.3.2 TERRITORIAL WAR IN THE PLAY

The play is a struggle between the males of a working class household and is indicative of class struggle. The need to hold on to autonomy and dictatorship between the men of the household is a turf war. Irving Wardle in his essay, "The Territorial Struggle" compares the characters of the play in terms of animal behaviour. He goes on to say, "The play has to be understood in territorial terms, or not at all...is what we see a ritualised tournament in which the two instincts of sexual desire and territorial aspiration fight it out..."

To many in the audience, the behaviour of the characters is indicative of animalistic fight for the home turf. The tussle for Ruth's ownership would establish the true alpha male of the household and in this case, Pinter gives Lenny and co. the upper hand in acquiring the prize. Yet the prize would be huge too as Ruth too plays it all out with her background as a bourgeois wife; she makes her own demands, thus establishing herself as the most powerful figure in the play.

Lenny's diction and manner of speech is reminiscent of Jimmy Porter; a similar young, intelligent yet disaffected man except for the sly designs he has for Ruth. He has the obvious upper hand in the household before Teddy and Ruth's arrival as he often tries to disregard and mock his father and uncle. As a professional pimp, he is extremely street smart and incidentally intelligent too. On the part of the audience, there is a strong desire to watch Lenny emerge as the hero of the play, yet he shows no desire to climb up the social ladder and use his talents to good use. He is content with his establishment as a pimp and tries nothing more than to mock his older brother for being successful; a character flaw and a half-hero.

Ruth's decision to switch to prostitution can be thus seen as a means to not only escape a confining situation but at the same time to climb the social ladder of power. Sex initiates a game of power struggle which Ruth senses the moment she meets Teddy's brothers and his father. Her sexual appeal helps her to win the game in a household wrought with its own working class tension and gain an upper hand. As Garner further points out,

“Ruth’s situation, sex is not a valuable commodity to trade carefully, but a frivolous and indulgent game, that masquerades as a power-struggle.”

Teddy’s position as a professor in America is a threat of a psychological kind to his family; they cannot match up to his standards and hence feel threatened. Yet the men try to attack Teddy verbally in order to win the unseen apolitical race. In acquiring his wife, Lenny, Joey and Max feel the victory over the bourgeois Teddy; hence winning the long race. Although Pinter is not overtly political regarding the class relations in the play, the false consciousness is hard to miss as the apolitical stance makes the power struggle between the working class men and bourgeois Teddy more apparent. The struggle is not between the men and Ruth rather between the two classes which become more profound due to Teddy’s obvious upper hand as a professor in America. The working class men find it hard to match up to his standards yet they try to dominate Teddy verbally and reduce him to a spineless bourgeois. By the end of the play Teddy has an air of resigned superiority and gives up on this class war within the family that has cost him his wife.

11.3.3 COLLAPSE OF FAMILIAL STRUCTURE

The Homecoming is one of Pinter’s more mature dramas whereby the theme of absurdity is explored extensively within the private domain of a household. It is also a critique of the traditional familial relationships which is all but laid bare to the audience as a world of make-believe. Family is the representation of the whole world condensed into one tiny unit within the confines of the home. Yet this family seems to be always on the edge over this confinement and constantly trying to put its members on the street and share them with the rest of the world. Instead of helping each other and respecting the familial relationships, all the characters are indulged in self-gratification.

Except for the character of Sam, the rest of them are all engaged in business-like arrangements with their own flesh and blood. The manner in which Ruth’s descent into prostitution is discussed and prepared by the family is indicative of the absolute disregard for the family ties. Surprisingly

even Teddy has nothing to object about for he sees himself to be freed from an uninterested wife who shares no interest with him. Yet the audience cannot sympathise with Ruth either for it is evident in the manner in which she negotiates that she is only but glad and relieved herself to find herself among men who want her so much and is in a way an ego booster for her faltering sexuality and age.

Teddy also points out that Ruth had lot of friends in America too and probably he was even aware of her infidelity in America too, yet refuses to acknowledge it as he finds no way out of his marriage. In Teddy's blatant acceptance of his wife's decision, we also can sense a sort of desperation to escape out of the marriage and from Ruth. For all we know he must be extremely relieved to leave Ruth in the hands of his family; or as punishment for her infidelity or disinterestedness amongst wolves who will devour her to their fullest. Pinter's portrayal of the marriage is more than dismal; almost unbelievable. The relationship between Teddy and Ruth can be fathomed to be a facade and we are left to wonder how they lasted for so long in their marriage. Teddy has long being suspecting his wife's unhappiness with her life and takes her to Europe in order to soothe her mind and repair their marriage, which seems to be working before they came to London. Pinter had a different intention altogether when he portrayed the harsh environment of the household and in the end, Teddy gives up on his wife as he feels that a broken marriage is beyond repair.

11.3.4 THE HOMECOMING OF RUTH

The Homecoming is beyond any doubt, Ruth's as we see the manner in which she falls back comfortably into her

husband's home on her first ever visit. There is absolutely no hesitation on the part of Ruth as the meek daughter-in-law; she is expected by the

The Biblical Ruth

Many critics have associated Ruth's situation to the biblical Ruth who is made to marry her father-in-law and disregards the familial order. Both of them meet with their redemption by saving their respective families from sterility and degeneration. Although their methods and intentions were quite different.

audience to be hesitant and a little bit nervous to meet her in-laws for the very first time. Ruth exudes a sense of a confident woman who has absolutely no misgivings regarding her overt sexuality displayed blatantly in front of her in-laws. Teddy seems to be emasculated by her behaviour as she fits in more naturally in his home than he does. In the end she even forgets the name of her husband and mistakes it for “Eddie”. This goes on to prove that in her newfound freedom, she has erased her past and forgets the name of her husband who to her was crippling her emancipation.

Ruth’s new awakening also opens up the debate of the male gaze and objectifying of her body. In her emancipation she has to let go of her dignity and be always available for her in-laws’ whims and fancy. By giving up on her old life she is opening up new vistas for her which includes constant manhandling by the men of the house. This appears to be a problem for the audience and the readers; yet Ruth seems to be blinded by her own satisfaction and liberty. America to her presented a grim view of life, fully domesticating and incomplete; London on the other hand gives her the autonomy to disregard her marital responsibilities and duties. Her quick agreement to the offer made by Lenny points to the direction that she has no qualms about losing her privacy. Her past career as the “photographic model of the body” has made her well at ease with nudity and prostitution. She has longed for that sort of physical freedom in America where she was restricted by the obligations of being a wife and a mother. Now that she gets an opportunity and admiration for her body yet again, she jumps headlong into it.

11.4 CRITICAL AND AUDIENCE RESPONSE

The Broadway opening of *The Homecoming* on January 3, 1967, was quite a success as theatre-goers couldn’t contain their excitement. There were some negative reviews of the play, especially by Walter Kerr of the *New York Times*, in spite of that the production has an impressive run. It received the Tony Award as Broadway’s Best Play in March of the same year. It went on to win The Best New Play on Broadway by the New York Drama Critics’ Circle in May and Whitbread Anglo-American award for

The Best British play of the year. Both audiences and critics were impressed and perplexed Pinter's penchant of denying them a clear rational explanations in his plays. His razor-sharp attack on the traditional familial structure exposed many themes which were relatable to the audience and critics alike, making him an immensely popular playwright and gave his future plays quite a success.

11.5 SUMMING UP

The Homecoming brushes on categories of Absurd drama, Kitchen-sink drama, Angry young men theatre of the fifties and the sixties. It draws on aspects of all these genres and paints a picture of a working class household which is struggling with finances and psychologically scarred due to the absence of female figures in the household. It also pushes Ruth to the center of the drama within the household as she climbs her way to the top through manipulations and guile. What was meant to be Teddy's position is easily claimed by Ruth who is the new woman. In Ruth's homecoming, it is not only the reclamation of her lost freedom but also the realisation of her self-worth. To this end, Pinter has portrayed not only an independent woman but an intelligent one at that. Aside from the disturbing facts relating to Lenny, Max and Joey's lusting after her, Pinter has projected Ruth as the new woman who will not let any man hinder her pursuit of freedom. Yet at the same time, questions such as integrity, respect, fidelity, marriage, motherhood are all left unanswered as Pinter leaves it to the audience to make sense of the ending of the play. For he believes that such questions are irrelevant on the face of a dismal world that we live in where relationships, familial or otherwise are all but an illusion and are subjected to easy forgetfulness just as Ruth forgets her husband's actual name. Therefore, we have come to the conclusion that the family portrait that Pinter projects onstage in *The Homecoming* is not troubling but a blatant truth of our absurd lives which rejects absolute norms.



ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. How do you differentiate between the literal and metaphorical homecoming in the play?
2. How does the working class background affect the male members of the family?
3. Who do you think is the most powerful figure in the whole family?
4. Why does Ruth emerge to be the emancipated lady at the end of the play?
5. Can *The Homecoming* be called an absurd play? Give reasons for your answer.



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MODULE V: CARYL CHURCHILL: *A NUMBER*

UNIT 12: TRENDS IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH DRAMA

UNIT STRUCTURE

12.0 Introduction

12.1 Learning Objectives

12.2 British Theatre since 1970: An Overview

12.2.1 Theatre in the 1970s and 1980s

12.2.2 Theatre in the 1990s and 2000s

12.2.3 Documentary Theatre or Theatre of Fact

12.3 Summing Up

12.4 Glossary

12.5 Assessment Questions

12.6 References and Recommended Readings

12.0 INTRODUCTION

The reading and the writing of literature is always conditioned by a given historical situation. The facts about a specific historical condition always determine the nature of writing of a particular writer. These facts include facts about the material circumstances in which the text, such as a play, was written and produced, facts about marketplace, facts about movements and countermovement's etc. If analyzed, these facts will lay bare the true nature of the context with which the work is virtually shaped.

Keeping this in mind, we will try to familiarize ourselves with the historical development of the British theatre during the last four decades of the twentieth century, as Caryl Churchill's career as an active theatre practitioner spans this time period. Further, we will also briefly refer to the prevailing trends of British drama in the first decade of the twenty-first century, for a fuller understanding of its contemporary features.

12.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This unit and the following two units form a module and through them you will be introduced to Caryl Churchill's play, *A Number*. To

achieve this end we will first discuss in this unit the history and trends of Contemporary English Drama. By the end of the unit you will be able to:

- Trace the distinctive intellectual and theatrical traditions of the second half of the twentieth century which shaped theatre practitioner.
- Recognize the concerns of Contemporary British Drama towards the notion of identity and family.
- Attend to stylistic and theatrical innovations that Contemporary British Drama has introduced in stagecraft and use of dialogue.

12.2 BRITISH THEATRE SINCE 1970: AN OVERVIEW

12.2.1 THEATRE IN THE 1970s AND 1980s

If you look at the playwrights of the 1970s and their works, you will notice that they were exposed to a profoundly turbulent time in British social and political life. The struggle between trade unions and the Conservative Government in the early seventies ended in a Miners' Strike of 1972 and 1974, which set the tone of constant industrial unrest, the inescapable rise in unemployment and racial tension, disappointment springing from the failure to explore the revolutionary potential of the Vietnam protest, were to provide inspiration for many playwrights to search new form and content within a socialist framework of mind. A host of dramatists including David Hare, David Edgar, Howard Brenton, Trevor Griffiths, and John McGrath were emerging with a common desire to create a new type of political theatre, described variously as 'underground', 'fringe' or 'alternative' theatre.

Fringe Theatre, which is a form of 'alternative theatre' that takes place outside the mainstream took the theatre world in Britain in the 1970s. The name comes from the so called 'fringe events' that developed around the official Edinburgh Festivals in the 1950s. Fringe theatre groups range from small scale professional companies to student and amateur societies; the first such group in Britain is usually held to have been Edinburgh's Traverse Theatre, through which C.P. Taylor and Tom Stoppard first emerged. The best known fringe venues in London include the Hampstead Theatre Club, The Bush, The Gate, The Riverside Studios and the Tricycle

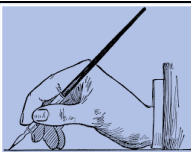
Theatre. Leading fringe groups include the Hull Truck Theatre Company, the 7:84 touring company, and the Pip Simmons theatre group.

The new political theatre that sprang up in the seventies and the eighties can be roughly divided into four categories: 'Avant Garde', 'Agit-Prop', 'Gay Drama' and 'Drama by Women'. Avant Garde playwrights like David Hare and Howard Brenton project the picture of a society trembling on the point of destruction. Howard Brenton's *The Churchill Play* (1974) and *Weapons of Happiness* (1976) show political tensions sparking into open conflict. David Edgar's *Destiny* (1976) or David Hare's *Plenty* (1978) echoes a wider sense of social disintegration in stories of personal despair. The plan of 'Agit-Prop' groups of the period such as CAST (Cartoon Archetypical Slogan Theatre), General Will or 7:84, were to educate and enlighten the common mass. They were also eager to perform to working class audience. Gay theatre group, such as, *Gay Sweatshop* (1975) emanating from the gay liberation movement of the late sixties, aimed to challenge the degrading stereotyping of the gay lifestyle and to present a more positive depiction of homosexual love. Drew Griffith and Roger Baker's *Mister X* (1975) and Jill Posener's *Any Women Can* (1975) fall into this category.

A group of feminist writers, who were linked with the alternative theatre movement, also made an impact on the British Stage during this period. Groups like Women's Company and the Women's Theatre Group (WTG) attempted in general to explore the female situation from a feminist perspective. Some of the important women writers who produced works in 1970s include Bryony Lavery, Jill Posner, Louise Page, Caryl Churchill and Pam Gems. In Churchill's work we find the gender, economic oppression and identity crisis being addressed within plays such as *Owner* (1972), *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* (1976), and *Cloud Nine* (1978).

All in all, the 1970s can be considered a very fruitful time for the new theatrical experimentation. But as the decade approached to an end, the initial zeal of social transformation gave way to cynicism. With the beginning of 1980s the authoritarian political functioning of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and the curtailment of funds for theatre

companies put theatre experiments on a difficult road. The most successful theatrical products of the time were spectacular musicals - *Cats* (1982), *Les Miserables* (1987) or *The Phantom of the Opera* (1986). These were market oriented and self-financed and thus suited the mercantilist spirit of the time. The mainstream theatre during 1980s, instead of functioning as a distinctive tool to diagnose social ills, became aimless. The works of Frayn, Bennelt, and Ayckbourn all retreated from reality while the works of Caryl Churchill, Howard Brenton and Harold Pinter critically explored the new state of the nation along with an in-depth analysis of the nature of transformation of human identity. Brenton's *Green Land* (1988), where it is easy to find a strain of cynicism about future and, David Hare's *The Secret Rapture* (1988), fall into this category. Feminist plays in this decade of the eighties also managed to make a place of their own with their assault on the forces of patriarchy and construction of gender and social identity. Sarah Daniel's *Masterpiece* (1983), *Neaptide* (1984) and Caryl Churchill's *A Mouthful of Birds* co-written with David Lane, are examples of such plays.

	<h3>CHECK YOUR PROGRESS</h3>
<p>1. What social conditions in England during 1970s led to the emergence of the new alternative theatre movements?</p>	
<p>-----</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p>	
<p>2. What do you understand by Fringe Theatre?</p>	
<p>-----</p> <p>-----</p>	

3. What were the dominant themes of the new experimental dramatists?

12.2.2 THEATRE IN THE 1990s AND 2000s

The nature of development of drama in the last decade of the twentieth century is driven by experimentation in a variety of themes and styles. The fall of Berlin wall, the exit of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister of Britain, the collapse of the regimes in Eastern Europe created an atmosphere of hope which became an inspiration for the dramatists. But as the decade progressed, the new found optimism was being viewed critically by a host of dramatists. David Hare created a state-of-the-nation trilogy: *Racing Demon* (1990), *Murmuring Judges* (1991) and the *Absence of War* (1993) and took stock of the country's situation. Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (1995) generated an unsettling feeling that any moment our society might be ripped apart. Plays like Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* (1996) and Martin McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (1996) surprised its audience with bold experimentation with theme. Such plays earned the name "in-yer-face-theatre" or "smack-and-sodomy plays" for their candid treatment of sex and violence and for creating awareness by generating shock waiver.

12.2.3 DOCUMENTARY THEATRE OR THEATRE OF FACT

The Documentary Theatre is a genre of play based directly on historical and documentary records. Created in Germany in the 1950s, the

form was much influenced by the US Living Newspaper. The first work in the genre to attract international attention was *The Case of J. Robert Oppenheimer* by Heinar Kipphardt, which opened in 1964 in Berlin in a production directed by Erwin Piscator. The play dealt with the development of the atomic bomb and the allegations of disloyalty made against the nuclear scientist Oppenheimer during the McCarthy witch-hunts of the 1950s. Other pioneers of the form were playwrights Peter Weiss and Rolf Hochhuth. Weiss's play *The Investigation*, about the Frankfurt trials of perpetrators of the Auschwitz atrocities, was produced simultaneously at 14 German theatres in 1965. His documentary about the Vietnam War, *Vietnam Discourse*, was produced in 1968 in Frankfurt.

As the millennium approached, British theatre responded and was shaped by international events. The 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre, America's invasion of Iraq, the war in Afghanistan, detention without trial of terrorist suspects forced playwrights to re-look into individual's identity in shifting political and cultural climate. We now have dominance of documentary drama, the variation of which is called 'verbatim theatre'. Robin Soan's *A State Affair* (2001), David Hare's *The Permanent Way* (2003) and *Staff Happens* (2004) fall into this category. *The Permanent Way* is about the privatization of Britain's railways and in *Staff Happens* he examines the reasons behind America and Britain's illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003. Writers like Gurpreet Kaur Bhatia in her play *Behzti* (2005) tries to expose contradiction inherent in British life, which can best be felt by those in marginalized community even in a multicultural society.

The contemporary British theatre is thus continuously experimenting with new forms, techniques and bold themes. We notice that the playwrights have always shown an urgency to thematically and ideologically respond to the world and the happenings around them.

LET US STOP AND THINK



Feminist Theatre – Feminist Theatre is a sub-genre of theatre that came to be widely recognized, practiced, theorized and studied in the wake of the Second Wave Feminism of the seventies' led by the Women's Liberation Movement. It has generally been understood as

an amalgamation of diverse theatrical works motivated by the recognition of and resistance to women's marginalization within social and cultural systems. In 1982, as a display of acknowledgement, Methuen Drama launched the Plays by Women series. The first of the four plays to be published in volume one was Caryl Churchill's Vinegar Tom. Other plays by Churchill such as Cloud Nine or Top Girls, proved seminal to defining a feminist landscape in British theatre and were highly influential in terms of studying and theorizing feminist theatre, both aesthetically and politically. How did Churchill's feminist concerns develop since the publication of Vinegar Tom? Reading of the plays in relation with socio-political development of the age will give you an idea about this.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. How did international politics influence writing of drama during 1990s?

2. How does the theatre of the last decade of the twentieth century differ from the theatre of 1970s?

3. Name some key objectives of the Documentary theatre style?

12.3 SUMMING UP

As we have come to the end of the unit you must be familiar with the themes and concerns of the theatre practices from the 1970s upto the contemporary times. It is clear from the historical evidences that the production of literature is always conditioned by social milieu and historical situations. The 1970s theatre scene was deeply influenced by the industrial unrest, the rise in unemployment and racial tension, the horrors of the Vietnam war and its subsequent protest. All of these events provided inspiration for many playwrights with a socialist framework of mind. The 1980s and 1990s British theatre is characterized by the candid exposure of sexuality and violence on stage which is a direct repercussion of the fall of the Berlin Wall, Thatcher's decline in power and the indulgence in economic and material excesses of the time. The Documentary theatre and Feminist theatre were two sub branches of the Fringe theatre movement which found popularity during this period of transition. Both are didactic in nature and are influenced by real and political events. It may be concluded that the fringe theatre was a necessary theatre movement created by the nature of the time.

12.4 GLOSSARY

Agit-prop: The word, derived from two words agitation and propaganda, includes stage plays, pamphlets, motion pictures and other art forms with an explicitly political message.

Avant-garde: A loosely defined movement in modern drama that reacted against realism and favoured a more imaginative approach to the theatre, often stressing the role of the director as an interpreter of a playwright's ideas.



12.5 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Give a social background of Britain during the 1970s and the 1980s and discuss how it affected the theatre scene during the time.
2. What were the main issues addressed in the theatre that emerged during the 1970s Britain.
3. What do you understand by Fringe theatre? Illustrate with examples.
4. The shift from the 1970s to the 1980s Britain also had a profound effect on the plays produced during these two decades. Make a comparison of the themes and issues dealt with in plays produced during this two time periods.
5. Write a brief note on the plays of the 1990s and the 2000s and their candid treatment of subjects such as sex and violence.
6. Discuss some of the main characteristics of Documentary Theatre? Do you think it serves a didactic purpose to educate the general public?



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UNIT 13: READING THE PLAY *A NUMBER*

UNIT STRUCTURE

13.0 Introduction

13.1 Learning Objectives

13.2 Caryl Churchill: Life and Works

13.2.1 The period of Radio-writing during 1960s.

13.2.2 The period for independent production to collaborative works: 1973-1979.

13.2.3 As a critic of capitalism, power and cultural practices: 1980-1999.

13.2.3 The post-modern Churchill: 2000-present.

13.3 Reading the play *A Number*

13.4 Summing Up

13.5 Assessment Questions

13.6 References and Recommended Readings

13.0 INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to be human? The question has disturbed philosophers, poets, anthropologists, scientists and ordinary men since ancient times. From a scientific point of view, in today's age of advanced biomedical research, this question has gained astonishing prominence. This is a question that is central in Caryl Churchill's *A Number*, a truly contemporary British play, where she uses the issue of human cloning as a dramatic device. You will be surprised to find how Caryl Churchill has been able to adjoin this basic scientific question with related issues of identity and family, taking the topic into a higher philosophical plane which, I am sure, will compel you to have a renewed look into life, identity and the meaning of existence.

13.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In this unit you will be introduced to *A Number*, a play by Caryl Churchill. We will do it by first placing Caryl Churchill in the British theatrical tradition and then exploring various nuances of the play. By the end of the unit you will be able to:

- trace the distinctive intellectual and theatrical tradition of the second half of the twentieth century which shaped Caryl Churchill's sensibility as a theatre practitioner.
- analyse the deliberate problematization of the theme to entice readers in exploring the dialectic of human cloning.
- recognize the concern of the play towards the notion of identity and family in relation to human cloning.
- attend to stylistic and theatrical innovations that Caryl Churchill has introduced here in stagecraft and use of dialogue.

13.2 CARYL CHURCHILL: AN OVERVIEW OF HER LIFE AND WORKS

It is virtually impossible to imagine the landscape of British Drama without Caryl Churchill. She is the author of more than 30 plays, a clutch of radio plays and adaptations. Irrespective of variations of her medium of expression, Churchill has had from the beginning abiding concerns for and exploration of the human mind along with commitment to feminism and socialism. In general, her stage plays since 1970s are concerned with the exposure of injustice and inequalities which are the results of late 20th century western capitalism.

Born in 1938 in London, Caryl Churchill spent some of her childhood in Montreal, Canada, but she studied at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford University, graduating in 1960. As a student she wrote *Downstairs*, a one act play performed by the Oriel College Dramatic Society in 1958. This was followed by her first full-length play *Having a Wonderful Time*. Churchill's career to date can be understood in four broad categories which are briefly discussed below:

13.2.1 THE PERIOD OF RADIO-WRITING DURING 1960S:

Churchill's first performed radio play *You've No Need to be Frightened* was presented as a 'play of voices' in a student production by Exeter College Dramatic Society in 1961. Her radio plays are places for her initial experiments with form and dialogue and had lasting effects on her theatrical imagination. The play *Easy Death* (1962) uses songs and verse and is composed of two plots running at varied speed. In *The Ants* (1962) and *Identical Twins* (1968,) she explores childhood and the issue of identity with in-depth accuracy. She experiments with different themes in her radio-plays, focusing constantly on the role of the individual in a changing society.

13.2.2 THE PERIOD FOR INDEPENDENT PRODUCTION TO COLLABORATIVE WORKS: 1973-1979

The focus of her writing shifted from 'words' of the radio drama to 'events' of the stage play in the period 1973-79. Now she wrote a series of independently scripted plays and from 1978 onwards she collaborated with Joint Stock, the theatre company with socialist bent and the feminist theatre group Monstrous Regiment. Her first professional stage production, *Owner* (1972) was staged at Royal Court Theatre Upstairs. The play is about a strong minded real estate agent who refuses to be defined and confined by her husband. It catalogues some of the long standing preoccupations of the dramatist like sexual politics, capitalist exploitation and question of identity, threat to ecology and future horror. We observe in Churchill's plays of this period a blend of social commitment and feminist creed. Plays like *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* (1976), *Vinegar Tom* (1976) and *Cloud Nine* (1978) fall in this category.

13.2.3 AS A CRITIC OF CAPITALISM, POWER AND CULTURE: 1980-1999

Churchill's plays during this period had become more political and progressively more feminist than in the previous decade. Plays like *Top*

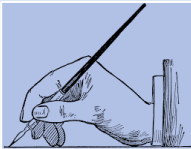
Girls (1982), *Fen* (1982), *Soft Cop* (1984), *Serious Money* (1983), *Mad Forest* (1990) and *Skirker* (1994) have tended to reflect on the theme of cultural politics, power and sexual politics. In *Soft Cop* her inspiration was French philosopher Michael Foucault's book *Discipline & Punish* (1975). She wrote the play to emphasise the hegemonic character of the state power by employing an all-male cast. The play redefines Michael Foucault's idea of 'power' presenting it through successive episodes accompanied by music.

In *Serious Money* (1987) Churchill attacks the stock market as the embodiment of capitalism. The West is presented as a huge capitalist machine transforming its subjects into sickness. In *Fen* (1983) she shows how the reach of financial capital across the continent had a local effect, changing local people into passive machines of production. As *Saskia Sasan* (2002) has shown, in every globalization story poor women are the group most severely disciplined as productive bodies. With no social and political means of resistance, characters like Val and her gang of labourers become easy victims at the hand of the exploiters.

13.2.4 THE POST-MODERN CHURCHILL: 2000 – TILL THE PRESENT

We can name this section 'postmodern Churchill' because from 2000 onwards her experimentations with themes and language and stagecraft has taken such a new turn that goes beyond the codified definition of modern theatre. Now she introduces issues of terrorism, violence, ethnic cleansing, the dangerous dimensions of technologies, environmental abuse, etc. in her plays. Now in the fashion of postmodern theatre, devices like standard plot and character development are minimized. The idea of a narrative structure is discarded to include fractional snapshots from history, culture and contemporary events. Her first play of the twenty first century, *Far Away* (2000) best represents the future nightmare in an unconventional format where pushing the traditional three act format to the limits of its possibilities, a dream like vision is presented.

If you compare the early historical plays of Churchill with the plays she has written in the first decade of the current century, you will notice that, in terms of themes and techniques, she has become an ardent critic of globalizations' shortfalls – its economic, cultural and political ramifications. She retains a strong faith in theatre's role in anatomizing human conditions in the contemporary world.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What are the major themes of the radio Plays of Churchill?

2. What anti-capitalist stand do you locate in the plays of Caryl Churchill in the period 1973-1979?

3. In what sense the plays of Caryl Churchill written in the first decade of the Twenty First century, be called 'postmodern'?

13.3 READING THE PLAY *A NUMBER*

Let's now familiarize ourselves with the play, *A Number*, in this unit, before critically analysing the same in the next unit. Caryl Churchill's *A Number* is a play with two actors and with a length of five scenes. One actor plays Salter, the other his son. The action takes place in a fixed place, where Salter lives.

SCENE ONE

Salter is sitting in his living room with his son Bernard, who is called B2 in the play. Bernard reveals to Salter that he has recently discovered a number of clones which have been made from his genetic material. Bernard is not sure about the exact number of clones that were created. Salter assures Bernard that he is the original one, the product of natural birth that he is his father and others are illegal copies of Bernard. When Salter refers to the copies as 'things', Bernard protests, by saying that they are also people. Salter plans to sue the doctors responsible for producing so many copies, and the hospital which is involved in the process, calculating on what each copy of his son's worth be. Bernard expresses doubt regarding his originality as the biological son. Salter finally confesses that Bernard is not his original son, but was created after his four year old son and wife were killed in a car accident. Salter named the new child after his first son, who was also called Bernard.

SCENE TWO

Salter meets his first son Bernard (B1), the one he has just said died. Bernard complains to his father about the fact that he was sent away and replaced by a cloned version. Bernard wants to know from his father why he never came to him when he cried out at night after his mother died. Salter tries to defend himself by saying that he did not hear Bernard's cry.

SCENE THREE

Salter meets B2 again. This B2 is Bernard of the first scene. B2 informs Salter that B1 recently paid B2 a visit. B2 was frightened by B1's

aggressive nature who he thought died in a car accident, as was informed by Salter. B2 feels unsecured and plans to leave the country. He also wants to know from Salter how his mother died. Salter says that his wife committed suicide when B1 was two years old. Salter tried to care for his son for another two years and finally sent him away to start a new life. He clones B1 as a way to correct his parental mistake. After hearing this, B2 expresses his dislike for Salter but Salter assures his love and care for B2. He also requests B2 not to leave the country. But B2 decides to go away as he is afraid of an attack on his life from B1.

SCENE FOUR

B1 comes to Salter and reveals that he murdered B2. When Salter wants to know about it in detail, B1 refuses to disclose. Salter now confesses to B1 that he was a bad father and he did hear B1's cry when he was a child, but did not pay attention to it. He wanted to give him a second chance as a father and so made a clone copy of B1 instead of having another new child as he thought B1 was a perfect child before the death of his mother.

SCENE FIVE

Michael Black, another cloned version of Salter's original son appears. Salter is genetically identical to other sons but is completely different in temperament. Salter tries to get Michael to tell him something unique about himself so that he can get to know him better. Michael tells many things to Salter—his family life, wife, children, profession etc., but nothing seems to satisfy Salter. He asks Michael about his feeling of being a clone, -- one of the many copies. Michael replies that he finds it delightful. Meantime, Salter gets the news that original Bernard B1 has committed suicide. He is heartbroken having lost two of his sons – the original Bernard, B1 and a copy of this, B2.

LET US STOP AND THINK



- **Science Fiction:** One needs to look into the genre of science fiction for a better understanding of the theme of A Number. Science fiction stories involve partially true and partially fictitious laws or theories of science and insert them into plots which are familiar to both the present day and the known past or entirely fantastical futuristic world.

- **Cloning:** In the early 1990s Dr. Keith Campbell and Dr. Ian Wilmut collaborated in Scotland to systematically investigate the requirements for a successful nuclear transfer by manipulating both the donor cells and the recipient eggs. Five live born lambs resulted from this early experiment, of which two died within minutes of birth and the third succumbed after ten days. However, the remaining two that came to be known as Megan and Morag lived well into adulthood.

- **Cloning and Literature:** The word 'clone' first appears in science fiction in 1915, in a collection of short stories, *Master Tales of Mystery* by the World's Most Famous Authors of Today, edited by Francis Joseph Reynolds. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), for its part was, arguably the book that called wide attention to and sounded alarm bells about some of the dangers of this new reproductive technology.

Cloning and film: following films were Human Cloning and Artificial Intelligence

- Artificial Intelligence (Steven Spielberg, 2001, US)
- Blade Runner (Ridley Scott, 1982, US)
- Multiplicity (Harold Ramis, 1996, US)
- Star Wars, Episode II, Attack of the Clones (George Lucas, 2002, US)
- The Kid (Jan Turteltaub, 1999, US)

13.4 SUMMING UP

As we have come to the end of the unit you must be aware of the broad themes and ideas discussed in the play *A Number* by Caryl Churchill. An attempt has been made to estimate Caryl Churchill as a playwright, before providing a summary of the play. We have observed that in *A Number*, Churchill imagines a future where cloning will be a reality. She asks us to consider the consequences of such a future have in store for us and its significance in relation to family, children and related issue of identity. We have then analysed the text from two perspectives, which I believe, establishes *A Number* as contemporary British drama. The sub-content on the style of the play is also added to explore the relation between the theme and the modalities of expression.



13.5 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Do you think of Salter's sons as identical copies of the same person, or more as siblings?

2. Describe the last meeting of Salter with Michael in the final scene. Why does Salter keep asking Michael for personal information? What he wants to hear from Michael and why? Give your opinion.
3. How, through the character of Salter, Caryl Churchill presents the problems associated with of fatherhood in the play?
4. Comment on Caryl Churchill's treatment of the theme of identity and family in the play.
5. Is cloning human beings fundamentally wrong, or does it depends on the circumstances? Give your own idea on human cloning.



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UNIT 14: CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE PLAY A NUMBER

UNIT STRUCTURE

14.0 Introduction

14.1 Learning Objectives

14.2 Major Themes in *A Number*

14.2.1 Technology, Cloning and Identity

14.2.2 Broken Family

14.2.3 Nature vs Nurture

14.3 Dramatic Devices

14.3.1 Minimalism

14.3.2 Dialogue

14.4 Summing Up

14.5 Glossary

14.6 Assessment Questions

14.7 References and Recommended Readings

14.0 INTRODUCTION

You have been introduced to the text of *A Number*, by Caryl Churchill in the previous unit. In this unit we try to analyse the play critically. Major themes of the play such as the question of technology, cloning, and identity, the dynamics of broken family and the nature and nurture discourse will be analyzed in this unit. The various dramatic techniques that Churchill employs to bring tension into the play will also be discussed in detail in this unit. The aim of this unit is to introduce to you the social, cultural and ethical issues which are present in Churchill's play *A Number* and in doing so unmask the danger that surrounds the scientific pursuit of human cloning.

14.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

A thorough reading of this unit will make you able to:

- recognize the concern of the play towards the notion of human cloning, identity and family relation.
- understand the unique representation and portrayal of the characters.
- comprehend the dramatic techniques employed by Churchill in the play.

14.2 MAJOR THEMES IN A NUMBER

14.2.1 TECHNOLOGY, CLONING AND IDENTITY

In this subsection let us engage in a cultural debate on the issue of human cloning, presuming that, as Churchill makes us to believe, in near future due to technological advancements, cloning may be a reality, linking it with the issue of identity. In Churchill's play, the surprising discovery of an underground cloning experiment becomes the cause of one family's conflict.

Caryl Churchill is best known for her treatment of themes on personal identity as they bisect with political and social issues. In *A Number* Churchill engages with the profound issue of human power and identity linking it with bio-ethical issues pertaining to cloning. Cloning, as you know, is one of the new frontiers in scientific enterprise. But Churchill's focus is not the science of cloning, but its ethical, social and cultural dimension which have bearings on our identity and genetic makeup.

LET US STOP AND THINK



- **Bioethics:** Bioethics has been used in the last twenty years to describe the investigation and a study of ways in which decisions in medicine and science touch upon our health and lives and upon our society and environment. Bioethics is concerned with questions about basic human values such as the rights to life and health, and the rightness or wrongness of certain developments in healthcare institutions, life technology, medicine and society's responsibility for the life and health of its members. Bioethics involves issues relating to the beginning and end of human life, all the way from issues relating to in-vitro fertilization and abortion to euthanasia.

(Source: <http://www.bioethics.org.au>)

As you have seen in the plot, the play is a series of confrontation between a man, his son and two cloned versions of the son. The play presents the picture of a frightening all conceivable world where scientific advances challenge our long-held assumptions about individual's autonomy. Cloning is used as a way to get at profound emotions of love and loss and addresses a mechanized culture in which individuality itself seems threatened. In fact, many of the issues raised within *A Number* in relation to cloning are seriously debated in connection with other procreative processes like donor insemination and IVF (In vitro fertilization, see glossary). Churchill is aware that human cloning is not yet a reality, but a possibility. She thus abstains from passing a final judgment on this controversial issue. The play, thus, acquires a unique status. This means, the author does not present a play with pre-loaded 'meaning', but a play with many gaps in its treatment of the controversial theme. The audience/reader, along with the writer participates in the process of construction of our individual perspectives on the issue. With a fixed stage setting and minimum dialogues (see subsection on Dramatic Technique) the social and the ethical dimensions of cloning is scrutinized in the play.

In the play, Salter and Bernard (B2) fall prey to cloning myths. Some of such myths related to its social, reproductive and ethical aspects of cloning are:

- Cloning might challenge the social aspect of parenthood and nature of family.
- Children produced by cloning might have a psychological problem of identity.
- The knowledge that one is a result of cloning may diminish one's sense of uniqueness.
- Cloning produces identical persons.

Through the interaction between the two sons, all these concerns are gradually addressed. Salter tells B2, "They've damaged your uniqueness, weakened your identity" (14). And B2 later on observes that clones are, "something terrible, which is exactly the same genetic person" (39). From a philosophical perspective, Jean Baudrillard (1993:7) objects to cloning,

arguing that this mechanical process of duplication will make the idea of uniqueness meaningless. Clones are copies without an original. But can we call one less 'human' because one is more 'technical' in origin? The text of *A Number* does not justify this. In *A Number*, Michael Black appears to be more human than the aggressive Bernard (B1), the 'normal' son of Salter. There is no evidence in the field of psychology that the experiences of future human beings created through genetic manipulation, can be identical, or they can be duplicated. Since in case of most of the human beings the personality and identity development is built on experience of life events, potential human beings created through any type of genetic manipulation will have uniqueness of any other human being. Churchill enjoys giving contrary arguments in the issue of uniqueness. Her focus is, first, the emergence of a new personality through cloning, and secondly, its multiple orientations in relation to surrounding environment. When a person perceives that his body is made of blotches which can be sold, then he becomes aware of his state of alienation. The cell taken from Bernard's (B1) body becomes an entity. Through cloning each cell can evolve into a new person or a product which will be differently oriented in natural environment.

You can find the evidence of the above argument in the text itself by observing different orientation for three sons of Salter. Biologically they are directly or indirectly related to father but characteristically so different. B1 is rough, dominant; he has dark memories of his loveless childhood. He hates B2 who was created to replace him. He kills B2 out of envy. B2 is opposite to B1. He is mild-minded, self-contained and has a weak personality. Michael Black is more a social person than a genetic copy. He is a family man, and a teacher. Through the portrayal of his character Churchill puts forward a counter argument to the claims of biological authenticity of a person. Michael's personality, speech and behavior suggest that one's identity is not biological but something more. We become ourselves moment by moment through (1) the acts we perform, (2) acts which are performed on us and (3) the agencies which influence us. *A Number*, thus, explores the effect of the varied factors on the free will of a person, natural or cloned. The nature of growth of each

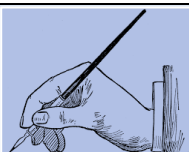
personality of the play can be understood by analysing the ‘unique self-relationship’ that they maintain with each other.

Churchill does not sentimentalize the issue of cloning but stresses the need to construct a new perspective that the new change will demand from us. French philosopher and cultural theorist Baudrillard in this regard warns us that in a new society of cloned individuals a ‘disqualified original’ would take ‘revenge on his clone’ (2002: 201). This happens as the ‘original’ will feel useless and threatened by his own clone. In the text B1 kills B2 out of this perceived threat to his personality. But there are contrary reactions also. Michael Black, another clone made from B1, accepts the new situation with new energy:

All these very similar people doing things
like each other or a bit different or
whatever we’re doing, what a thrill for
the mad old professor if he’d lived to see
it, I do see the joy of it. (p.61)

The contrast between Black and Salter in relation to B1 and B2 is clearly visible here. Michael Black does not suffer from identity crisis. He has taken responsibility of himself, and is not dependent on genes to tell who he is. When Salter asks Michael how does he feel ‘losing your life’ (p.60), Michael replies, I’ve still got my life’ (60), clearly showing his preference to life itself, as it unfolds to him.

Churchill has thus brought us to a slippery space-- tugged on one side, by a fear that human cloning will have disastrous consequences, and on the other, a belief that the society has inbuilt mechanism to adapt to new scientific innovations. We must reconstruct a broader idea of identity, which will not be rooted to singularity but plurality of visions to face the future.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What light does the play throw on the issue of ‘uniqueness’ and ‘originality’ regarding the identity of a cloned individual?

2. How does the confrontation of B1, B2 and Michael throw light on the theme of biological authenticity?

3. Beyond physical attributes, how were the three clones similar? How were they different?

14.2.2 BROKEN FAMILY

The breaking of the traditional bourgeois family structure is an important concern of Caryl Churchill. *A Number* is a play where family dynamics is exclusively dependent on father-son relations. Through the device of an encounter between an aging father and three genetically identical sons, Caryl Churchill attempts to address new concerns of the concept of family, imagining a future when human cloning will be a reality.

The nature and function of family as it appears in *A Number* touches upon many controversial issues on parenthood, women empowerment and identity. The ‘family’ of Salter is an all-male family. The mother makes her presence felt through her absence and multiple

constructed versions of her absence by Salter. Her death is rehearsed, first as a death in childbirth, then in car accident, and finally a suicide under the train. As if systematically the mother figure is abandoned and projected as unnecessary. It is not only the father but his son Bernard (B1) also who associates her absence with the same kind of neglectful abandonment, as he says: “I remember her sitting there, she was there... she’d be there but she wouldn’t help stop anything” (32). The story of the play does not give us any chance to be sympathetic with the mother, as we have not been given any clue regarding the reason of her suicide but enough testimony by B1 that he was neglected by his mother. *A Number* thus presents the picture of a disturbing family life where suicide, allegation of neglect by the son against his mother and also his father ruptures all the parental bonds.

Cloning technology applied to human being would predictably have far reaching effects in social and family dynamics. If men can have their own offspring without the help of women, as Salter did in the text, then a woman can do the same. What will be personal, social and political implications of such a state? Motherhood has served throughout the ages to glorify woman as mother but at the same time to subordinate her. If new reproductive technology, as the argument goes, frees the women from the burden of motherhood as she will be in control of her biological identity, then it may lead to greater parity with men and equal opportunity for female. But, on the other hand, think about the contrary possibility: if men can have their own child, then considering the masculine power structure of our society, there will be an imbalance in number in male and female births. Don’t forget that Salter, as a result of the conspiracy of the doctor though, has all the cloned sons. It may thus lead to perpetuation of male centered power structure of our society.

14.2.3 NATURE VS NURTURE

The ‘Nature versus Nurture’ debate is at the center of the family drama in *A Number*. You may call the play the story of the father who failed. Salter had his first son conceived with his wife, but after his wife’s suicide, while struggling with alcoholism and depression, he failed to take

care of his child. He recognizes his failure and wants another child. So he turns to cloning. Here Salter takes a morally controversial approach in mending his broken family. Apparently we see nothing wrong in Salter's wish for a new start. It is a universal desire. Don't we take decision in family issues which we later wish we could retreat from? But the way Salter tried to mend it, by breaking through natural human boundaries, is a risky step. It raises the vital question – do we get second chance in parenting?

Salter's fathering capacity, we may see, is at the root of problematic dynamics of family in the play. He is unwilling to, and possibly incapable of engaging with all his offspring in equal terms, simultaneously. He has a strong sense of physical ownership who thinks that his being the father gives him absolute right upon his sons—even the cloned versions of his son. The cloned sons are commodities to him labelling with price. Although they are living beings, Salter calls them 'things': 'how many of these things are there?'(10). B2 protests and challenges his father: 'You call them things, I think we'll find, they're people' (11). Salter apologizes: 'sorry I said things' (12). We find here that when a child of a particular genetic construction is made, it is easier to consider him as a product than a being.

In *A Number* the cloned identity of two 'sons' make the issue more complicated. We find here that Salter the father is partial in his parental care. He loves B2 but hides from him the history of his true genetic origin. The older Bernard –B1, cannot value himself as he has not experienced love from his father. Churchill has always found the impulse for a better society in love – a love which is genuine, as it is mixed with truth. More than the biological DNA it is the 'DNA' of love, the function and manipulation of which results into the nature of functioning of a family. When B2 has come to know from his brother the true story of his birth, regarding which his father continuously lied to him, he escapes from his father. The inner void in B2's mind thus remains unfulfilled.

The trauma of B1 is much deeper than B2. Although Salter insists that he did love him, the first Bernard had no memory of love and so cannot love others. He endured his trauma for thirty five years. He was

abandoned by father and replaced by a cloned brother. He is aggressive, violent and threatening because of this stolen childhood, home and family. On the issue of making a clone of him, he directly charges his father and father confesses the truth:

B1: And they take this painless scrap, this
speaky little cells of me and kept that
and you threw the rest of me away

SALTER: No

B1: And had a new one made

SALTER: No

B1: Yes

SALTER: Yes

B1: Yes (26)

Salter's confession is the confession of an arbitrary patriarch. His main concern has always remained his relations with children set in his terms, disregarding others' wishes and likes. Salter searches for son's replacement the moment he loses B1 and B2. He tells Bernard:

I didn't feel I'd lost him when I sent him
Away because I had the second chance.
And when the second one of my son the
Second son was murdered it wasn't so
Bad as you'd think because it seemed
Fair. I was back with the first one (61)

He is guided here by the laws of demand and supply, turning the family a market place, a place to bargain.

It is only in the character of Michael Black, another cloned version of B1, that we have a hint of alternative family relations. His appearance changes the family saga to another direction which was till then dominated by egoist Salter. You have already seen in section 5.6.1 that Michael Black is different from his other brothers. He has a harmonious life. He is

married, has three sons and is a teacher of mathematics. When Salter asks him 'are you happy?'(55), he replies, 'yes, I think I am' (55). He is the alternative to egoist Salter, and attempts to script a family history beyond genetics, the issue of uniqueness and originality debate.

What is the cementing force of an alternative family structure? To Churchill, it is love – an all-embracing love. Michael has the power to inculcate the basic value of love. He, as E. H. Kritzer (1991) argues, by understanding and accepting relatedness with even such humble things as lettuce, presents an alternative to the masculine subjectivity, the power centre of a traditional family:

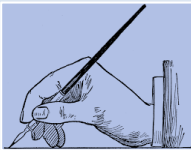
We've got ninety-nine per cent the same
Genes as any other person. We've got
Ninety nine per cent the same as a
Lettuce. Does that cheer you up at all?
I love about the lettuce. It makes me feel
I belong. (62)

All the characters of the play suffer from, what Julia Kristeva (1997) calls 'abolition of psychic space' (171) for want of genuine feeling of love. They have also failed to come in terms with their cloned identity as it demands different orientation and personality modification. As a result, except Michael Black, all the characters become alone with one self. Churchill cannot be definitive about the nature of the structure of family in a futuristic world when cloning may be a reality; her effort lies in questioning various orthodoxies of our conventional idea of family. As shown above, the idea of pre-eminence of mother in a family is questioned but along with it the notion of fatherhood is deliberately problematized. The importance of the role of parents is not measured from the perspective of 'being parents' but 'doing parents' – what parents can do for the family here is the yardstick of the quality of their being. Similarly, the idea of single parenthood has introduced the level of adequacy or inadequacy which is dependent upon our own interpretation of the motives and functioning of the characters of the play.

LET US STOP AND THINK



- **Post-Human** – What does it mean to think beyond humanism? Is it possible to craft a mode of thinking that rejects the classic humanist ideas? The idea of posthuman partly answers this. It argues that we have long ceased to be human because of our increasingly intimate relationships with non-humans, such as technological artefacts. It indicates existence in a state beyond being human. As the human species has come to the last stage of evolution, it must incorporate technology to step into the next level.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. The final scene between Michael Black and Salter is left very open-ended. What can you derive from this?

2. Find out the similarities and dissimilarities among the cloned brothers.

14.3 DRAMATIC DEVICES

As a playwright Churchill has always experimented with various theatrical techniques to promote an alternative discourse of theatre. By conceptualizing a stage with minimal décor loaded with symbolic overture, she took the art of minimalism to perfection. How this technique helps us understand the meaning of her play? Samuel Beckett is famous in using such technique of minimalism in his late plays like *Ohio Impromptu*, *Catastrophe*, *What Where* or *Breath* to give us an idea of a sense of calamity both psychological and physical. Although Churchill's subject is different here yet it seems that a comparative analysis with Beckett will help you immensely in understanding the technique of Caryl Churchill.

14.3.1 MINIMALISM

You will find *A Number* a fit example of such stylistic experimentation. It has minimal technical requirements as a cast of two—one character will play Salter and one plays all the sons. There is no stage direction, only we are told that the play takes place “where Salter lives”. In the original London production, the actor playing the sons conveyed the difference between each character simply by changing his voice and physical mannerism. Elsewhere actors relied on elements of costume to suggest different persona. Some directors had these changes off stage, while others had the actor transform in full view of the audience.

Churchill's *A Number* is structured in such a manner where the connotation is derived from an intersection between its performative potential and textual appeal. Regarding the relation between the play text and the performance, Keir Elam (2009) writes:

The written text/performance text relationship is not one of simple priority but a complex of reciprocal constraints constituting a powerful intersexuality...Any given performance is only to a limited degree constrained by the indications of the written text, just as the latter does not usually bear the traces of any actual performance.(191)

In this regard you will find in Churchill the influence of German dramatist Bertolt Brecht, with his episodic mode of storytelling in which each scene is isolated and has a crucial turning point. We are encouraged to have ‘eyes on the course’ and ‘not on the finish’. Keeping Salter at the centre stage, we find that five scenes of the play are arranged in the following order - Salter and B2, Salter and B1; Salter and B2; Salter and B1; Salter and Michael Black .The performance of each scene encourages the audience to construct their own idea on the controversial idea of cloning. Instead of writing a play with pre-loaded ‘meaning’, Churchill arranges scenes, dialogues and settings to create perspectives.

14.3.2 DIALOGUE

Churchill’s specific invention lies in her improvisation in using dialogue. Here dialogues of the characters are filled with half – sentences, interruptions and seemingly incomplete thought. Each line of dialogue is ‘like a piece of DNA’ which contains in it as it is in the entire play. Here the characters’ words overlap into each other and conversation proceeds with mutual interruptions. For example, look at the exchange between Salter and B2-debating on ‘originality issue’:

B2: what if someone else is the one, the first

One, the real one and I’m

SALTER: no because

B2: Not that I’m not real which is why I’m

Saying they’re not things, don’t call them

SALTER: just wait, because I’m your father.

B2: you know that?

SALTER: Of course

Here before a conversation is built, it is ruptured by another person’s words, exposing to us the very difference that exists between two speakers. It appears that the action of the play is primarily psychological, i.e. it consists of fluctuating thought, silence and doubts and their expression through words. Instead of characters performing, it is words that perform on the stage. We may also say that what Brecht achieved

through his use of Alienation Effect, alerting the audience about the reality during performance, Churchill does the same with his words, their gaps, silences and incompleteness.

The language experiments she carries out in the play *A Number* is called ‘a theatre of the impossible narrative’ by Vicky Angelki, where the language steps out of “the traditional contract that presupposes an adequacy between form and content – abdicating the grand romantic project, as it were – stands out as a means of reinventing tragedy.” (2013:92)

Such a language structure produces a theatre which is: “doomed to stuttering and to endless repetition, a theatre of ‘the eternal return’. Churchill proposes to our ears words that are only summoned to vainly and imperfectly encode a world – a world doomed to disappear as soon as it is uttered.” (2013:92)

The following conversation between Salter and B1 testifies this where the possibility of production of meaning of a sentence is caught in the eternally playful circularity of the language structure:

SALTER: So what kind of a place was it? Was it

B1 : The place

SALTER: He was in a hotel was he or

B1 : No.

SALTER: I thought he was in a hotel. Somewhere was he?

B1 : What?

SALTER : I’m trying to get a picture

B1 : Does it matter? (48)

In the play, thus, we have a network of disjointed language structure with incomplete sentence, repetitions and interruptions, from which the audience/reader has to find his own way out. The author, considering the contentious nature of the subject, deliberately takes a reluctant stance in letting the language of her play produce easily discernible meaning.

14.4 SUMMING UP

As we have come to the end of the unit you must have become familiar with the different critical aspects like themes and features of the play *A Number* by Caryl Churchill. This unit along with the previous two units is an attempt to give you an overall understanding of the British Contemporary Theatre scene and Caryl Churchill as a playwright and her works including the prescribed play *A Number* is a quintessential contemporary British play. The irony of contemporary plays is that even if they are set in Britain or Germany, we live in such a globalized world now that the issues being dealt with in the play becomes relatable to all readers from all over the world. Churchill's play *A Number* even though it is a British play is not about Britain but about human society and scientific progress. The core value dealt with in the play is humanity (or the lack of it), something which is very universal and relatable to everyone, and not just to the English audience. This universality and cosmopolitanism should always be kept in mind while discussing contemporary plays.

14.5 GLOSSARY

Donor insemination: It is a simple procedure that uses a syringe to place semen into a woman's womb to assist her in getting pregnant. The semen is normally obtained from someone other than the woman's husband or partner.

Genetics: The scientific study of heredity, the characteristics and colours that are passed from one generation of organisms to the next.

In Vitro Fertilization (IVF): In vitro fertilization (IVF) is the most common and most effective type of assisted reproductive technology (ART) to help women become pregnant. The procedure involves fertilizing an egg outside the body, in a laboratory dish, and then implanting it in a woman's uterus.



14.6 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. How much does the genetic makeup define a person? What is the role of environment in shaping a personality? Give your opinion on the issue by analyzing the characters of three ‘brothers’.
2. How do you think Caryl Churchill would opine on the issue of “nature vs. nurture”?
3. Do you find a strain of melancholy behind the aggressive façade of the ‘original’ Bernard? Is his aggression a natural aspect of his personality or caused by outer agencies?
4. Assess the character of Salter and the varied relationships he has with his cloned sons.
5. Comment on Caryl Churchill’s treatment of the theme of identity and family in the play.
6. How does the dramatist’s use of innovative dramatic techniques contribute to our understanding of the complicated issue of human cloning?



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