

# The Alienation of the First Generation of Post-War British Society in Light of *Look Back in Anger* by John Osborne

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## **Abstract**

This paper mainly aims to explain the alienation of the first generation of Post-War British society in light of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*. The isolation from the society takes the first position in alienation of the new youth. Secondly, the isolation from the religion and anger against the Church (the institutional religion) drive the individuals to alienation. Thirdly, the condition of the middle-class marriage is revealed to the reader as one of the most remarkable problems of the post-war Britain resulting in alienation. Fourthly, the lack of connection with the past produces frustration that leads to alienation in the process of reconstruction. Lastly, the isolation from the idea of Englishness destroys the social identity of the post-war British society.

**Keywords:** *Alienation, Welfare State, Post-War Britain, John Osborne*

## **Özet**

Bu çalışma temelde John Osborne'nun *Öfkeyle Geriye Bakmak* eseri ışığında 1945-Sonrası ilk kuşak İngiliz (British) toplumunun yabancılaşmasını açıklamayı hedeflemektedir. Toplumdan izolasyon yeni gençliğin yabancılaşmasında ilk sırada yer alır. İkinci olarak, dinden izolasyon ve Kilise (kurumsal din) karşıtı öfke bireyleri yabancılaşmaya sürükler. Üçüncü olarak, orta-sınıf evlilik biçiminin durumu 1945-Sonrası Britanya'sının en önemli problemlerinden biri olarak takdim edilir. Dördüncü olarak, geçmişle bağlantı kuramama 1945-Sonrası dönemde hayal kırıklığı ve yabancılaşma üretir. Son olarak, İngilizlik düşüncesinden izolasyon 1945-Sonrası Britanya'sında toplumsal kimliğe zarar verir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Yabancılaşma, Refah Devleti, 1945-Sonrası Britanya, John Osborne.*

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## **Introduction**

The literary works written in transition periods reflect the sociological and political background of their own society in various literary ways under the influence and control of the authors who are inevitably in touch with the social crises of their own society. In this respect, it is a useful method to scan the literary works of a period in order to understand the sociological problems of its people who are the members of a society in transition progress. The post-war era is a transition period, from modernism to postmodernism, for British society and the individuals of the reconstruction era have difficulties deriving from inability to get connection with the pre-war institutions and values that had been the sustaining values for ages on the sociological level for British people. John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956) enabled a great contribution to the literary canon of the New Wave British Theatre by concentrating mainly on the post-war youth's frustration and isolation resulting from the unfulfilled promises given by the welfare state project just after the Second World War. *Look Back in Anger* reveals the isolation of the first generation of the post-war British society from the concepts such as society, religion, the institution of middle-class marriage, the individual past, and idea of Englishness by making serious judgements about all the established institutions before 1945. These five different ways of isolation are the reasons leading the first generation of the post-war British society to alienation. The alienation of the new youth mainly derives from these five ways of isolation. In the paper, the alienation, as a psychological concept, is used to refer to psychological condition of an individual whose dissatisfaction with the present situation, the social norms, and the society itself creates frustration on the conscious level while prevents the individual from adaptation to the social norms and values in daily life.

## **The Political and Economic Picture of the Post-War Britain**

The post-war era is generally considered as the transition period from modernism to post-modernism. The discussions about the period mainly focus on the transformation of the society and its individuals' adaptation into the new situation. The economic model of the war years is modified according to the post-war situation with the help of the post-war consensus in the economic model to be followed to make the state more powerful economically. Alan Sked gives the panoramic picture of the period in

politics and economics:

The famous ‘post-war consensus’, based on a mixed economy, the welfare state, Keynesian economic policy and economic corporatism in domestic affairs was complemented by a consensus over foreign policy that included support for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), a special relationship with the United States, the peaceful transformation of empire into Commonwealth, an independent nuclear deterrent, and -eventually- membership of the EEC/EC/EU (40).

The post-war economic policy was based on the Keynesian model of redistribution and welfare state economy. The welfare state economy was adopted by the Labour Party and it is the process in which the Labour Party adopted itself to the new circumstances after the Second World War while transforming the British society by following the mixture of the Keynesian model of redistribution and socialist principles of state-sponsorship. The ‘special relationship’ with the United States and the support for the NATO are the basic principles in the foreign policy. The loss of the Empire leads the politicians to follow the policy of Commonwealth in order to preserve its powerful position in the world politics. The loss of the Empire as an important actor in the world politics paves the way for integration of Britain into European Community and the special relationship with the United States becomes the basic principle in the foreign affairs. The governmental devices try to adapt themselves to the new developments in politics and economics but reconstruction of the political devices in accordance with the “new needs” of the state necessarily takes time. In this context, the British society is faced with the conflicts and social upheavals of the transformation period as it is successfully portrayed by Osborne in *Look Back in Anger*.

### **Isolation from the Society**

The relationship of the individual with society determines the personal development of the individual. The society constructs personality by using its own social institutions and social devices. The relationship of the individual with the society in post-war era also plays a key role in the character formation of the first generation of the post-war British

society. The first generation of post-war British youth has a rebellious character deriving from fighting against all the social norms and the moral values introduced and obeyed by the majority of the society. In the play, Jimmy Porter is the representative of the alienated individual of post-war Britain because of the fact that he does not live in the same time with his contemporaries on the conscious level. He does not share same ideas and feelings with the other characters in the play. His point of view is completely different from the other characters' standpoint. Helena defines Jimmy's main problem to Alison who is the female representative of the upper class values:

HELENA: Do you know-I have discovered what is wrong with Jimmy? It is very simple really. He was born out of his time.

ALISON: Yes. I know.

HELENA: There's no place for people like that any longer-in sex, or politics, or anything. That's why he's so futile. Sometimes, when I listen to him, I feel he thinks he's still in the middle of French Revolution. And that's where he ought to be, of course. He doesn't know where he is, or where he's going. He'll never do anything, and he'll never amount to anything (Osborne, 90).

Jimmy, in Helena's view, has the rebellious character of French Revolution which is considered one of the most important turning points in history of modern world. The key point is that he is "in the middle of the French Revolution" (90) and so he cannot get connection with the people around him. His personal obsession with the past determines his reaction to the external world. In this respect, the "revolutionary" way of thinking cannot communicate with the "reconstructive" way of thinking. He always aims to look at everything from a pessimistic point of view and it inevitably results in "deconstruction" of the all established institutions and social values. So, he tries to change everything around himself according to his own expectations; however, he cannot fulfil his strong desire to "rebuild" the external world. His inability to change or "rebuild" people and institutions around himself drives him to create his own values and principles. In post-war era, people in Britain are looking for reconstruction of new institutions and values but the first generation of post-war youth has a revolutionary way of thinking even in the period of reconstruction. The gap between the real

world and the “illusionary world” drives the first generation to frustration that produces anger against all established institutions and values created by the majority of the society. The struggle against the social institutions deserves to be pointed because it mainly marks the character formation of the post-war youth. İbrahim Yerebakan puts emphasis upon this fact in “*Osborne’s Female Portraits in Look Back in Anger*”:

One of the best indications of his [Jimmy Porter] isolation from the accepted social norms is that his higher education did not give him a position in which his qualification would be useful. He feels lonely and frustrated by the unfulfilled promises of the welfare state. He has no confidence in any of the established institutions because he finds in them a real hypocrisy and insincerity. (82)

The hypocrisy in all values and institutions in his life creates frustration and produces anger against welfare state and its devices. The expectations of the new youth for the upward social mobility determine the politics of the period. In this respect, the education system was redesigned according to the Keynesian politics and new demands of the consumerist middle-class in the post-war era. The new universities founded by the government in post-war era created a great deal of students who could not achieve to be member of upper class. Bosede Funke Afolayan emphasizes the role of the education system in the alienation of the post-war youth:

He [Jimmy Porter] criticises the society that gives him an upper-class education but does not provide him the necessary relevance in the society. He refers to his university as “white-tile” not “red-brick”. “White-tile” is an image used to represent the newly created universities by the Mass Educational Act of 1944. This welfarist state is attacked by Jimmy Porter. “Red-brick”, on the other hand, represents Oxford and Cambridge-the Etonian Old School boy tradition which connects with the rich (134).

Osborne’s angry protagonist makes verbal attacks to the newly-founded universities after the Mass Educational Act of 1944. He is unsatisfied with the governmental affairs and the decisions related to the new understanding of higher education. The role of the education in frustration of Jimmy

Porter is also defended by Emine Tecimer:

Jimmy Porter is regarded as an embodiment of the frustrations of a particular age and class especially the generation of young men who have been expecting to leave behind their lower class origins by using higher education. Jimmy is educated beyond his social roots; however, he cannot get what he expects from his education. Despite his university degree he has worked as an advertising salesman, a neophyte journalist, and a vacuum-cleaner salesman. Then he starts to run a sweet stall for a living which is also not a proper job for a graduate man (11).

Tecimer reveals the fact that Jimmy expects to get a new style of life thanks to the education system that enables him a higher education. The education is seen as an “elevator” that provides a chance of upward social mobility by the protagonist who reflects the expectations of the new youth after 1945. Jimmy cannot find a proper job although he gets a higher education and it makes him disappointed after spending great effort to get a good position in life. In a way, the frustration appeared after the failure of the new education regulation by the Labour Party is discussed by the author by means of the protagonist of the play. Therefore, Osborne makes a serious judgement about the new regulations in education by the government which tried to give new opportunities to the university students. The present situation does not fulfil the expectations of the students who studied at the universities to get a “better life” and it is one of the most important reasons behind the frustration of the new youth in the post-war era.

### **Isolation from the Religion**

The relationship of the individual with the social institutions is an important process in social life. The dissatisfaction with the present situation generally drives the individuals to isolation from the social institutions and social norms constructed by the society. In *Look Back in Anger*, Jimmy Porter is the representative of the first generation of post-war graduates who are introduced as the isolated individuals from the religion, the Church, and the Monarchy. He makes verbal attacks on the Church and the Monarchy by releasing his inner anger toward all the traditional values. The Church and the Monarchy represent the traditional social order attacked by Jimmy

who is dissatisfied with the present situation on the economic level. He uses every opportunity to attack these institutions and the “values” associated with these social agents. Osborne’s “angry young man” gets angry after hearing or seeing something related to religion or tradition. The church bells, for instance, make him angry:

Oh, Hello! Now the bloody bells have started!

*(He rushes to the window)*

Wrap it up, will you? Stop ringing those bells! There’s somebody going crazy in here! I don’t want to hear them! (Osborne 25)

Jimmy Porter’s anger against the church bells represents the new youth’s anger against all the values and symbols related to the Church. The Church and the Monarchy had been the most important devices of traditional authority for British people but the decline of the traditional upper class on the political level resulted in the decline of all the devices of traditional authority. The loss of the economic power and the powerful social status for the aristocratic class is artistically indicated by the author while reflecting the background of the new youth’s anger against the old social order. In this respect, Jimmy Porter’s anger against the church bells is the indicator of the new youth’s anger against the traditional authority and its devices.

### **Isolation from the Institution of Marriage**

The institution of marriage has been one of the widely praised institutions of British social life. The welfare economics of the post-war period begins to transform the institution of marriage and the family life while the society tries to integrate itself to the new situation in the economics and the politics. The first generation of post-war British youth differs from the majority of the society in looking at the institution of marriage and traditional marital values. In the play, Alison Porter’s confessions about the changes in her believing in “the divine rights of marriage” are the indicator of the great shift for the majority of post-war British society. She releases her real feelings and ideas about the traditional understanding of family life to Helena:

ALISON: Helena –even I gave up believing in the divine rights of marriage long ago. Even before I met Jimmy. They’ve got

something different now-constitutional monarchy. You are where you are by consent. And if you start trying any strong arm stuff, you are out. And I'm out. (Osborne 89)

Osborne uses Alison's confessions in order to reflect the changes in moral values of the traditional upper class of British society in the progress of social and political crises. Alison, as a representative of the upper class values and norms, cannot get connection with the once-praised principles of his own class. In Osborne's play, the only character who shares the traditional way of looking at the marital issues is Colonel Redfern. He is aware of the problems that Jimmy and Alison have at their home for a long time but he does not advice separation or divorce as a possible solution to the conflicts between them. He reflects the basic characteristics of the traditional upper class in British society even in the period of crisis that forces the institution of marriage. Helena is another member of the upper class but she leads Alison to leave Jimmy by claiming the marital problems and she defines Alison's house as "this mad-house" (47) that should be left immediately at the cost of leaving the husband. On the other hand, Jimmy Porter strongly reflects the new generation's morality while creating his own moral norms. He does not care about the social norms of pre-war British society and creates his own moral norms. Alison Porter gives serious clues about his "newly-created morality":

ALISON: Jimmy's got his own private morality, as you know. What my mother calls "loose". It is pretty free, of course, but it's very harsh too. You know, it's funny, but we never slept together before we were married.

CLIFF: It certainly is-knowing him!

ALISON: We knew each other such a short time, everything moved at such a pace, we didn't have much opportunity... (Osborne 30)

It is obviously seen that the isolation from the society and the social norms drive Jimmy to create his own morality while ignoring morality of the society in which he lives. His dissatisfaction with the social norms and moral values is the reason leads him to criticize the moral system of the society strongly without considering the results of the isolation from the society.



The institution of marriage, needless to say, is one of the vital instruments of the social morality and it helps to the integration of the individual to the social life. Hence the rejection of the institution of marriage is followed by the rejection of the moral norms of the society. Jimmy is not aware of his rejection of the morality of the society philosophically. Instead, it is just a personal reaction to the social values. On the conscious level, he does not know the reasons behind the transformation of the marital life and the institution of marriage like his wife, Alison, but he is dominated by the transformation in the family life and marital values in the transition period from modernism to post-modernism. In this way, Jimmy and Alison are two representatives of the individuals who deviate from the “divine rights of the marriage” as a result of the transformation of the post-war British society on the social and economic levels.

### **Isolation from the Past**

The connection between the past, the present, and the future is a necessity for the integration of the individual into the social order. It is a necessary element of the social and the personal memory. Hence the lack of connection with the past destroys the individuality and the personal identity on the psychological level. Jimmy Porter’s obsession with the present condition derives from the fact that he cannot get connection with his own past and it destroys his personal and social identity. The reader learns his isolation from his own individual past thanks to the conversation between Jimmy and Alison Porter:

JIMMY: (*kissing her again*). You’re fond of him [Cliff Lewis], aren’t you?

ALISON: Yes, I am.

JIMMY: He’s the only friend I seem to have left now. People go away. You go away. You never see them again. I can remember lots of names-men and women. When I was at school -Watson, Roberts, Davies. Jenny, Madeline, Hugh... (*Osborne 33-34*)

Jimmy Porter remembers names of his friends in the past but their absence in his present life makes him disappointed and frustrated. He is not in touch with the friends in the past. He declares “You never see them again” (34) in order to reflect his “sorrow” deriving from the lack of connection with the

individual past. So, the retrospective approach of Jimmy in a melancholic way clearly reflects his frustration springing from the individual past. It is a kind of hidden obsession with the personal past that creates nostalgia on the conscious level for the protagonist, Jimmy. His desire to have connection with the personal past reveals his aim to connect the past, the present, and the future with each other. Tim Armstrong shows the results of the discontinuity on the personal and social level in *Modernism*:

What is produced in the Post-War world is a disrupted temporality in which the dynamic relation between past, present, and future which we saw as intrinsic to modernity is forced to co-exist with elements of “frozen” time: a lost past; a traumatic present; a blighted future (42).

Armstrong discusses the time perception of the reconstruction period by making explicit reference to the science of psychology in order to emphasize the relation of the individual with the time and space. The discontinuity in time perception destroys the individuals by breaking their connection with the past, present, and future. He thinks that the discontinuity on the conscious level destroys personal identity. On the other hand, David Edgerton makes a significant analysis about the deviation from the imperial past of British governmental affairs on the political level after 1945:

The nation and national interest became key terms of political discourse. For example in The Labour Party election manifesto of 1945, “Socialism” appears once, whereas ‘nation’, and “people” appear repeatedly, more so than Britain or British; by contrast the 1935 manifesto hardly invoked Britain/British or nation. The 1945 manifesto called coal ‘Britain’s most precious national raw material’. It is not surprising then that a National Coal Board would appear. Alongside it came a National Health Service (though a British Transport Commission and a British Electricity Authority). It is interesting too that while the 1945 Labour Party manifesto called for ‘public ownership’ or ‘socialization’ of industries, ‘nationalization’ would become the standard term (42).

Edgerton makes comparison of the “imperial past” and “national present” in politics while discussing the post-war politics. The British Labour Party follows the same political agenda with the ruling class because of the influence of nationalization movement in the period. The Labour Party defends the social state and it is supported by the conservatives because of the negative results of the Second World War to the Britain’s economy. Therefore, the political parties are in agreement with the nationalization policy in order to strengthen the state economically after the Second World War. It includes the state-sponsored economics, comprehensive social insurance, nationalization of the health service, state-sponsored housing project, and a more accessible public education. The raising idea of the period is nationalization and the whole society wants to hear some key words or terms from the politicians. All the political figures use the concept of nationalization as a key term and the Labour Party is the pioneer of the nationalization of Britain after the Second World War. In this respect, the deviation from imperial past of Britain marks the central aim of the reconstruction era for all the social and political movements. The need to strengthen the state economically unites the political parties in following the Keynesian model of redistribution and welfare state economy. In this respect, the meaning of nationalization differs from the classical meaning of the concept of nationalization and it refers to the control of the state over the instruments of public service. The nationalization process in British politics leads the political parties to have a consensus in the mixture of the capitalist Keynesian model of redistribution and the socialist way of the control over the instruments of the public service and the means of production to solve the political and economic problems of the country after the war years.

### **Isolation from the Idea of Englishness**

The disappearance of the idea of Englishness is one of the most serious problems of post-war generation on the political level. The idea of Englishness cannot be a kind of “melting pot” after the decline of Imperial Britain because of the fact that it does not gather people around a certain concept or an idea which is the necessary principle to be a society or union. Needless to say, each society needs “a myth” in order to gather around it. So, post-war era is the period in which all the social and governmental agents try to construct an identity, a myth, for the British people because

the loss of the Empire and the desire for adaptation to the new situation destroyed the old “myth”, the idea of Englishness. Colonel Redfern is aware of the situation and he reflects the mentality of the traditional ruling class which is in decline:

COLONEL: ...No perhaps Jimmy is right. Perhaps I am a-What was it? An old plant left over from the Edwardian Wilderness. And I can't understand why the sun isn't shining anymore. You can see what he means, can't you? It was March, 1914, when I left England, and, apart from leaves every ten years or so, I didn't see much of my own country until we all came back in '47. Oh I knew things had changed, of course. (Osborne 67-68)

The Colonel, representative of the Imperial Britain, releases his deep feelings that are the evidence of his self-realization about what is going on in the process of decline for the traditional ruling class. As a soldier, he follows the traditional upper class culture and shares the traditional way of living. He reflects the “gloomy years” of the traditional ruling class by making reference to the period between 1914 and 1947. The Colonel cannot understand “why the sun isn't shining anymore” and in this way Osborne emphasizes the fact that the old upper class does not know the reasons behind the decline of Imperial Britain. In other words, the decline of the Great Britain means the decline of the traditional ruling class and its values or vice versa but the members of the class are not aware of the loss of the “imperial past” in politics and economics. The unawareness of the upper class prevents it from adaptation to the new situation which is the necessary principle to survive for all livings. The adaptation to the new situation needs self-awareness but the Colonel is not aware of the ‘facts’ although he is about to realize the “approaching danger”. So, it is possible to say that it is revealed to the reader that the isolation from the idea of Englishness is one of the basic reasons in the alienation of the first generation of the post-war youth as depicted by means of the lack of a ‘real communication’ between the Colonel and Jimmy.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, *Look Back in Anger* gives a panoramic picture of the post-war British society by making explicit references to the frustrated and alienated

youth of the decade in different ways. The “new youth” in search of a new social identity fights against all the pre-war institutions and social norms. Osborne aims to explain five different kinds of isolation that produce anger and frustration for the first generation of post-war British youth. The isolation from the society takes the primary position in frustration of the new youth. The rejection of the social norms is discussed by the author in relation to the isolation of the protagonist to depict the panoramic picture of the new youth. Secondly, the isolation from the religion and anger against the Church drive the individuals to alienation. The author discusses the anger of the protagonist against the Church to show the reluctance of the new youth toward the religious style of life and the social instruments of the religion in the period. Thirdly, the condition of the middle-class marriage is revealed to the reader as one of the most remarkable problems of the post-war Britain. The loss of the faith in the “divine rights of the marriage” is pictured in the examples such as Jimmy, Alison, and Helena. Fourthly, the lack of connection with the past produces alienation in the process of reconstruction. The play discusses the necessity of the personal and common memory in the social life while presenting Jimmy’s lack of connection with his personal past and also with the imperial past of Britain. The play presents a great example of the discontinuity in the social and personal memory by giving concrete examples of characters representing the new youth of the post-war period. Lastly, the isolation from the idea of Englishness destroys the social identity of the post-war British society. The relation between the loss of imperial power and the isolation from the idea of Englishness is discussed in a comparative way and, on the other hand, the reflections of the transformation in the social order is illuminated to make the reader aware of the upheavals in the transition periods. In this respect, Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* presents post-war youth as it really is and the success of the author in using literary instruments makes the play one of the most important works of the decade in New Wave British Theatre. It gives a significant example of social analysis by using the literary method as an instrument to make some certain judgements about the different manifestations of the social life.

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