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10.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we shall:

- Understand the historical and social background that inspired the author to document the turbulent times of the post-war Britain
- Understand the state of the English Theatre after the Second World War
- Understand the concept of “kitchen sink drama” and “angry young man”

At the end of the unit, you should be able to

- Discuss the various concepts such as “kitchen sink drama” and “angry young man”
- Discuss socio political condition of Britain at the end of the Second World War

10.1 INTRODUCTION

As the unit is based on the work of Osborne which was published after the Second World War, it is important to understand the major impact of this war on Europe in general and specifically on Britain. This is the period where Britain was losing its power over its multiple colonies as well as we can see the slow rise of U.S.A. as a global Super power. So, it's interesting here to understand the historical and social background of the play.

10.2 HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT OF THE PLAY

John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* is a work of drama that can also be considered a sort of historical document that encapsulates a significant social tension and the whole approach to life lived during the 1950s. When the play opened at London's Royal Court Theatre on 8 May, 1956, it heralded the 'new movement' in the British drama. The new generation found the play fresh and the British theatre also discovered a significant break with its immediate past and the beginning of a new era. The success of the play and the rave reviews it received put Osborne on the graph of popular British dramatists. The enormous success and popularity of the play aroused English national pride and set the stage for the 'angry young man' movement.

A close look at the industrial society provides some insight into the success of Osborne's play. The British society was deeply divided against itself during the 1950s. There was disillusionment and despair in the British society. World War II had diminished Britain from the position of a great imperial power to that of second class power. This reduced importance had a deep and lasting impact on the British society. Britain had not only lost an empire but also found itself at odds with a fast changing world.

In 1945, in the post-war British election, a new generation of voters felt the need to make a clean, new start. The British national hero during the war, Winston Churchill, was dismissed from office and the Conservative Party gave way to the Labour Party. This significant change brought in fresh hopes for a New Britain among the working classes, the middle classes and the youth. They demanded a new society that is not dominated by class system. The Labour government introduced several changes with the concept of a Welfare State. The Welfare State concept with its ambitious programme of nationalisation of industries, opportunities of free education, social security, distribution of national wealth and welfare among all the classes was heralded as a revolution. However, this concept of social Utopia failed to create a feeling of harmony. There was lack of social insurance, political and social power still remained in the hands of wealthy individuals. A large number of school children did not get any opportunity to pursue higher studies, forcing them to live a life of drudgery and neglect. The unprivileged

youth felt disillusioned by the contradictory trend in society that rejected class advantages on the one hand but still practised the values of the social class structure of the bygone era. The youth realised that they were given false hopes and felt cheated by idealistic notions. They discovered that class and hierarchical structure of the industrial society is difficult to break.

In 1950, the Labour Party resumed power but its popularity had plummeted and its majority was reduced drastically. The next year, another election brought the Conservatives back in power. They did not dismantle the Welfare State and continued with the same policies of the earlier government. This created further disappointment and people lost faith in political parties. They did not see any way out of their situation.

There were several other events that happened in 1956, the year *Look Back in Anger* was staged. In Hungary the people rebelled against their Russian-imposed Communist government. Russia curbed the revolt ruthlessly using brute military force, while the rest of the world watched this silently without doing anything. In the West people became disillusioned with communism as a humane way. On the other hand the Egyptian government decided to take over the Suez Canal which was owned and run by British and French governments. Britain and France invaded the Canal Zone but had to return it back to the United Nations which handed it back to Egypt. This humiliation made Britain accept the fact that they were no longer world power and the supporters of the Imperialist ways became disoriented. Moreover, the chasm between two generations - those who fought the war and considered themselves inheritors of the imperial past and those who were born during and just after the war found many of the values of society outmoded – was widening. The central mood of anger and of protest depicted in the play *Look Back in Anger* was in conformity with the prevailing social temperament and Osborne came to be regarded as a dramatist who could project this mood of despondency and dejection.

10.2.1 English theatre during the Post-World War II Era:

After the end of the Second World War, British theatre had fallen into a dismal state. It was in a state of decline and neglect. Audiences had been falling off and theatres were being closed all over Britain. The process of decline was accelerated by the advent of television after a war time break. The English stage was flooded with drawing room comedies, farces, melodramas and adaptation of French sentimental plays. Most of the old plays of Shakespeare, Chekhov, Ibsen, Shaw, Restoration Comedy were reproduced. The bold and passionate plays by American authors such as Arthur Miller and Tennessee William were staged. The unexpected success of a series of verse plays by Christopher Frye, T.S. Eliot and theatrical attempts by some poets accounted for the revival of verse drama. They tried to incorporate the freshness of communication of the Elizabethan stage with modern consciousness. However, the kind of escapism their plays offered did not find much favour with the theatre

goers. Their drama failed to establish any living tradition in contemporary British drama. The most successful dramatist in England at that time was Terence Rattigan who specialised in emotional dramas. The other dramatists of the period like Giles Cooper, Denis Cannan, Peter Ustinov showed some spark but fizzled out soon and failed to create any lasting impact.

In 1956, a new group, the English Stage Company had been set up at the Royal Court Theatre. The avowed intention of the company was of becoming a writer's theatre. Many other companies had started with the same spirit but had to shut down due to the pressures of the commercial London theatre. The English Stage Company would have met the same fate had it not been for *Look Back in Anger* and the success it became. The 'new movement' in English drama began on the night of May 8, 1956 when Osborne's play opened at the Royal Court Theatre in London. The reviews in the newspapers the next day were mostly favourable.

Osborne's play appeared at the right time. If it had appeared a few years earlier or a few years later, it would not have been received well by the audiences and the critics. But in 1956 the critics as well as the public were ready for something new. They were different from the earlier generation of playgoers. The dominating mood of the play – of anger and protest – was an echo of the prevailing social conditions. The youth identified with the young protagonist of the play who is misfit in the contemporary society. Jimmy Porter became a cult figure, a representative of the disillusioned youth of the post-World War II generation.

10.2.2 The Kitchen Sink Drama:

The mid-twentieth century marks the most significant movement in British theatre called the Kitchen Sink Drama. These types of plays were distinctly different from the earlier Victorian theatre. One of the important features of the Kitchen Sink Drama was that the setting of the plays was almost always middle class. These plays centered around the theme of some social message or attack on some traditional ideology. In contrast to the earlier Victorian drama that depicted the lives of the upper, aristocratic class, the Kitchen Sink drama presented the lives of the working class people and their conflicts and struggles on the stage. The characters in these dramas unabashedly expressed their frustrations and dissatisfaction with the ruling class. They expressed their disgust over class dynamics and brazenly criticised the social, political and economic power structures.

The Kitchen Sink Drama moved the sphere of the play from the public domain to private lives of people. The plays made the kitchen the center of familial and social life giving it a realistic flavour. These plays certainly set the stage for the portrayal of the "Angry Young Man".

The Kitchen Sink Drama did not win favour with some critics and commentators of the twentieth century for portraying only the masculine

point of view. These plays focused mainly on the emotions and tribulations of the male characters. The women characters were mostly ignored in the main action of the plays and occupied a marginalised position. Men were portrayed as the suffering lot where as women were presented as contributors or responsible for their suffering.

The setting of Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* is one room attic flat in a small town of England. The furniture is simple and old comprising three chairs, two shabby leather arm chairs, a double bed, a dressing table, book shelves, a chest of drawers. The dull, dim and boring setting highlights the contrast between the high ideals of Jimmy Porter, the protagonist of the play and the dismal reality of the outside world. Jimmy comes from a working class background and has strong disdain for the upper class people. He is highly critical of the English society and its power dynamics.

10.3 The Concept of the Angry Young Man:

The phrase "Angry Young Men" refers to a movement in English theatre in the 1950s. The term is ascribed to various British novelists and playwrights who expressed scorn and disdain with the established social, political, economic and religious structures of their country. They were against the hypocrisy and mediocrity of the upper and middle classes. They showed irreverence for the British class system. They belonged to working class and some had been educated at the red-brick universities. They scorned at the idea of the welfare state. Their writings often expressed raw anger and frustration as the post-war society failed to meet their aspirations.

Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* is representative of the "angry young man" movement as it depicts how there is frustration and anger within the younger generation. It highlights the personal and social alienation of the young who were promised equal opportunities but in reality realise that the power structure exists and it is difficult for them to break this class structure. Jimmy Porter is a spokesperson of this disillusioned generation who is angry and upset at the world around him.

10.4 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have seen how historical and social background of England during the post-World War II times led to a new movement in English drama and made the Angry Young Man a popular, representative figure of that era.

10.5 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.1 Answer the following Questions.

1. Discuss the post-World War II historical and social background of Britain.

2. Write a note on the condition of the English theater after the Second World War.

3. Show how the Kitchen Sink Drama and the Angry Young Man movements effectively voiced the frustrations and anger of the people during the 1950s.

Q.1 Choose the correct option and answer the following:

1) The Concept of the _____ was popularized by the Labour Party in the Post World War II era.

- | | |
|---------------------|----------------------|
| (a) Developed State | (b) Welfare State |
| (c) Economic State | (d) Industrial State |

2) Which of the following aspects was not included in the concept of the welfare state?

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|
| (a) free education | (b) social security |
| (c) nationalization of industries | (d) good infrastructure |

3) Christophe Frye and T. S. Eliot are associated with _____.

- | | |
|--------------------|---------------------|
| (a) tragic drama | (b) emotional drama |
| (c) romantic drama | (d) verse drama |

4) Osborne wrote *Look Back in Anger* for the _____.

- | | |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| (a) English Stage Company | (b) Royal Shakespeare Theatre |
| (c) Globe Theatre | (d) Modern Theatre Company |

5) The protagonist of *Look Back in Anger* became a cult figure among the youth of the times because _____.

- (a) he fought in the war bravely

- (b)(b) he represented a global outlook
- (c) he represented the disillusioned youth
- (d) he was bold in his comments

6) The Kitchen Sink Drama dealt with the lives of the _____ people.

- (a) Bourgeoisie
- (b) middle class
- (c) intellectual
- (d) aristocratic class

7) Which of the following statements cannot be applied to the Kitchen Sink Drama?

- (a) The plays had a realistic touch.
- (b) The plays focused on the private lives of people.
- (c) The women characters played a pivotal role.
- (d) The plays presented the lives of the middle class people.

8) *Look Back in Anger* is set in _____.

- (a) an empty room
- (b) an attic flat
- (c) a shopping complex
- (d) a storage room

9) What is the social background of Jimmy Porter, the protagonist of *Look Back in Anger*?

- (a) He comes from a working class.
- (b) He is a descendent of the Royal family.
- (c) He comes from an aristocratic family.
- (d) He belongs to a family of industrialists.

10) The phrase ‘Angry Young Man’ is ascribed to the portrayal of young men who were dissatisfied with the _____ of the times.

- (a) literary canon
- (b) housing facilities
- (c) education system
- (d) socio-economic and political structures

10.6 KEY WORDS

Angry Young Man	Angry Young Man was a term used for a group of mid twentieth century British writers who presented the anger and frustration with Modern British culture.
Chivalry	It is a medieval knightly system with its religious, moral and social code. The term is often related to virtues like kindness, courage, politeness and self-sacrifice.
Dark Ages	The term “Dark Ages” is used to denote Medieval European society.

10.7 BOOKS SUGGESTED

- Taylor, John Russell (ed.) *John Osborne: Look Back in Anger: A Selection of Critical Essays*. London: Macmillan, 1968, Print.
- Choudhuri, A. D. *Contemporary British Drama: An Outsider's View*. New Delhi: Arnold –Heinemann, 1976. Print.
- Brown, John Russell Ed. *Modern British Dramatists: New Perspectives*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1984. Print.
- Stephen, Martin *English Literature*. New York: Pearson Education Limited, 1986. Print.
- Sanders, Andrew. *The Short Oxford History of English Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. Print.
- Burgess, Anthony. *English Literature: A Survey for Students*. London: Longman, 1974. Print.

Answer Key:

Check your progress 2:

Q.1 Choose the correct option and answer the following:

1- b;	2- d;	3- d;	4 – a;	5 – c;
6 – b;	7 – c;	8 – b;	9 – a;	10 - d