

Anger, Nostalgia, and the End of Empire: John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*

NANDI BHATIA

The evidence suggests that Racism had assumed an active form in the British overseas empire right at the beginning of Victoria's reign. The Darwinian revelation injected scientific and sociological content; and the Indian Mutiny and the "mini-mutiny" in Jamaica provided the "rivers of blood" to justify prejudices. The last quarter of the century saw Racism reach a plateau, being manifested in the Empire which had then attained its widest bounds. Today, in the imperial afterglow, we survey our lost domains from the same plateau of Racism in what is now our supposedly beleaguered island home.

—Hugh Tinker¹

As he reminisces about his Edwardian past during the period of British colonial rule in India, Colonel Redfern, who belongs to the class that ostensibly constitutes Jimmy Porter's "natural" enemy, is overcome by nostalgia. When Jimmy Porter, the working-class protagonist and anti-establishment hero, remembered by commentators as "represent[ing] a postwar generation in his anger, petulance, dissatisfaction, infirmity of purpose, railing, [and] complaining,"² alludes to the Colonel (after endless bouts of indiscriminate attacks on Alison, his wife and the Colonel's daughter, in an attempt to shake her out of her upper-class complacency), his anger wanes. Exhibiting sympathy for the Colonel, he sighs about the end of the imperial dream. The attitudes of the Colonel and Jimmy shed a new light on John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger*, a play that has been recorded as "the beginning of a revolution in the British theatre," and lead to some interesting insights about Jimmy Porter, hailed as the voice of a whole generation of disgruntled anti-establishment intellectuals.³ On one level, references to the imperial dream reveal that at the time that Osborne wrote the play, the Raj was a pressing issue for both Jimmy Porter and his creator, Osborne. More importantly, they illuminate an essential contradiction in Jimmy Porter's anti-establishment stance. Even as he is

critical of the establishment, Jimmy's sympathetic attention to the Colonel, and by implication to the executors of imperial policies in India, brings into the play a discourse of imperialism that refuses a critique of the empire. This ideological contradiction has been drowned in critical responses both to the play and to Osborne himself, responses that remain overwhelmingly concerned with the playwright's angry attacks on the establishment and with his ostensible cynicism about issues that dominated the contemporary political landscape: the Russian quelling of the Hungarian rebellion, the Egyptian takeover of the Suez canal from Anglo-French imperialists, and "the question of nuclear disarmament."⁴ While such political preoccupations have led critics to brand Osborne as "the angry young man," what remains neglected is a return to the cultural archive of race relations in the 1950s within a post-imperial Britain.⁵ Such a return is necessary, as it reveals a great deal more about Osborne's complicity in the act of consolidating the practice of empire by naturalizing the social relations in the play in ways that construct the other as subordinate. The cultural archive that addresses issues of empire, race, and racism demonstrates that Jimmy Porter's liberal socialist stance reiterates a dominant dimension of the pro-imperial political-intellectual culture of the 1950s. Moreover, it raises the following question: what are the implications of producing such a discourse in the 1950s? When placed against the backdrop of a time marked by a shrinking number of jobs, increased immigration from the ex-colonies, and an increasing awareness of race relations in a postcolonial Britain that had to redefine itself as a declining world power, a rereading of *Look Back in Anger* reveals that Jimmy Porter's (and Osborne's) pro-imperial attitude is not produced in a vacuum but derives from a particular historical moment in Britain.

According to one critic, when *Look Back in Anger* was first produced, it "electrifi[ed]" British audiences.⁶ "On 8 May 1956 came the revolution,"⁷ announced John Russell Taylor in his critical study of *Look Back in Anger* six years later. Later still he emphasized that "8 May 1956 still marks the real break-through of 'the new drama' into the British theatre" and Osborne as "the new dramatist *par excellence*, the first of the angry young men and arguably the biggest shock to the system of British theatre since the advent of Shaw."⁸ George E. Wellwarth remarks that the opening night of *Look Back in Anger* at the Royal Court Theatre in London was the "[official beginning of] [t]he 'new movement' in the British drama."⁹ And Kenneth Tynan, whose response "set the critical parameters within which much of the subsequent exegesis was to take place,"¹⁰ called it "the best young play of its decade," declaring that he would fiercely dispute anyone who did not like *Look Back in Anger*.¹¹ While the play initially received mixed reviews, veering from what Malcolm Rutherford calls "the sharply dismissive" to "the indifferent" and "the ecstatic," it is largely the last response that has survived and shaped critical analysis of the play, as evident in Rutherford's own acknowledgement that

Tynan had been "right" about *Look Back*, for indeed "[i]t probably was the best young play, and perhaps the best British play, of the decade."¹²

The high praises that were showered on Osborne and his new drama were attributed largely to the revolutionary character, Jimmy Porter, whose anger at the system and sympathy with the downtrodden spoke "for a whole generation."¹³ These were essentially the lost youth of the post-war generation that he and Osborne represented. In the course of the play, Osborne veers between expressing overt anger at the establishment to a position that champions the cause of the exploited. Indeed, as we read the play we discover Jimmy's angst. He constantly berates his wife, Alison, whom he considers his class enemy; opposes Alison's brother Nigel, a member of Parliament and an Etonian; attacks the "posh" Sunday newspapers;¹⁴ and condemns Alison's family, especially her mother, for their upper-class ways. In contrast to these attacks, he admires his own father for fighting in Spain against Franco and has high regard for his working-class friends, Hugh Tanner and his mother, who had helped him set up the stall where he sold candy. In the post-war economy of England, and in the wake of a Conservative victory in 1951, the political resonance of the attacks launched by Jimmy Porter can hardly be overlooked or dismissed. Yet the relative neglect of the issues of empire, race, and immigration has prevented rigorous critiques of the imperial dimension in the play.¹⁵ For somewhere in the midst of the positions that have become transparent symbols of Osborne's revolutionary stance, there creep in allusions to Britain's lost glory and imperial past, as epitomized in Colonel Redfern.

The Colonel symbolizes the empire and what it stood for. In *Orientalism*, Edward W. Said discusses the idea of "European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures" and how it "depends for its strategy on ... *positional* superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand."¹⁶ The Colonel's superiority over "Oriental backwardness"¹⁷ is reiterated through references to his physical appearance as well as through his nostalgic recollections of the imperial past. Osborne describes him as "a large handsome man [...] Brought up to command respect [...] who] now [...] finds himself in a world where his authority has lately become less and less unquestionable" (63). Such descriptions epitomize the ways in which the white man's masculinity was constructed in the colonies; it was an image of masculinity that had dominated ever since the beginnings of colonial expansion and was an integral part of the assertion of racial superiority. As he reminisces to Alison about India, the Colonel reproduces the functioning of colonial governance and tries to legitimize his set of beliefs in the social positions held by Europeans in India:

I had the Maharaja's army to command – that was my world, and I loved it, all of it. At the time, it looked like going on forever. When I think of it now, it seems like a

dream. If only it could have gone on forever. Those long, cool evenings up in the hills, everything purple and golden. Your mother and I were so happy then. It seemed as though we had everything we could ever want. I think the last day the sun shone was when that dirty little train streamed out of that crowded, suffocating Indian station, and the battalion band playing for all it was worth. I knew in my heart it was all over then. Everything. (58)

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

If, indeed, as critics have argued, “anger” was the keynote of Osborne's commentary on the modern world, then Jimmy Porter should have been most angry at this representative of Britain's imperial history. From a postcolonial perspective, an anti-establishment sentiment should constitute an opposition to imperialism as well. Yet Porter's stance on masculine imperialism is rather soft. The only critique he has to offer for the Colonel is to call him a “sturdy old [plant] left over from the Edwardian Wilderness that can't understand why the sun isn't shining anymore” (67).¹⁸ A subject that should have been of major concern to an angry, anti-establishment man like him is directed into an insipid sorrow or pity for the Colonel. If Jimmy was socialized into a culture that perpetuated the legacy of imperial glories, then his anger does nothing to disrupt the nostalgia for the past in the contemporary multiracial (and racist) British society of the 1950s. On the contrary, he feebly attempts to find an explanation in the lack of good causes:

I suppose people of our generation aren't able to die for good causes any longer. We had all that done for us, in the thirties and the forties, when we were still kids. [...] There aren't any good, brave causes left. (84, stage direction omitted)

While Osborne attributes the cause of Jimmy's inertia to the 1930s, situating the play's production against the specific social, political, and material conditions of the 1950s highlights the reason for his lack of action. With the decolonizing process that began in the 1940s, numerous changes relating to the empire took place in that decade that were to affect Britain's socio-economic fabric. The new Commonwealth had expanded immigration from Britain's former colonies, and, following the subcontinental divide into Pakistan and India on the eve of India's independence, many people relocated to England

in search of work or a home after the loss of their own homeland. By 1955 debates on the issue of "coloured" immigration" had increased, "leading to a close association between race and immigration in both policy debates and in popular political and media discourses."¹⁹ These debates exhibited a growing anxiety over the "social problems" posed by "too many black immigrants" and focused on the problem of getting around the 1948 British Nationality Act, which gave them legal rights of entry and settlement in Britain following India's independence. The years 1950 through 1955 saw the debate regarding immigration from India and Pakistan intensifying in the Cabinet, and by 1952 both the Labour and the Conservative governments "[had] instituted a number of covert, and sometimes illegal, administrative measures to discourage black immigration."²⁰ Thus, throughout the 1950s, immigration remained a contentious issue in Parliament and in the media.²¹ Pressing reasons for the concerns just mentioned were the problems of housing and employment in Britain. When Britain was facing occasional labor shortages in the post-war economy, the less attractive jobs were often taken up by immigrants. Because a number of industrial cities were in the Midlands, immigration pressure seemed to be greater there, since it was easier for the immigrants to find jobs. Because of the immigration pressure, the 1950s also witnessed race riots in the Midlands and in London, and racial hostilities increased. The year 1956, when *Look Back in Anger* was written, was also the peak year for the arrival in the industrial cities of immigrants from the West Indies, Pakistan, and India.²²

At a time when overseas students and immigrants created a threat to jobs in Britain and even undercut wages, the Colonel's world seems a much brighter place to people such as Jimmy, who as a university graduate was forced to peddle candy in the streets of the Midlands. Against the background of the Suez Crisis, which had revived memories of the loss of Britain's most prized possession – the Indian subcontinent – Jimmy's sympathy to the Colonel indicates that he secretly desires his Edwardian lifestyle as an alternative to his own. During the Edwardian era at least, it seems to Jimmy, things were better. By contrast, in the post-war, post-empire era of immigration and changing political economy, he feels, as do other young people of his generation, that he simply does not have a chance. Looking back on the Colonel's world, he tells Cliff:

I hate to admit it, but I think I can understand how her Daddy must have felt when, he came back from India, after all those years away. The old Edwardian brigade do make their brief little world look pretty tempting. All home-made cakes and croquet, bright ideas, bright uniforms. Always the same picture: high summer, the long days in the sun, slim volumes of verse, crisp linen, the smell of starch. What a romantic picture. Phoney too, of course. [...] Still, even I regret it somehow, phoney or not. (17)

Considering the racial hostility and discrimination faced by Britain's minorities in the Midlands, where migrants were fighting racism in the areas of housing, education, and employment, it comes as a shock to the audience that with his socialist utopia, Jimmy ignores the problems in the present. Since he lives in the Midlands and is supposedly politically conscious, one would expect him to be aware of and sympathetic to such problems. Yet we never hear him discuss these issues. He makes only cursory references to certain "grotesque and evil practices" in the Midlands as he reads the newspaper (75–76). It is not clear what Jimmy means, but quite soon he speaks to Helena about going to a concert. If Jimmy Porter was complaining about "no good, brave causes left to fight for" (84), unlike the generation of the thirties, then it's not that there weren't any causes left. If Jimmy wanted, there were plenty of causes to agitate for in the strained multiracial environment of Britain. On the contrary, however, he chooses not to criticize the colonial aspects of the very apparatus that he resents.

If Jimmy's silence on the imperial question and his sympathy for the Colonel are indications of his sympathy towards the empire, then surely Jimmy must resent the free subjects of that empire. If such a claim remains a matter of speculation, then at the very least one sees his hostility towards the non-white races in his stereotypical portrayals of the "other." As he berates Alison, he compares her to a "dirty old Arab, sticking his fingers into some mess of lamb fat and gristle" (24) and her unborn child to a "mass of india rubber" (37), and calls her mother "as rough as a night in a Bombay brothel" (52). Although there is nothing directly mentioned about the Suez defeat in this play, the derogatory remarks about Arabs as butchers serve to construct their inferiority, reinforcing, at the same time, Osborne's disappointment with yet another humiliation in the aftermath of the empire. If the play reflects what critics call a "national malaise,"²³ then Jimmy's stereotyping of the other races is only "an index of the widespread familiarity with the image of coloured people that they carry."²⁴ In *Race and Empire in British Politics*, Paul B. Rich argues that colonial racist discourse had led to the continued circulation of popular preconceptions about non-white and colonized peoples. After the end of the empire, racial hostilities and "public ignorance" about the historical reasons for the immigration of coloured races further reinforced and circulated many stereotypes about them, creating a "lingering" suspicion among the British public that the coloured people who had immigrated to Britain were "from primitive jungle societies or had tails or were cannibals."²⁵ Along with similar portrayals in magazines like the *Spectator*, this "set of stereotypes ... was often aided by cartoonists in the popular press," such as *Punch*, and by "the continuing popularity throughout the 1950s of adventure films such as *Tarzan* and pulp fiction such as that of Ian Fleming's James Bond."²⁶ The historian Kenneth Morgan even suggests that "the literature of the time – for instance, Enid Blyton's immensely popular and very numerous adventure stories for children written in the forties – was unashamedly colonialist, perhaps

racist, with clear assumptions of the cultural superiority of the Anglo-Saxon and other white races. School geography primers and atlases with their extensive splashes of British red, reinforced the point by reindoctrinating a new generation of post-war children."²⁷ In constructing such images, Jimmy only perpetuates the racist discourse prevalent in British society of the 1950s. Juxtaposed with his sympathies for the Colonel's desire to dominate, such images reflect his refusal to engage with the colonized societies in any other way except to revitalize images disseminated by the media. Yet Jimmy seems barely aware of the effects of his racial stereotyping. Nor does he do anything to question or modify his position. His attacks on the establishment remain limited by his own narcissism, and he fails to raise urgent concerns that occupied this postcolonial period.

While Jimmy's slurs on other communities are problematic, they seem hardly surprising when we examine his own attitudes. He is "an enormous cultural snob" who feels superior to his working-class brethren unless he is in the position of feeling sorry for them.²⁸ Throughout the play he alludes to Shakespeare and Wordsworth and T.S. Eliot. In fact he even wants to be Eliot as he fantasizes about continuing his life with Helena. He comments on Priestley's work, assumes he's the only one who reads it, "spend[s] ninepence" on the "posh" Sunday newspapers every week while living in a poor apartment in the Midlands, and accuses those who haven't read them of being lazy (13–15).

Osborne's search for a new dramatic idiom that was to express the contemporary mood of despair departed from the earlier formalistic experimentation (as manifested in Brechtian methods, for example) to move to a naturalistic kitchen-sink drama more suited to the mood of the times. However, the spatially reduced attic of the naturalistic setting can also be seen as an analogue to the reduced space of an empire now in a shambles, with a depressed economy and joblessness for the educated.²⁹ Also, as Rutherford says, the "bourgeois" attitudes of the characters imply that to call this play "a kitchen-sink" or "working-class drama" is a bit of a "misnomer."³⁰ Rutherford points out that the bourgeois values are reflected in Jimmy's "insist[ence]" that Cliff's wrinkled pants be ironed; moreover, patriarchal norms govern the behaviour of Jimmy and Cliff, who take it for granted that the women will do the ironing (after Alison leaves, it is Helena who replaces her at the ironing board while Jimmy and Cliff sit in their armchairs and read).

Perhaps critics eagerly in search of a symbol for the post-war lost generation read too much too quickly into Jimmy Porter's predicament. Or, in their excitement, critics such as Tynan hastily constructed a left-wing hero, reading Jimmy's ambiguities as signs of a "drift towards anarchy, ... instinctive leftishness, [and] automatic rejection of 'official' attitudes."³¹ For, indeed, as Rutherford acknowledges, "[t]here is no evidence that Jimmy Porter, John Osborne, or even Kenneth Tynan ... [was] exactly forward looking.... [T]he political significance was injected into the [play] by Tynan and, given the turbulent events that were going on at broadly the same time, we all swallowed

it.”³² The overwhelming response of critics, however, has blinded many to Osborne’s reactionary stance towards the colonial question in the play. Moreover, since the Colonel is not the main character, and since most of the play’s action is centered on Jimmy’s anger and his relationship with Alison and later with Helena, it leaves little time for the audience to mull over the issue of colonialism. Whatever the causes of this construction of the “angry young man,” rightly acknowledged by some as “partly a media hype” and “mainly a much-needed myth who both summed up a problematic present and suggested ways of dealing with it,”³³ it is certainly indicative of the narrowness of the British Left of the 1950s. If, on the other hand, Jimmy Porter harks back to the 1930s as exemplary of a liberal temper, then one can see why his creator skirts the issue of colonialism. For even in the British left of the 1930s, a turbulent time of imperialist expansion accompanied by fierce anti-colonial struggles in the colonies, questions of imperialism had, for the most part, remained in hiding. While Britain’s left-wing youth threw most of their energies into their battles against Franco and fascism, they neither questioned the world of the empire nor aligned themselves with the countless numbers who agitated against imperialism and lost their lives fighting for freedom from it.³⁴ As in the case of Jimmy Porter’s predecessors, who barely addressed the question of colonialism in the thirties, the colonial critique once again remains absent from the socialist slogans of this 1950s left-wing hero.

As Osborne himself was to recall in his autobiography, the opening of *Look Back in Anger* at the Royal Court Theatre on 8 May 1956 “seems to have become fixed in the memories of theatrical historians.”³⁵ Nearly half a century later, obituaries of Osborne in 1994 remembered him as the “angry young man” of the decade. In this age of postcolonialism and interrogation of empire fifty years after its demise,³⁶ what are the implications of the obituaries that maintain Osborne’s iconic image as the “original angry young man” who was “best known for ... the original kitchen-sink drama”?³⁷ They simply continue to keep alive the myth of the quintessential “angry young man.” Yet if we examine Jimmy Porter’s position with regard to the Colonel and his attitudes towards non-white people, it is hard to see Jimmy in the same heroic light as did the critics of the earlier decades. If anything, the play reveals Jimmy’s anger as misdirected. But there are many things about *Look Back in Anger* that are misdirected. It’s a play about anger at the establishment that evokes an idealized imperial past. It seeks to liberate the underprivileged but brutalizes women. And, as Sierz points out, it’s a kitchen sink drama that “takes place in an attic without a sink.”³⁸

NOTES

- 1 Hugh Tinker, “Race and Neo-Victorianism,” *Encounter* (April 1972), 49. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 1996 Flair Symposium, “Shouting in

the Evening: British Theatre 1956–1996,” held at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin. I am grateful to Elizabeth Richmond-Garza for encouraging me to develop the idea when I first discussed it with her.

- 2 Gareth Lloyd Evans, “John Osborne and Naturalism,” in *Modern British Dramatists: New Perspectives*, ed. John Russell Brown (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1984), 13–14.
- 3 John Russell Taylor, editor’s introduction to *John Osborne: Look Back in Anger: A Casebook* (London: Macmillan, 1968), 11.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 14–15.
- 5 David Cairns and Shaun Richards’s study questions Jimmy Porter’s political and social engagement and his seeming nostalgia for colonialism. They attribute his inability to identify with “good brave causes” to the situation of the Left in the 1930s, as evident in “the failure of the Labour Party to organise and educate amongst the young in any systematic way” and its inability “to sustain itself” in the 1950s. My own analysis takes their argument forward by placing the play against the backdrop of immigration and race relations in the 1950s. See David Cairns and Shaun Richards, “No Good Brave Causes: The Alienated Intellectual and the End of Empire,” *Literature and History*, 14: 2 (1988), 197.
- 6 John Russell Taylor, “John Osborne,” in *Casebook*, 77. See note 3.
- 7 John Russell Taylor, *Anger and After: A Guide to the New British Drama* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), 28.
- 8 Taylor, “John Osborne,” in *Casebook*, 75.
- 9 George E. Wellwarth, “John Osborne: ‘Angry Young Man’?” in *Casebook*, 117.
- 10 Cairns and Richards, 194. See note 5.
- 11 Kenneth Tynan, review of *Look Back in Anger*, by John Osborne, at the Royal Court Theatre, London, in *A View of the English Stage, 1944–63* (London: Methuen, 1975), 178.
- 12 Malcolm Rutherford, “Kitchen-Sink Nostalgia,” *Encounter* (November 1989), 74–75.
- 13 Taylor, *Anger and After*, 38. See note 7.
- 14 John Osborne, *Look Back in Anger: A Play in Three Acts* (London: Faber & Faber, 1980), 13. Subsequent references appear parenthetically in the text.
- 15 Cairns and Richards explicitly touch upon the colonial dimension in the play. They situate Porter’s nostalgia for empire in the context of the popular discourse of the 1950s, when “Empire” and “Commonwealth” were used interchangeably and, for the most part, opinion on both the Right and Left was likely to be pro-imperial. They attribute Porter’s yearning for the empire to the effect on Osborne of popular opinion and imperialist discourse. I prefer to link Jimmy’s nostalgic discourse to the material conditions of immigration policies and race-relations in the 1950s.
- 16 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 7.
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 Alison, quoting Jimmy, delivers this line.

- 19 John Solomos, *Race and Racism in Britain*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1993), 57.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 The Conservative government eventually fulfilled its objective of controlling immigration through the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act.
- 22 Donald Wood, "The Immigrants in the Towns," in *Coloured Immigrants in Britain*, by J.A.G. Griffiths, Judith Henderson, Margaret Osborne, and Donald Wood (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 41.
- 23 Aleks Sierz, "John Osborne and the Myth of Anger," *New Theatre Quarterly*, 12:46 (1996), 138.
- 24 Paul Hartmann and Charles Husband, *Racism and the Mass Media: A Study of the Role of the Mass Media in the Formation of White Beliefs and Attitudes in Britain* (London: Davis-Poynter, 1974), 31.
- 25 Paul Rich, *Race and Empire in British Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 175.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Kenneth Morgan, quoted in Cairns and Richards, 199–200.
- 28 Taylor, *Anger and After*, 41. See note 7.
- 29 I am grateful to Elizabeth Richmond-Garza for this insight.
- 30 Rutherford, 75. See note 12.
- 31 Kenneth Tynan, review of *Look Back in Anger*, in *View of the English Stage*, 178. See also, in the same volume, "End of a Twelvemonth," 199; and "Decade in Retrospect: 1959," 271. See note 11.
- 32 Rutherford, 74.
- 33 Sierz, 140. See note 23.
- 34 Barring Orwell's concerns with the empire in *Burmese Days*, one finds practically no engagement with the colonial question in the generation of the thirties. Although Osborne ostensibly looked to Orwell for inspiration, his own stance is conspicuously nostalgic. For an analysis of Orwell's position on the colonial question see John Newsinger, "'Pox Britannica': Orwell and the Empire," *Race and Class*, 38:2 (1996–97), 33–49.
- 35 John Osborne, *A Better Class of Person: An Autobiography* (New York: Dutton, 1981), 13.
- 36 In 1997, India celebrated fifty years of independence from British colonial rule.
- 37 See Lawrence Donegan, obituary, *Guardian* [London] (27 December 1994), 1. Quoted in Sierz, 136.
- 38 Sierz, 139.