

Research Paper

**“The Tragic Struggle of Dillon against the Jungle of the Modern Cliches
in John Osborne's “Epitaph for George Dillon” ”**

Dr. Ajay P. Deshmukh

Principal, K.N. Arts & Commerce
College, Karanja (Lad) Dist. Washim (M.S)
Research Supervisor in English,
S.G.B. Amravati University.

ABSTRACT

Of Osborne's first three plays (after his earlier unpublished and publicized works), the latest to appear on the London stage was actually written before “Look Back in Anger” and “The Entertainer”. How far the final version of “Epitaph for George Dillon” differs from the original and how much part Osborne's collaborator Anthony Creighton had in the work, have not been fixed.

it seems reasonable to take George Dillon, the frustrated and none too scrupulous actor-writer around whom the action revolves, as the first of Osborne's characteristic heroes. George Dillon is a tragic visionary, an embryonic form of Jimmy Porter of “Look Back in Anger”.

The play is part of Osborne's theme about the danger of talented 'Creative' artists being swallowed up in a world of debased commercialism. Like Jimmy Porter, George Dillon is rebellious and homeless. The play is set “in the home of the Elliot family just outside London”. George Dillon is pitched in their 'Menage' when Mrs. Elliot invites him to stay with them during one of his periods out of work, and the action which develops from then on forms the material of a family conventional plot. In a single setting, the decline of George Dillon runs its course, separated into the customary three acts.

The first act is mainly expository. The Second contains mainly a suologue between George and Ruth, who has fallen out of life with a self-pitying artist much like Dillon. This act constitutes the main “development” of action, and the play also reaches its climax in this act. And the Third Act-pausing briefly to enable George to go down, witnesses his final victimization by the 'vicious web' of society represented by the Elliot family.

“Epitaph for George Dillon” presents a clash between the sensibilities of the artist and the mediocrity of contemporary “English Culture”. George, the central character of the play is an actor and writer who despairs at morally forlorn society and longs for values; while the rest of the characters in the play exist only to personify conventional ethical values which George and his creator Osborne detest. Characters from outside the family make their brief appearances for a similar purpose. Mr. Webb of the Assistance Board radiates bureaucratic smugness and homespun virtue, as does Barney Evans the inverted values of admass culture; and Geoffrey Colwynstuart - a revivalist acquaintance of Mrs. Elliot embodies a benign religiosity. This is how Osborne engineers a confrontation of Values which generate the conflict.

The conflict can also be analysed as between the

conscious, much alive sensitive artist in Dillon and society that is symbolically presented on the stage by the Elliot family, whose lives are reduced to the living death of anaesthesia. Despite possessing the talents, he is commercially a failure. The characteristic Osborne hero is restless and dissatisfied, a rebel who knows what he is against without being very clear about what he is for.

The play has a slow opening, and a lot of time is spent filling in the background to Dillon's long awaited arrival. It is not until Dillon arrives that the movement of the play begins, and even then the characterization is more like caricature. In Act Two, for example, Josie remarks:

Josie : S-E-X? Oh, Sex. Sex doesn't mean a thing to me. To may way of thinking, love is the most important and beautiful thing in the world and that's got nothing to do with sex(1).

By representing the minor characters in this way, Osborne heightens the sense of George's isolation in this jungle of clichés. The presentation is so deliberate that even the family names have a mannered onomatopoeic ring - for Ruth is strident, Norah is normal and boring, and Josie is jolly. This youngest daughter is first seen scanning the problem page of women's magazine and she exudes admiration for Jazz and motor cycles. As Simon Trussler remarks, such habits of mind as crystallized here echo “The easiest kind of intellectual assumptions about Philistinism-assumptions which are 'themselves' clichés”(2).

This is how the ground is prepared for the 'conflict' in the play, between Dillon and the rest of the characters who represent ethical absolutes. As Jimmy attacks the degenerate post-war England society in “Look Back in Anger”, so does Dillon in “Epitaph for George Dillon”. Dillon too lashes at their existential absurdity:

Have you looked at them? Have you listened to them? They don't merely act and talk like caricatures, they 'are' caricatures! That's what is so terrifying. Put anyone of them on the stage, and no one would take them seriously for one minute! They think in clichés, they talk in them, they even feel in them – and,

brother, that's an achievement! Their existence is one great cliché that they carry about with them like a snail in his little house - and they live in it and die in it!(3)

Looking at this situation on the stage, objections could be raised as Anderson points out : "It is difficult to imagine a figure like Dillon, however hard-up he might be, involving himself so deeply in a household as depressing as that of Elliot's"(4). Such objections are undoubtedly justifiable but if we visualize the scene from Osborne's point of view, such drawbacks involving the plot can easily be overlooked. If an individual is portrayed as being victimized by society, it has got wider implications. As already noted in the previous chapter, so many forces are responsible for the downfall of an individual. And such an individual often becomes the protagonist in Osborne's plays and wages war single-handed. Osborne focuses so intently on the hero in the foreground that the group and the background often get blurred. In "Epitaph for George Dillon", Dillon raises his voice against the Elliot family that do not even bother to recognize the enormity of the situation. And his anger is directed against those only to awaken them to the reality. And if the objection is to why Dillon should join such family, it must be questioning the Theatrical technique of the playwright. This is the form Osborne has chosen for presenting his ideas and revealing his vision. Hence even the Religion does not escape from Osborne's attack which might otherwise prove irrelevant to the action of the play. During the course of action the family chatter is disturbed by the entrance of Mr. Colwynstuart who comes to escort Mrs. Elliot to a religious meeting. Colwyn-Stuart delivers a stereotyped moral lecture to George who is provoked to answer the claims of the "Shining lights of the Soul" with the words:

George : ... life isn't simple, and, if you've any brains in your head at all, it's frankly a pain in the arse I don't care who it is - you or anyone - you must have a secret doubt somewhere. You know that the only reason you do Believe in these things is because They 'are comforting'(5)

Osborne expresses here his dissatisfaction with what we accept today as religion. Religion in his sense has abdicated its central position in the scheme of things, and is now occupied with providing comfort. Its position had been filled by the substitute religions of nationalism, politics and commercialism. Human beings seem to have lost the traditional objects of their belief, but not their habit of believing. Osborne is concerned with man as an individual, an individual with a conscience which needs satisfying, and satisfying by a belief in this world.

The remarkable thing about "Epitaph for George Dillon" is that, though it has a dominating angry hero, not only is he given an adversary worthy of him, but, in the end, doubt is more decisively cast on his probity and worth than is ever permitted in "Look Back in Anger" (despite the stage direction referring to Jimmy's 'apparent honesty'). In the Second Act the scene between Dillon and Ruth, after the departure of Colwyn - stuart and Mrs. Elliot, we witness a head-on collision between Ruth who is decidedly well drawn, and Dillon. In that conflict, each digs too close to the other's soft centre for comfort until

harsh truths emerge on both sides.

Ruth was an ex-communist who has just broken with the party after seventeen years, soon after casting off her lover of six years. Because she discovered their relationship was built on cheap lies, she is uncertain of herself, uncertain of her value to herself and others. Thus she has resigned herself to her 'ideals' because she doesn't want to lead that painful life. Having recognized this, Dillon forces her to realize the 'truths' of her existence, to admit to her helplessness and lack of courage. Ruth in turn makes Dillon accept the fact that the only excuse for this eccentric behaviour is talent, which he doubts. Unlike Jimmy Porter, he has every now and then, enough penetration to doubt whether he is worth pity. He really questions himself on whether he is a real artist deserving sympathy or whether he is just a confidence trickster who usually tricks himself as well. Thus is their confrontation, they strip each other bare of comfortable pretences, and George comes to admit openly, and even sincerely, that he may be living on an illusion that he may talent after all:

Dillon : But do you know what is worse? Far, far Worse? Having the same symptoms as talent, the pain, the ugly swellings, the lot - but never knowing whether or not the diagnosis is correct. Do you think there may be some kind of euthanasia for that? Could you kill it by burying yourself here for good?(6)

Whether or not this is possible, we will come to know later, but obviously in this confrontation and with this soliloquy the play reaches its climax. It remains to be seen, whether he shrinks away from the pain of a fully imaginative existence like Ruth, preferring to surrender his responsibility as an artist to the morphine of family life with Elliots. He condemns himself to live with the euthanasia of the Elliots' love, despite his protests made to Ruth, which showed him to be a man of perception :

George : I have a mind and feelings that are all fingertips. Josie's mind. She can hardly spell it. And her feelings - What about them? All thumbs, thumbs That are fat and squashy - like bananas, in fact and rather sickly(7).

This image could as well serve as frontispiece for any play by Osborne, for it expresses perfectly his purpose which is to illustrate the despair and helplessness of man of feeling, false artist though he may be, surrounded by sickly banana like imitations which pass today for imaginative human beings.

The artist receives the fatal blow in the Third Act which heralds the appearance of Barney Evans, a theatrical producer. Their conversation is so crucial to the understanding of the miserable condition of the artist in post-war Britain:

Barney : This the first play you have written?

George : My seventh -

Barney : Dialogue's not bad, but these great

Long speeches - That's a mistake.

People want action, excitement. I

Know - 'you' think you're Bernard Shaw.

But where is he today? Eh? People

won't listen to him. Anyway, politics

are out. You ought to know that...
 ...Get someone in the
 family way in the Third Act – You're
 half way there(8).

This had been an actual experience with Osborn seven years before writing "Epitaph for George Dillon" and he presented it with staggering fidelity. In this context, Osborn remarks that self-caricature is so general that it makes the task of the writer very difficult, particularly in the theatre. Barney was probably unacceptable in a play, being so likely in life, embodying the cliché: "If you put him on the stage no one would believe it"(9).

Improbability was writ large over half of the nation, making restraint almost the first necessity of art, defending the truthfulness of drama against the distortions of documentary of social realism. In the face of life – notably English life with its eccentricity and anomaly, 'reticence' was also most the first discipline a writer had to assume.

Ironically, as Barney insists on a girl, "in the family way" in Dillon's play, in his own life, the scornful, sophisticated George Dillon falls into the trap set by so many dramatists for so many heroes and villains, of getting a blushing virgin in the family way in the final Act. Dillon becomes the tragic hero by killing the artist in himself for ever instead of reconciling himself with a life he so much detests. Ironically, one of George's play has become successful, but as he recites his own epitaph:

Here lies the body of George Dillon, aged
 thirty-four or thereabout – who thought, who
 hoped, he was that mysterious, ridiculous being
 called an artist. He never allowed
 himself one

day of peace. He worshipped the physical things
 of this world, and was betrayed by his own body.

He loved also the things of the mind, but his
 Own brain was a cripple from the waist down. He
 achieved nothing he set out to do. He made no
 one happy, no one looked up with excitement
 when he entered the room. He was always troubled
 with mind round his heart, but he loved no one
 successfully. He was a bit of a bore, and,
 frankly rather useless. But the germs loved him
 Even his sentimental epitaph is probably a
 Pastiche of someone or other, but he doesn't
 quite know who. And, in the end, it doesn't
 really matter.(10)

Dillon turns to Ruth but she had already gone only to mark his own spiritual death. Even though Dillon doesn't seem to be vigorous in his outburst, he proves himself to be the tragic hero in an embryonic form to develop later Jimmy Porter and other protagonists who are to follow.

REFERENCES:-

1. John Osborn, Epitaph for George Dillon (London, 1958), p.38.
2. Simon Trussler, The Plays of John Osborn (London, 1969), p.25.
3. Epitaph for George Dillon (London, 1958), pp.58,59.
4. Michael Anderson, Anger and Detachment (London, 1965), p.35.
5. Epitaph for George Dillon, pp.47,48.

6. Epitaph for George Dillon, p.62.
7. Epitaph for George Dillon, p.59.
8. Epitaph for George Dillon, pp.75-77.
9. Osborn, A Better Class of Person, an Autobiography, pp. 190,191.
10. Epitaph for George Dillon, p.87.