



A Study of John Braine's *Room at the Top* as a 'Pseudo Protest Novel'

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Abstract:

The present research paper is an attempt to explore the concept of 'Pseudo-Protest novel' by analyzing John Braine's well-known novel *Room at the Top*. This novel was published in 1957, and was exceptionally successful. It is a novel which epitomizes its age. It probes deeply and tellingly into a central problem of the times. Braine's Joe Lampton, the protagonist of the novel, is a creation of the post war British welfare state. Joe is a working class origin who is pitted against the indifference and insensitivity of the rich class. He comes before us in the novel as a working class Youngman of 25 – who is said to have lost his parents in a bomb blast during the second world war- and is now living with his aunt and her family in Dufton, a small town. He has served in the army as a pilot. He is a handsome Youngman who was once a considerable boer. What turns him into a rebel are his aspirations to rise high, lack of opportunities, resultant failure, and frustration, alienation and loneliness. But his anger is different from Osborne's Jimmy Porter who withdraws – from society to hurl abuses at it. In fact, Joe Lampton gets even with the society by obtaining it and out doing its members by becoming a successful "Zombie" himself, with an extremely hectic beginning, Braine introduces Joe as an ambitious Angry Young Man of 1950, always agitated and irritated with or without reason with the creamy layer of society. Braine holds up to ridicule the vague impotent protest of these angry young men as they were always in a hurry to capture not only wealth, power, name and prestige but also rich beautiful sexy girls and that too in the shortest span of time.

Full Paper:

From post - war Britain emerged the syndrome of the angry young man, one apparently intent on overthrowing established social conventions and the codes of behavior. In the theatre, John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* set the pace, and in fiction, John Braine's novel *Room at the Top* (1957). With Jack Clayton's film of the Braine novel, the syndrome became known internationally and the central character of the novel, Joe Lampton, became the epitome of the restless young Englishman fed up with social traditions that made life forever, one situated in the lower or middle class. All this shappened because towards the end of the 1940's the world had experienced two world

wars and their resulting frustration and suffocation. Despair and disillusionment, frustration and failure, became the destiny of the post-war world. There imbalance in each and every sphere of life- whether it was social, or moral, or economic, or political. In this atmosphere of total despair and doubt, a group of young writers mostly from the working class or the lower middle class, emerged on the literary surface. This whole decade (1950's) of despair and frustration is termed as "The Angry Decade" by Kenneth Allsop in his book *The "Angry Young Man"* group includes writers like Kingsley Amis, John Braine, William Cooper, John Wain, Peter Towry, John Osborne and many others. These writers took up working class heroes and dealt with their social, economic and sexual predicament in a stratified society that resisted social change and mobility. The protagonists of these novelists are not really angry as Fredrick Karl puts it:

They are however, disgruntled – with themselves, with their social status, with their work, with their colleagues, with the shabbiness of daily life, with their frustrated aspirations for self fulfillment, with the competitive spirit, with the inaccessibility of women and drink, with all the small activities whose pursuit takes up their depleted spirit.

These novels are generally called "Protest Novels" as they are written against the balanced social establishment. Here, the arrow of criticism is mainly towards the hypocrisy of upper class society. However, the protest of these protagonists lack moral substance and it seems that these protagonists merely want comfort or perhaps power and their rebellion is actually the manifestation of their egoism. Kenneth Allsop writes in this context, "They do not rebel for the sake of society. They are in fact nauseated by the moral demands that society makes upon them"(52).

John Braine's famous novel *Room at the Top* (1957), like Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* and Amis's *Lucky Jim*, is considered as young man's protest against the contemporary society. Joe Lampton, the protagonist of the novel, is a typical product of our own times. He comes before us in the novel as "a 'natural hero-un-hero, tongue-tied in all beyond materialist values" (Tibble 211). As Braine's brain-child, he seems to announce most clearly the philosophy of the times." (Albert 574).' The novel depicts the hero's protest against the capitalistic society where the rich are becoming more rich and the poor more poor. But if we examine the novel carefully, we find that it is not a pure protest novel in the true sense of the word. Because true protest is not a hollow opposition against the partial social norms. On the contrary it must have some moral standards of its own. For instance, if a person protests against corruption in the modern society it does not mean that his protest is just for the sake of protest and that he himself is allowed to indulge in the same corruption and exploit the society. Such kind of protest would be nothing but just a false accusation that has been leveled for his own selfish ends. And this is what happens in *Room at the Top* which is only a pseudo - protest novel. Here, the so called hero Joe Lampton pretends to hate the upper class but does not miss a single chance to become like them can evaluate this point on various levels. But before doing so, we must keep in mind what Kenneth Allsop says in this regard:

An angry man, if his protest is to have significance, must react in terms beyond his own wants and dislikes. When he is angry or when he rebels — he must stand for something significant.(75)

Therefore, when we think of protest on behalf of a larger group and not for himself. But this does not happen in case of Joe Lampton. When we first meet him, he seems to be a true representative of working class people as he exposes the hypocrisy of the upper class society. He and his friend Charles give the label of "Zombie" to all those upper class people who have all comforts of life. They categorize these "Zombies" according to their status and money. Joe leaves Dufton because he never wants to be like these hypocritical Zombies. On the very first page of the novel he warns himself saying, "No more Zombies, Joe, no more Zombies".

But after reaching Warley, this voice of social protest turns into the voice of his personal selfish ends. The question of social protest goes into hell and Joe falls morally and spiritually to fulfill his own selfish desires. When the novel starts, he is full of hatred for the rich but towards the end of the novel, he himself becomes one of them—the most "Successful Zombie".

The second argument is that Joe Lampton's protest is merely a pretension. When he was in Dufton, every rich man was his enemy and he had a sympathetic attitude towards the lower class of society. But after reaching Warley, Dufton, his native town becomes "Dead Dufton, Dirty Dufton, Dreary Dufton, Despicable Dufton". The glamour of Warley blinds him and the life lived in Dufton seems to him the most hellish one. He says, "It was as if all my life I'd been eating sawdust and thinking it was bread.

Thus as soon as he steps in Warley, he is full of hatred not only for his native place but also for its poor people. He even feels insulted in meeting his poor aunt Emily and uncle Dick had looked after him after his parent's death. Joe himself admits:

I was too much T'Top now, and half
- hating myself for it, I found myself
seeing them as foreigners. They were
kind and good and generous; but they
were not my sort of people any longer."

Thus we can't call him a protester as he hates his own poor people. Of course, the novel is a protest but not on the behalf of the poor masses but only a protest on Joe's own behalf. Moreover, the action of a protest novel must invariably focus our attention on the consciousness of a group through an individual's consciousness. Since the individual does not find the society acceptable, he questions the validity of its laws and conventions and this he does angrily. Joe Lampton also illustrates the difficulties of the slow rise to the Top for one who has the will and desire to succeed, But the tragedy is that his whole desires and consciousness are self-centered.

Further, Joe is like those preachers who know just to preach but never take the burden to follow it themselves. He hates the capitalists for their money - mindedness but he himself is no more

than an opportunist and schemer, who is convinced that ability is not the key to advancement; he sets his sights on marriage to Susan Brown, the daughter of local industrialist and community leader. He marries Susan not because he loves her but because she is the means for his materialistic hunger. Therefore, when he tells Charles that he loves Susan, Charles exposes his reality and says, "In love with her! Drive! In lust with her. And Daddy's bank balance. I know you, you scoundrel!" (88). Joe himself admits this reality as he says:

I was taking Susan not as Susan but as a
Grade A lovely lady: as the daughter of
a factory owner, as the means of obtaining
the key to Aladdin's cave of my ambitions.(173)

And it is for this greed of money and status that Joe sacrifices not only his own real self but also the pure and tender love of Alice. Alice remains the victim of Joe's sexual as well as emotional gratifications and finally commits suicide. After her death Joe's hollow nature becomes crystal clear. As before coming to Warley Joe has a notion that the upper class people are emotionally dead and nothing matters to them except money. He tells Charles, "Zombies lose people like a parcel or a glove. And they can't bear to talk of it or to be reminded of it. They are dead already."(19)

But Joe is no better than these Zombies in anyway when he himself passes Alice's just as a "loss of a parcel." No doubt he feels himself "homeless" thereafter and expresses deep remorse but this remorse becomes when he marries Susan just after some time. Can we call such a murderer a protester? Obviously not. Similarly Joe categorises some of the Zombies as "Sex-starved Zombies" and "Adulterous Zombies". But peeping into skirts and blouses is a temptation that he can never resist himself. Love is lust for him and he starts thinking of taking off clothes and bed as soon as he sees a girl. About Susan he says:

I imagined her nakedness, young and firm
and fragrant . . . Even when I let my eyes
rest on the outline of her firm, small
breasts beneath her sweater, it was with
a trace of lasciviousness.(57)

Finally, the protest novel places the hero's responses in a critical perspective and gives ironic treatment to his anxieties and tensions. But here, there seems no touch of satire and criticism in John Brains' tongue when he depicts Joe's immoral journey towards the top. Lee James appropriately observes "Braine's apprehension of his heroes for worldly goods is acute and exact"52.

In this way, we find that Joe's protest against the capitalistic society is merely a protest for his own sake. There is no consideration of a larger group. How can a person talk about hypocrisy, shame, and hollowness of the upper class when he himself possesses these faults in full abundance? Such a protester has no right to criticize social existence when he himself is hardly better than it. The novel could still be called a protest novel if the author had given Joe's journey to the Top a satirical

treatment. Thus the protest in the novel is a protest without dignity as here neither the hero, nor the author seems to suggest any substitute for the suffocating circumstances that they have been criticizing all along. Moreover, it is not the remedy that you yourself should indulge in the evil to protest against it. We can only sympathize with an irresponsible bohemian and accept Joe's protest just because he represents the working class people who are forced to sell their souls in order to succeed and reach the Top. The novel seems to argue that poverty can not be descent; the poor can not afford moral surplus and goodness as John Braine himself writes in the novel, "It's astounding how often golden hearts and silver spoons in the mouth go together."(10)

In conclusion, we may say that *Room at the Top* is not a novel of protest because for all his protestations, Joe is hollow from within. He is a cad and hedonist. He wants to be other than himself, lose himself in the world of on going concerns, a car, a beautiful girl, and a room at the top. He gives up Dufton for the glamour of Warley and succeeds in hooking a rich girl, even impregnating her so that he could make his way to the top of the world. Nevertheless he loses himself in the process. And it is in the end when Alice commits suicide that he comes to realize the enormous cost that he has to pay for a room at the Top: The world still wants to console him but Joe remains inconsolable. Thus, the novel is a lesson for those who lose themselves for becoming other than themselves. It conveys the idea that poverty can not be an excuse for the moral downfall of a person as one can not sweep morality beneath the carpet of money. In short, the novel is not a protest against capitalistic society but a protest against the blind pursuit of a person towards false glamour and materialism.

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