

## **The portrayal of contemporary social commentary in John Osborne's *the gift of friendship***

**Ajay Sangwan**

Shiv Colony Near ITI Bhiwani, Haryana, India

### **Abstract**

The television plays of John Osborne, like his regular and adapted plays, epitomize the fury and disillusionment, frustration and anger of an entire post-war generation. The objective of Osborne's writing *The Gift of Friendship* is to provide a vivid portrait of man of era in British society in particular and of our own cultural history in general. Like many intellectuals of our country, Osborne thinks that to raise relevant questions and to be aware of the problems is as important as to find their solution. Answering a question if society can be saved, the playwright asserted, "Yes, if it can be woken up"<sup>1</sup>. If people could be made aware of the problems, they would move some stage towards their solution. Therefore, his basic aim has been to wake up the society through the clarion call of his protagonists. Literature reflects society and drama does this more closely. Therefore, it is also natural that the plays of John Osborne should also reflect the life of the people. *The Gift of Friendship* is one of the television plays written by John Osborne. The play was published by Faber & Faber in 1972. To many the television plays of Osborne may appear to be more in the nature of commercials and not fitting in the wider pattern of his plays. But this will be overlooking the intrinsic merit of the television plays. True, television plays have their own requirements and are bound to be different from the regular plays. Also, a television audience is larger than the theatre audience, and a television company would accept only such plays as would click their viewers.

**Keywords:** Osborne, answering, protagonists, therefore, contemporary

### **Introduction**

The story the dramatist presents in the play is of little importance. What is significant is his character's reaction to the environment they live in. Assessing Osborne's plays, a famous critic Alan Carter says "it is the speaker's state of mind that the true impact, the real danger lies, rather than in what is said. Osborne's plays are a kind of vocal self-analysis in which his characters explore the nature of their own existence"<sup>2</sup>. While so doing they question the values of the environment they live in. If they feel the environment unsuitable they say this repeatedly so that we may also be aware of them.

The story of the play *The Gift of Friendship* revolves around two eminent writers, Jocelyn Broome and Bill Wakely who were once close friends. Broome invites Wakely at his residence for dinner as both friends have not met with each other for a long time. Wakely visits his house. They talk together; they dine together. But, later on, weekly is surprised to discover this fact that his friend Broome hated him much.

At the beginning of the play we are confronted with Jocelyn Broome planning to post envelope to invite Wakely. His wife Edwina Broome asks him to allow her to live in their company. But Broome wants to be all alone with Wakely. Alienation and despair are the common characteristics of modern man and his life. The basic tragedy of man as has been conceived in modern time is that his life is a long struggle, from which there is no escape. He faces this life long struggle with determination, courage and strength and yet the picture that emerges is that of a victim. The young men are the victims of circumstances. In the play Osborne portrays the concept of modern family. It has totally changed from what it used to be in past. Parents are alienated from their children. At one place Edwina asks

Jocelyn, "do you miss the children", then Jocelyn replies "Miss them. Good heavens, no. You must be getting old my dear. It has taken me a quarter of a century to get them out of the house at the same time"<sup>3</sup>.

Both parents and children live in a world of isolation due to their personal, social, and cultural reasons.

The past is always good because the present is horrible and the future is uncertain. The old people knew one another and realized their feelings, but, today, they (the young) lack of it. When Edwina says that the people in the past were closer, Broome supports her and adds that they kept respectable and sensible distance with one another. Today, love is reduced to the level of affairs only. Jocelyn Broome tells his wife that "people of our generation are on about being loved and having affairs"<sup>4</sup>. In other words, love is commercialized.

Friendship according to Broome, and which Osborne also thought, is a rare blessed gift which people scarcely get in their life. People are so much inclined towards their vested interests that they seldom realize that they should give due respect to other people's emotions and feelings.

As we go on reading the play we find that Bill Wakely plans to visit Broome's house alone, although his wife Madge does not want him to go there. She has a natural repulsion for Jocelyn Broome as he has not invited her with her husband. She has felt insulted at such kind of invitation. Again through conversation between Bill Wakely and Madge, the dramatist presents many problems of today's world. Man lives unreal life today; he has covered himself with the shade of artificiality. There is always difference between what he says and what he does. When we watch a play on the stage, we admire the characters' actions for their real presentation of life and the world. But, in this play, Wakely thinks that they do not represent the real feelings of the people. Sometimes, they suppress their personal agonies

to amuse and entertain the people. In fact, they play paradoxical role from what they actually live. Bill says at one place,

“Actors are not usually much like people. I have always thought <sup>[5]</sup>.”

The reader/audience becomes curious to know about what happens to Bill Wakely's tryst with Jocelyn Broome. It is seen that Wakely has arrived at his residence. He takes his dinner there. Both discuss on many problems of human life. Jocelyn feels that people are pragmatic today. There is lack of vitality in them. He tells Wakely that there is decline in the standard of both literature and the readers. People have developed consumerist approach. Good books are hardly written today. Even people have lost the interest of reading books. They have no time. In Jocelyn words,

“The actual labor of writing books is more or less finished. Even reading proofs and printing. No one has time <sup>[6]</sup>.”

We know that one of the objectives of writing a literary composition is to yield delight. In the past, writers wrote good books to derive pleasure out of it. Now, the situation has entirely changed. People write about other people to become “a literary commercial traveler.”

In the play, there is reference to the seven deadly sins, Wrath, Envy, Lust, Gluttony, Avarice, Pride and Sloth. People are victim of these sins. Bill Wakely realizes that there is no vitality. People do nothing though they pretend they have done something. In a long speech, he presents the correct picture of society. He reads out Madge from the letter of Jocelyn Broome,

“Must get away from noise. Listen, even the door closing is no comfort any longer. Shouldn't hate trivia. But I do. Whatever is TRIVIA. Myself, most of all? Surely. Go to bed. Tired. Wake up just the same. Pretending I've done something. Done nothing. Just fatigue. No proper effort. Can't sleep but tired. No quacks. No pills, won't work. No pleasure in writing. Not much from reading. At least Lust gone. Only SLOTH. Ambition gone quite certainly. Wakely will, at least, save me from those American Professors. At least, I hope so. Those Laden universities and their LADEN students. EXEGESIS. Lord, I give myself to the Wakely, but not the WAKELYS of this world <sup>[7]</sup>. “

Many authors found that it was very tempting to depict Britain of the sixties a money lusting, sordid, and decadent society. The outright pursuit of happiness led to unhappiness. America and England represent a decadent civilization. Today's civilization is the civilization of machines. Bill thinks that “England was already no more than strip of concrete and rumbling stench <sup>[8]</sup>.” This shows the dominance of machines in every sphere of human life. Therefore, liveliness is gone. America, in the play, is compared to hell. Bill Wakely reads out the final part of Jocelyn's letter,

“There are only two finalities. Is that what I mean? Hell and America. The United States and Despair <sup>[9]</sup>.”

It is noticeable that the Post-Second World War brought about frustration and alienation only. Therefore, the younger generation of the period could not employ themselves to useful or worthwhile purpose.

However, at the end of the play Bill Wakely is reminded by Jocelyn Broome's remark that “time does not make ancient good uncouth” <sup>[10]</sup>. Through this the dramatist wants to suggest that there can be hope of building good civilization only by adapting the ancient values. The ancient goods are eternal and imperishable.

## References

1. Carter Alan, John Osborne, Edinburgh, Oliver & Boyd, 1973, 164.
2. Ibid, 170.
3. The Gift of Friendship, 12.
4. Ibid, 12.
5. Ibid, 18
6. Ibid, 29.
7. Ibid, 35.
8. Ibid, 22.
9. Ibid, 35.
10. Ibid, 36