

CHANGING CULTURAL MORES AND SOCIAL ACCENTS IN THE FICTION OF KINGSLEY AMIS

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Kingsley Amis is the spokesman of the contemporary times. He has integrated himself so inextricably with the present day life that he is looked upon as the major commentator on the social conditions of our time. Anthony Burgess observes “The future will know about the state of England today not from the linguistic but by the novels of Amis” (p.268).

Culture is never stagnant, it is ever changing. As we cross over to the new millennium, the values and ideals of English culture drastically change. Kingsley Amis has presented an unbiased image of the changing façade of England and has tried to redefine what culture means to the new generation. His novels are socially relevant and have presented challenging insights into English society. They have captured the temper of the time and have delineated “the flavour of contemporary culture in its fashionable, frantic, elusive turnover” (Bradbury, p. 159).

Racial discrimination is a piquant feature of English society. In the contemporary times, it has assumed menacing proportions and has spread its tentacles throughout the world. The Whites invariably suffer from an inveterate hatred for the Blacks and consider them inferior. The fiction of Amis bears out this trend openly and in ‘*I Want It Now*’ characters like Ronnie share the general refrain, “Everybody in his sense know that the Black man is an inferior form of life” (p.162). Hatred for blacks is so deep-rooted in the English society that in ‘*Girl 20*’ it is quiet unthinkable “why would a white girl want to have a black boyfriend” (p.119). Alienated from the mainstream, the blacks are treated as social outcasts and it is widely felt that the only way of solving the Negro problem is to keep them down. In ‘*I Want it Now*’ Student Mansfield’s vituperative denunciation of the blacks is characteristic of the contemporary society, “The only way to keep the Negro in its place is by fear. The only argument he understands is the lash” (p.184). However, the scenario is not entirely bleak and is redeemed by the enlightenment that is dawning upon the new generation. In ‘*Girl 20*’, Roy Vandervane’s progressive attitude “in favour of racial integration” and Vivienne’s marriage with Gilbert behove the changing attitude of the Whites towards the Blacks which is gradually sweeping the globe” (p.119).

Discrimination against women the world over is the bane of our civilization. The status of women has by and large remained a neglected segment in the male dominated society. Their condition has not improved drastically even in the contemporary times. Kingsley Amis has tried to depict the deplorable condition of women with rare candour in novels like ‘*Jake’s Thing*’, ‘*The Alteration*’, ‘*Stanley and the Women*’ etc. He affirms that in spite of their excellence in all spheres women are still considered intellectually feeble and are seldom given equal opportunities at the decision making level. Tobias Anvil, the protagonist of ‘*The Alteration*’ disparages

women in a sweeping generalization, ‘a woman’s opinion on a matter of this kind is of no import whatsoever’ (p.54). The portrayal of women touches its nadir in ‘*Stanley and the Women*’ where male characters share an aggressive attitude towards women and feel that “the real mad people are not the ones in mental hospitals...but... women” (p.307). Kingsley Amis personally shared the same jaundiced view. In an interview with **Val Hennessey** he himself affirmed, “I find all these new feminists revolting”. Hence, the women of Amis are forced to exclaim with Anna, the protagonist of ‘*Take a Girl Like You*’ that “All that horrible universe of men, it is miraculous how we manage to survive” (p.20)

The **varied and changing to sex** constitutes a vital chapter in the social history of post-war Britain. Pre-marital and extra-marital relations are inextricably bound up with social mores. They are not only in a state of flux but vary from one socio-economic level to another. Being an official chronicler of the contemporary times, Amis’s “analysis of modern society includes, of course, its sexual mores” (Phelps, p. 71).

Homosexuality both among men and women has come to be widely accepted as a natural practice in the contemporary English society. Hence, homosexual trends make a recurring presence in the novels of Amis. It is a prominent theme of ‘*The Anti-Death League*’ and dictates the structure of ‘*Difficulties With Girls*’ which has been set in “the swinging ‘60s in London when homosexuality between consenting adults is about to be decriminalized” (Salwak, p.251). Promiscuity has also become an integral part of Britain’s permissive society which is clearly reflected in the novels of Amis. Val Hennessey has traced “an almost prurient obsession with sex” in novels like ‘*I Want It Now*’, ‘*Girl 20*’, ‘*One Fat Englishman*’ etc. (p.204).

Sexual morality has lost its sanctity in the contemporary times and has become redundant in the scheme of social affairs. Pre-marital sex, which was once regarded as taboo has now become a yardstick for measuring the alleged progressiveness of Britain’s liberal society. Notions of pre-marital chastity are considered outmoded. For instance, Jenny’s quest for Mr. Right and concept of virginity do not hold ground in ‘*Take a Girl like You*’. She is told, “Well, that was perfectly sensible in the days when there wasn’t any birth control and they thought they could tell when a girl wasn’t virgin. Nowadays they know they can’t and so everything’s changed”(p.63). Apart from the notions of pre-marital and extra-marital chastity, even the practice of engagement has become obsolete. Yandell exclaims, “Nobody gets engaged these days” (p.218). Hence, from the novels of Amis it becomes explicit that in the changing times “morality is never contingent on lifelong fidelity and extra-marital affairs have gained currency” (Guindin, p.147).

The **attitudetowards marriage** of young generation has also changed. Nowadays, marriage is no longer considered a bond of life-long faithfulness but a fossilized institution which is fast on the decline. Moreover, it is weighed down social and economic considerations to a large extent. Thus, rarely in Amis’s novels is there any relationship between the sexes that is wholly satisfying. Ronnie Appleyard, who aspires to be catapulted to the highest echelon of society by making a fortunate marriage in *I Want It Now* exemplifies the outlook of the youth today, “He hadn’t got a wife because he hadn’t yet found a sufficiently rich girl of a sufficiently powerful family who was willing to marry him” (p.38). Apart from this, happy marriage, built on the principles of mutual trust, love and confidence has become anachronistic today. It has virtually become a crumbling edifice which gives away under the slightest duress. Hence, disintegration of marriage is pretty common these days and Amis’s characters often “describe their unhappy marriages as if they were badges of honour” (Salwak, p. 253).

Parent- child relationship constitutes the bulwark of society. It too is changing fast in contemporary times. In past, couples wistfully languished for children but nowadays, the number of married couples deciding not to have children has accentuated to a great extent. Besides pursuing career and testing the marriage against separation, both ‘not enough money’ and ‘too much money’ also enter into reasons for not having children. For Trevor and Tracy, the protagonists of *Ending Up*, children are “a question of money” (p.52). Not only this, but also the attitude of parents towards the upbringing of children is changing fast. Unlike past, when mothers influenced a child’s development more than any other person, fathers are more involved in caring for young children. Both the parents are now actively engaged in raising children. They take charge of the children in turns and attend to their primal necessities cheerfully. John Lewis, the protagonist of *I Like It Here* is all geared up to tend his children in his wife’s absence:

“What shall I do if he wakes up?”

‘If he cries for more than ten minutes warm some milk for him I’ve put it in saucepan’

‘Nappy?’

‘On the chest of drawers. And if you do change him mind you put his rubber knicker’s back on. You remember what happened last time when you forgot” (p.96).

However, parent child relationship is getting increasingly disturbed and disoriented these days. Parental rejection and abuse, over indulgence, severe discipline, generation gap and broken homes may be accounted the main reasons of these maladjustments. Consequently, children suffer from feelings of insecurity, tend to be hostile, rebellious, aggressive, anti-social and usually end as juvenile delinquents. The seventeen year old Svlyia Meers in *Girl 20* is the prototype, of such children. Her father ruefully exclaims “For reasons I won’t go into, my daughter’s beyond my control” (p.75).

Academic culture too is in a state of flux. During his various stints as Professor of English in different universities, Kingsley Amis has seen academic life at close quarters and has given it a fair portrayal in novel like *Lucky Jim, Take A Girl Like You and Jake’s Thing*. The changing times have witnessed student’s growing aversion for educational system. It has been epitomised through Michael, the primary school student in *Take A Girl Like You* who “just hated school”(p.32). Our defective system of education consisting of vapid lectures, shallow teachers and barren books which gives precedence to scholastic learning above all things is primarily responsible for it. As such the pernicious trend of boycotting lectures is gaining ground among students nowadays. Jake Richardson, the reader of History in *Jake’s Thing* is flabbergasted to learn that the “little bastard from Teddy Hall had been taking to cutting (no doubt it was called boycotting) his lectures” (p.230). This pernicious trend ultimately leads to a spiralling incidence of dropouts. A surprising feature of the changing academic culture is the pride which the students take in declaring themselves dropouts. Penny the protagonist of *Girl 20* takes glory in announcing “I’m not at any sodding domestic science college. I’ve left it, see? I don’t go there anymore. I’m eh drop out” (p.29).

Student’s unrest has become an indispensable feature of academic culture these days. Hooliganism, rowdiness and vandalism have become the bywords of educational institutions. Not only this, but also corruption, insurgency, debauchery and drug trafficking are pretty rampant in schools and colleges. For instance, in ‘*Jake’s Thing*’ the kaleidoscopic range of recalcitrance encompasses “ fighting, vomiting, illicitly playing pianos and gramophones , setting fire to the J.C.R, throwing bottles of ale at the Dean’s window, wrecking the rooms of Jews or pinioning them to the lawns with croquet hoops...fornicating, taking drugs” etc(p.129).

In the changing ethos, even the **reputation of teachers** has suffered an egregious setback. They are no longer hailed as the torch bearers of society. Moreover, the unifying bond of piety betwixt teachers and students has been replaced by an unnatural economic and official relationship. Consequently, veneration for teachers has become an anachronism. In '*Lucky Jim*' Macher is "the only student Dixon had ever heard calling a member of staff 'Sir...'" (p.27). Obdurate flippancy is so endemic in schools and colleges that the monstrous kids in '*Take a Girl Like You*' have no hesitation in reviling their teacher Jenny Bunn as "Silly bitch" and striking her even (p.25). Six and a half year old Donald who "rushed at her and threw a punch which she easily took on her forearm" clearly reflects the changing mentality of the students (p.24).

Kingsley Amis has vividly portrayed the anathema of **corruption** of society which has become a culture in itself. Corruption, in all its ramifications viz. embezzlement, red-tapism, scams and scandals find a fair portrayal in his works. Character assassination is endemic in his novels and the protagonists have no qualms in adopting unfair means for self-aggrandizement. Indeed, it is considered a sure shot way towards success and affluence. Igor Swianiewicz, the most affluent man in '*Russian Hide and Seek*' takes pride in being known as one who has "made his fortune by selling supplies illegally" (p.110). Even educational institutions are not immune from malafide practices. In '*I Like it Here*' corruption has vitiated the entire political machinery and has become a corrupt monolith. Kingsley Amis is so concerned and aggrieved about these malpractices that in '*Difficulties With Girls*' he warns the readers to be "doubly vigilant against corrupting forces in our society" (p.253).

Drug addiction is fast becoming an alarming feature of English culture in contemporary times. The disintegration of family organization, sense of emotional security and an upsurge of crass materialism have brought the youth of today to the cross-roads. In order to escape the stress and strain of life they take recourse to drugs feeling "they're going to be good but they are not really" (*Girl 20*, p 88). The novels of Amis abound in a number of disillusioned youths. Steive, the protagonist of '*Stanley and the Women*' is suspected of being "a shot of something like L.S.D" (p.64). In '*Girl 20*' Sylvia is usually high on "filthy hash" and Penny eventually ends as a drug addict (p.58).

Thus, Kingsley Amis has presented a notable panorama of the changing cultural mores of the contemporary English society through his novels. Indeed, he has become a living emblem of Britain's attempt to keep things in perspective.

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