



Cultural Studies In Kingsley Amis' *Take A Girl Like You*

Ms. RASHMI RANI

Lokmanya Tilak College of Engineering, Koparkhairane, Navi Mumbai

ABSTRACT

Kingsley Amis's most ambitious reckoning with his central theme- the degradation of modern life—introduces one of the rare unqualified good guys in Amis's rogue-ridden world: Jenny Bunn, a girl from the North English country has come south to teach school in a small smug town where she hopes to find love and fortune. The novel centers on the (increasingly desperate and cruel) attempts of Patrick Standish, a 30 year old schoolmaster at the local grammar school, to seduce Jenny, against a backdrop of his skirmishes with his school authorities and with the shabby, suburban middle class milieu in which the novel is set. In this novel, Kingsley Amis highlights the culture of British Society in 1950s.

KEYWORDS : Culture, Comedy, Morality, Realistic

Every human society has its own particular culture, or socio-cultural system, which overlaps to some extent with other systems. Variation among socio-cultural systems is attributable to physical habitats and resources, to the range of possibilities inherent in various areas of activity, such as rituals, language and customs, and the manufacture and use of tools, and to the degree of social development.

In his essay "Culture and Anarchy" Matthew Arnold defines culture with its motive in a very prominent manner. According to him; there is view in which all the love of our neighbour, the impulses towards action, help and beneficence, the desire for removing human error, clearing human confusion, and diminishing human misery, the noble aspiration to leave the world better and happier than we found it- motives eminently such as are called social- come in as part of the grounds of culture, and the main and pre-eminent part:

Culture is then properly described not as having its origin in curiosity, But as having its origin in the love of perfection; it is a study of perfection.¹

Since the 1950s Britain has experienced a

period of accelerated social and cultural change. This has coincided with the disintegration of British Empire, an expansion of the Commonwealth and the immigration of people of numerous nationalities, languages and cultures. The gradual globalizing of life, to which these phenomena have contributed, has produced a multi- ethnic Britain, with a popularity of identities and heritages. The most important cultural and intellectual phenomenon of the years after 1945 was the upheaval and extensive abandonment of traditional values, and the quest for new values felt to be more appropriate to life in a rapidly changing, materialistic and scientific civilization. This could be described in various ways. The novelist, C. P. Snow, described it as gulf between 'the two cultures', scientific and literary.

In this regard D. H. Lawrence has criticized the modern world:

Our civilization... has almost destroyed the natural flow of common sympathy between men and men, men and women. And it is this that I want to restore into life.²

Take a Girl Like You is Kingsley Amis's fourth novel. Published in 1960, it is set in the recent past of the 1950s. In this novel due to social and cultural changes, questions about the value of adjustment become more a matter of superficial comedy and the worth of adjustment, like that of learning to order a meal, drive a car, or lose virginity, is taken for granted. *Take a Girl Like You* explores almost all the variants of sexual persuasion and pursuit and is a most accurate and devastating comedy of contemporary sexual mores and manners. Malcolm Bradbury has rightly said:

It opened the way for Amis to take on a new kind of writing in which the 1960s mood of sexual liberation and then of growing male- female conflict were to be dominant themes. A cultural democrat Amis values honesty, civility and lack of pretense.³

Take a Girl Like You represent a determined effort to come to terms

with the moral rather than the practical problems of life, and deals in a more or less straight- forward way with the problem of maintaining some kind of standards in modern life.

Amis introduces his heroine; Jenny Bunn, as a beautiful, educated, working class girl. His main narrative line is occupied by Patrick Standish's repeated attempts upon her virtue, and the moral issue arises from her desire to safeguard that virtue. Jenny comes equipped with as a rigid code of morality as that of Barbara Bowen of *Like it Here* (1958). But unlike Barbara she is not imperious to pressure and rather than simply insisting upon what is right, she feels she must make her morality work in her relations with the people around her. During this exercise in maturation, her values change. This, too, makes a progression in Amis's technique, for *Take a Girl You* is the only novel in which the characters develop within the novel itself; up to now, any development of Amis' moral vision and any evidence of his consolidating his moral knowledge is of necessity acquired by our comparing the hero of one novel to that of another.

Jenny stands for Amis' own perception of morality and Patrick is the student. Although he refuses to act, he is forced to concede, through Jenny's insistence, that decency is a moral obligation and that self- indulgence must be subjugated to it. Amis' concern with Patrick and his skill in portraying him shifts the reader's attention to Patrick's problems and motives rather than allowing it to remain on Jenny. Moreover, Patrick's grappling is concerned largely with pseudo- problems in that he tries to ignore, even after the Sheila's episode, the problem of decency altogether.

Thus it is possible to see Jim Dixon, John Lewis or even Garnet Bowen as men who struggle with this central problem- the problem of how to be a decent man despite the pressure of modern society. But Standish, a sort of Amis' "non- hero", sidesteps the issue completely until, at the novel's end, it is forced upon him by Jenny who has, throughout, the moral initiative. Standish, then, receives from Amis a hero's place without being given a hero's problems.

The use of violence as a comic device provides a clue to the way in which Amis uses comedy and farce to assist him in presenting the morality. It is useful to go back to the parallels with Fielding and see that guiding Amis' satire, there is a rule very like the dictum of fielding that only an

"ill- framed mind" can see ugliness, infirmity or poverty as ridiculous in themselves and that affectation can be the only true object of ridicule.⁴

Such an attitude displays a basic decency and a willingness to acknowledge the sanctity of the individual. Ian Watt examines the way in which this decency is displayed in the comic technique of Fielding; he states that

The spectacle of a village mob assaulting a pregnant girl after church service is in itself anything but amusing, and only Fielding's burlesque manner, his 'Hamerican style', enables him to maintain the comic note. It is certain that this and some other episodes would be

quite unacceptable if Fielding directed our attention wholly to the actions and feelings of the participants...⁵

The development of this

"anti-experimental and anti-romantic, anti-ideological, and eminently realistic" trend has been well documented in a work by Rubin Rabinovitz.⁶

Citing John Braine, Alan Silitoe, and John Wain, along with Kingsley Amis, as examples of mid-20th Century writers adopting a common neo-realist style, Rabinovitz draws attention to their basic principles in relation to those of James, Woolf, and Joyce.

Their styles are plain, their time sequences are chronological, and they make no use of myth, symbolism, or stream-of-conscious inner narratives. Their prose is realistic, documentary, and even journalistic ... Elaborate descriptions, sensitivity, and plotless novels are avoided, ... and to display too much individuality in style would be egregious and in bad taste.⁷

In his study, Rabinovitz discusses a number of arguments against the experimental novelists, and in doing so provides several reasons why a new wave of writers should choose to abandon the modernist temperament and return to aged conventions. The modernists sought to produce something entirely new, as they experimented with narrative techniques, symbolism, ambiguity, and style. While some may consider these experiments and, arguably, developments essential to the history, and perhaps the ultimate survival of the novel form, writers such as Kingsley Amis and his close acquaintance Philip Larkin, would have passionately disagreed.

Amis saw in the development of, and over indulgence in one's own definitive style, for example, a paucity of ideas, and ultimately an "idiosyncratic noise-level in the writing, with plenty of rumble and wow from imagery, syntax, and diction."⁸

Although the works of Kingsley Amis are distinctly his own, he makes no effort to "display too much individuality." Character development, acute and biting social observations, and, throughout his early novels at least, the

"way he controls the development of an action ... to create that combination of surprise and logicity," all mark Amis' work as distinctive, as his own, yet we are never overwhelmed by any heavily stylistic idiosyncrasies.⁹

Throughout the bulk of his work Kingsley Amis has consistently turned his attention to the smallest details of everyday life in order to present his fictions as 'real', to render them as "realistic" as possible. While Joan Rockwell writes of "the novel being remarkably selective for emotional, rather than emotionally neutral events,

"Amis, in *Take A Girl Like You* describes in great detail, through a series of seemingly incidental observations, the various door-knockers to be found in the lodging house."¹⁰

Despite his protestations in Memoirs, that he was never

"much good at houses at the best of times," this focalisation of certain details within Amis' work marks an attempt to bring the fictional world of the novel closer to our own physical world, in which we are invariably subsumed in a multitude of detail, whether noted or not.¹¹

Plot and the chronological unfolding of events are realist conventions also common to all of Amis' novels. In *Take A Girl Like You* for exam-

ple, Amis turns to Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*, written between 1747 and 1749, for a plot outline, again emphasizing his return to the foundations of the novelistic form.

Conclusion

In *Take a Girl Like You*, Amis goes further towards resolving the moral questions raised in his preceding novels, for although Jenny loses her physical virginity, she retains her morality and consequently comes closer to solving her problem of maintaining standards of decency and mortality in an antipathetic society than does any other of Amis' central figures.

REFERENCES

1. Rubin Rabinovitz, *The Reaction Against Experimentation in the English Novel, 1950- 1960*, p. 9.
2. David Lodge, an introduction to the 1992 Penguin edition of *Lucky Jim*, p. vi.
3. Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel*, p. 315.
4. Amis, Kingsley, *Take a Girl Like You*, 1960; rpt. London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1984, p. 3.
5. Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, p. 253.
6. Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel*, p. 315.
7. Rubin Rabinovitz, *The Reaction Against Experimentation in the English Novel, 1950- 1960*, p. 9.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 39, taken from an article written by Amis which appeared in *The Spectator*, November 1959.
9. David Lodge, an introduction to the 1992 Penguin edition of *Lucky Jim*, p. vi.
10. Kingsley Amis, *Take A Girl Like You: "Its door had another little brass knocker on it, this time representing a religious looking person on a donkey"* (p. 15).
11. Kingsley Amis, *Memoirs*, p. 248.