Sexual/Textual Politics: A Feminist Reading of Kingsley Amis’s *Lucky Jim*

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Abstract:

Kingsley Amis’s first creation, *Lucky Jim*, a novel that caught the true flavour of Britain in the 1950s, generally presents Jim Dixon as its focal male hero. But here the discussion shifts the onus and attempts to explore the position of women in a society that is largely patriarchal. In other words, the novel is, at a deeper level, a fiction of male desire and fantasy which defines women as objects that exist without consideration. Throughout this novel, Amis takes a stereotypical view of women and projects them as either meek or haughty. In short, sufficient space for independent psychological development has been denied to women both in society and in Amis’s literary world. That is why, some critics have accused him of being misogynistic and old-fashioned.

**Keywords**: female space, male gaze, docile womanhood, seduction, individuality, psychological independence

Since January 1954, when the first publication of *Lucky Jim* by Victor Gollancz, put him into the front ranks of new British writers, Kingsley Amis has been hailed as one of the most prolific, widely analysed, satisfying and exasperating of novelists writing in English. *Lucky Jim*, a novel that seemed to change a generation, is indeed a classic comic fiction, a seminal campus novel which revealed the sleaziness underlying the seemingly respectable realm of academia, and a novel which seized and expressed the mood of those who came of age in the 1950s. Moreover, in the introduction to the Penguin edition of *Lucky Jim*, David Lodge commented:-

In his hilarious send up of academic life, Kingsley Amis poked devastating fun at a very British way of life, and gave post-war fiction a new and enduring figure to laugh and laugh at. (5)

Thus Amis has quite justifiably been described as the finest English comic novelist of the second half of the twentieth century. But underneath the mocking, irreverent view of social pretension, cultural snobbery and authoritarianism of middle class intellectuals who dominated the university premises, there lies another most significant and serious strand of the novel which remains, to some extent, unexplored. The ensuing discussion proposes to unravel the elements of stereotypicality through which Amis depicts each and every female character in *Lucky Jim*, a presentation which projects women either as ‘madonna’ or as a ‘whore’
and refuses to allow them any space for independent psychological development.

The title-phrase of Coventry Patmore’s highly discussed poem “The Angel in the House”, was traditionally accepted as the yardstick for judging women in the Victorian society. A woman who perfectly embodies the role of both the selfless mother and the submissive wife, the one who has become habituated with the socially appreciated ‘ideal’ of docile womanhood, is generally worshipped as the ‘angel’ by the male ideology. Thus the clichéd norms of femininity conceive of a woman as pretty, meek, gentle, calm; in other words, made for home, for fireside, peace and happiness. Any woman, who tends to undermine this gender role defined by the patriarchal order, is termed as evil, aggressive, haughty and even ‘demon’. Such a classification of women made by the society, unmasks the prevalent trend of treating women like objects that exist without consideration of own perspectives, feeling or opinions. This subjugated status of the female persona has been very convincingly captured in the literary creations of the contemporary writers as well. In short, scope for the thriving of individuality has been offered to women neither in the social periphery nor even in literature.

However, with the advent of feminist movement in the twentieth century, women made a strong assault on the conventional perceptions of the patriarchal culture and also asserted a protest against the sexist domination of society. The area of their demand was chiefly material liberty and also a need for mature psychic space in literature. Virginia Woolf, “the founding mother of the contemporary debate”, in her one of the most significant contributions, A Room of One’s Own (1929), concerned herself with women’s material disadvantages compared to men and the historical and social context of women’s literary productions. Following Woolf, came another noteworthy French feminist, Simon de Beauvoir whose hugely influential book, The Second Sex (1949), was clearly pre occupied with the vast difference between the interests of the two sexes and also made an assault on men’s biological and physiological, as well as, economic, discrimination against women. Thus in a way, the ultimate aim of the contemporary feminists was, to a large extent, directed against the manners in which gender was represented in literature. But very subtly, they felt coerced by a male dominated critical school which sanctified the male author as an impregnable authority. The ploy of patriarchy to construct the woman merely as commodified flesh, was evident in the works of D.H.Lawrence, John Osborne, James Joyce, sometimes at the subconscious of their texts. Kingsley Amis was also not at all an exception in this context.

In Lucky Jim, Amis clearly develops the character of Jim as a figure of fun, whose career is a chapter of accident and disasters. He is nevertheless the focal male hero. Events and other characters are consistently seen from his jaundiced viewpoint. The reader is invited to be amused by and also to identify with Jim’s picaresque
adventures. But the point of view from which Jim analyses the women in his life, compels us to consider him as the voice of the typical patriarchal authority who demeans woman in varied ways. Moreover, Amis’s characterization of women in his novel also inevitably involves the use of sophisticated stereotypes. The character of Christine, admittedly, rarely rises above her archetype, the blonde, beautiful, virginal, the embodiment of all the angelic qualities yet voluptuous object of male desire. On the other hand is the dark, skinny, neurotic Margaret, the evil spirit who is much more interesting because of her complex relationship with Jim. This representation of the two major female characters is undoubtedly done from an archetypical male perspective which forcefully situates the readers in the imaginative position of the patriarchy.

The entire text of *Lucky Jim* is strewn with several instances which very vividly defines the valorization of masculinity and the concomitant depreciation of the feminine features. For instance, throughout the novel, the focal male hero, Jim perceives all the women merely in terms of their external appearances. The first time when Jim encounters Christine Callaghan in Professor Welch’s residence, in Chapter 4, we get a specific male stance as Dixon anatomizes the lady purely as a ‘body’:

Dixon had noticed all he needed to notice about this girl: the combination of fair hair, straight and cut short, with brown eyes and no lipstick, the strict set of the mouth and the square shoulders, the large breasts and the narrow waist, the pre-meditated simplicity of the wine-coloured corduroy skirt and the unornamented white linen blouse. (39)

On the other hand, for Jim, Margaret, the senior colleague-lecturer, appears to be nothing more than a lady who is “small, thin and bespectacled with bright make up” (18). In the first chapter, when Jim fantasizes about his forthcoming meeting with Margaret, the only thing that goes through his mind, is her outer shell:

What would she be wearing this evening? He could just about bring himself to praise anything but the green Paisley frock in combination with the low-heeled quasi-velvet shoes. (11)

Again, although Jim inwardly desires the company of Margaret, he at the same time, also speculates that, “It was a pity she was not a bit better looking” (37). Further in Chapter 1, the protagonist himself refers to his relationship with Margaret as the “Margaret business” and considers interacting with girls as the “awful business”, thereby passively denoting the triviality of his bonding with the lady and also his tendency to commodify feminine gender in general. Moreover, even while meeting Margaret at the bar of the Oak Lounge, for the first time after her attempted suicide, Jim considers himself ‘lucky’ as “so much of the emotional business of the evening had been transacted without involving him directly” (21). In spite of being attached to the realm of academia,
Jim never, for a moment, hesitates to utter something entirely unexpected from a person of his social stature:

I’ll stick up for you and I’ll chat to you and I’ll sympathize, but I’ve had enough of being forced into a false position. Get it into your head that I’ve quite lost whatever interest I may have had in you as a woman, as someone to make love to, or go to bed with. (158)

Such a conventional patriarchal point of view is evident not only in the character of Jim Dixon, but the senior Professor Ned Welch even harbours almost a similar sort of perception when he discusses Margaret’s health with Jim and comments that, “It’s her mind that’s suffering now, you see, not her body; physically she is absolutely fit again” (9). Such an assertion undeniably marks some amount of satire at the psychological fragility, traditionally associated with feminine gender. Again, Margaret’s attempted suicide initially suggested the lack of firmness and self-confidence in the character of the lady. But when the same attempt turns out to be fake, it becomes an expression of shrewdness to the patriarchal eyes. Further, it has been repeatedly pointed out that in spite of being well-settled in career, Margaret “rarely volunteered to stand” Jim a drink, for which the latter expresses his disgust secretively. Moreover, the female characters themselves fittingly contribute to the ploy of patriarchy that tend to define women chiefly in terms of their physic as is evinced by Margaret’s sardonic comment in Chapter 4, regarding the appearance of Christine:

Pretty girl, that Christine Whatshername. . . Wonderful figure she’s got, hasn’t she? . . . Not often you get a figure as good as that with a good-looking face. . . Pity she’s so refined, though. . . I don’t like women of that age who try to act the gracious lady. Bit of a prig, too. (44)

Further, while discussing her mental status with Dixon after her attempted suicide, Margaret refers to Professor Welch’s wife as “old Mother Welch” in a profoundly satiric tone, in spite of being well-aware of the fact that Mrs Welch is the one who has given her shelter in her period of crisis:

Do you know, old Mother Welch had people from the village who’d never even heard of me before, dropping in to ask how I was. It was really incredible. You know, James, they couldn’t have been kinder, but I’ll be awfully glad to get out of that place. (22)

Again, all through the novel, Jim notices Margaret’s gestures as typical of a seductress:

She leaned sideways on her bar-stool in laughter, her hands clasped round one knee, the quasi-velvet shoe falling away from her heel. . . She shook her head, still laughing quietly, and pulled her cardigan up over the shoulders of the green Paisley frock. (19)

This irrevocably bears a suggestion of Margaret’s purposeful subversion of the traditional ‘angelic’ decorum attributed to a woman. On the other hand, Jim, the one for whom women are no more than sheer flesh, is also
no less in the game of seduction. While being with Margaret in the bar, in Chapter 2, Jim was constantly “securing the barmaid’s attention”, “who was large and very dark with a narrow upper lip and rather close-set eyes” (25). He does not even hesitate to misuse the status of a lecturer and tries his best to capture for his special subject “the three prettiest girls in the class” (28).

The plot of Lucky Jim further unexpectedly shows Jim starting a relationship with “Bertrand’s blonde and busty Callaghan piece”, Christine and deciding to drop the dowdy Margaret. Quite obviously, Margaret’s reaction to this news is hysterical and the description of the fit of hysterics is pitilessly externalized and noticeably protracted:

She was making a curious noise, a steady, repeated, low-pitched moan that sounded as if it came from the pit of her stomach, as if she’d been sick over and over again and still wanted to be sick. (159)

Raman Selden, in Practising Theory and Reading Literature, implies that such a presentation seems to evoke an irretrievable suggestion;-

The last thing Amis wants the reader to do is to sympathise with Margaret. He even implies that she is indulging in hysteria knowingly: ‘When she felt that she was sitting on the bed next to him, she threw herself forward so that her face was on his thigh’. (144)

Further from a feminist standpoint, we can see that Jim, in such a circumstance, shows an attitude which conceives women as mysterious creatures who are difficult to interpret. The physicality of the description of Margaret’s hysteria has a further significance. As Mary Ellman notes in Thinking about Women, in gender stereotypes there is “a repeated association of women with nature and of men with art”, and thus the fit of hysteria has been customarily attributed to women without any question. It has been further alleged that even a novel, as sophisticated as Amis’s, relies on primitive desires and fantasies and feeds upon harsh female stereotypes in order to induce comedy and laughter. In Practising Theory and Reading Literature, Raman Selden commented;-

The novel (consciously or unconsciously) builds its comedy upon the stereotyping of women as the unknown, all too familiar ‘other’ (that which is defined only in terms of its difference from the male). (145)

That is why, along with the two key women characters, the other minor female figures in Amis’s novel are also treated not as subjective personalities, but as dependent immature objects. For instance, the character of Celia Welch, the wife of Professor Ned Welch, who claims herself to be the driving force behind her husband’s social ambition, can hardly rise above the role of an emblematic pretentious hypocritical snob. Her only participation in the novel is to make ostentatious declarations depending on the social position of her husband. On the other hand is the
character of Carol Goldsmith, a lady in her forties and the wife of Cecil Goldsmith, a senior lecturer in the History department of Dixon's college. Carol is shown to be involved in an adulterous relationship with Professor Welch's eldest son, Bertrand. She also seems to be an ally of Dixon and provokes him to get into an amorous rapport with Christine who is presently engaged to her lover. The amount of conspiracy Carol exposes through this gesture and the awe she creates in Dixon because of “her mature air” (45), thwarts her from attaining the status of a fully developed feminine persona.

Even the angelic Christine, the epitome of all the rational virtues, has not been able to escape the misogynist attitude of the novelist coupled with his aversion for effeminacy. At the end of the text, Christine’s gesture of clinging to Jim’s arm suggests that she is a parasitic female who always requires a supportive shoulder. She has been relieved of Bertrand, only to fall in the hands of Jim. Her master has changed, not her situation. Moreover, whereas Amis considers a man to be ‘lucky’ because of his upper class origin or upward social mobility, for him, a woman can be ‘lucky’ only if she enjoys the privilege of having good looks. Hence Amis’s comment, “Christine was lucky to look so nice”. Jim’s unexpected escape from the provincial academia at the end of the novel, his winning of the girl of his liking, and also the achievement of a well-paid job in the place of his dreams, London, in short, the hero’s journey from ill-luck to good fortune, leads some of the critics to notice a fairy-tale structure buried deep in the plot of *Lucky Jim*, in which Jim is the Frog-prince, Christine, the charming princess, Gore-Urqhart, the fairy godmother, and Margaret, the destructive witch. But if such an explanation is analysed from the feminist point of view, it undoubtedly bears a humiliating suggestion which equates femininity with submission, encouraging women to wait patiently to be rescued by a man. This is exactly the attitude of every popular apparently innocent fairy-tale, like “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs”, “Sleeping Beauty”, and of course, “Cinderella”, where the debilitating effects of patriarchal gender roles on women are unabashedly unmasked.

In his review of *Lucky Jim* in *Practising Theory and Reading Literature*, Raman Selden assertively commented;- The female characters are always the objects of male gaze and only that. Both Margaret and Christine are in this sense ‘sex objects’. They exist as characters only as the focus of male attention. Margaret’s failure in this role is her central characteristic: “Margaret was talking again, animatedly her face was a little flushed and her lipstick had been more carefully applied than usual. She looked as if she was enjoying herself; her sort of minimal prettiness was in evidence”. (145) The harshness of a male gaze is evident here. A little later, Amis’s shocking assertion, “Christine was still nicer and prettier than Margaret”, very fittingly attests to the above mentioned claim. According to David
Lodge, quite obviously, such a contrast drawn between the two women is ‘sexist’. But very interestingly, any comedy, or even irrational aberrant action at Jim’s expense and also by the other less significant male characters, is more than counter-balanced and substantiated by the essentially male orientation of the entire narrative, whereas even the most sensible action on the part of the women is relegated to the sphere of absurdity by Amis. Thus although the novelist makes an intriguing effort to bring the so-called marginalized working class section to the fore by giving a picture of the expedition of Jim, he forgets, in this venture, the reality that by taking side of one otherised segment of the society, another peripheral section, the woman, are unequivocally subjugated.

However, in an attempt to justify Amis in his attitude towards women, David Lodge, in the Introduction to the Penguin edition of Lucky Jim, commented that such sort of sexist outlook can be visualized in “most fiction written by men in the 1950s, or indeed at any other time, judged by 1990s standard of what is politically correct” (16). For instance, Scobie, the hero of Graham Greene’s The Heart of the Matter (1948), the tragedy of which Lucky Jim is a comic aversion, has many things in common with Jim Dixon. Even Greene’s staging of Scobie's shrewish wife is very much similar to Amis’s portrayal of the hysterical, deceitful Margaret. Moreover, Amis was, by his own admission, and as revealed by his biographers, a serial adulterer for much of his life and his perception of women has been frankly divulged in many of his other literary creations. For example, in One Fat Englishman, Roger Micheldene, thoroughly under the grip of the three deadly sins—gluttony, sloth and lust, seems to be drawn by a need to receive constant attention and love from women, although he entirely discounts their thoughts and general stature. Stanley and the Women (1984), the most venomous of Amis’s novels, created a great controversy over its alleged misogyny. The novel’s main premise is that, with perhaps a few exceptions, women are insane, a theory proven by Colling’s irrational responses, Nowell’s neurotic misreading of the past and Susan’s egocentrism. In That Uncertain Feeling also, a provincial librarian’s temptation towards adultery and women is shown to be almost akin to that of Dixon. Same was the presentation of women in Amis’s other works, such as Difficulties with Girls (1988) where one of Amis’s male characters reveals his conception of women by commenting, “They’re different from us. More like children.” Even his last unpublished poem that begins with “Women and queers and children / Cry when things go wrong…”, marks the lack of respect for women that looms large behind Amis’s psyche.

Thus the central issue of ‘female space’ in Lucky Jim can be resolved, to a degree, by emphasizing that Amis is a male chauvinist, and, therefore, so is Jim and herein lies the validation of the novel being claimed almost autobiographical. Although Amis himself once mentioned in one of his memoirs that there has always been a naïve tendency on the
part of his readers to apply the activities of his characters to himself, the
fact that the path of Jim’s life, to a large extent, follows the trajectory of
Amis’s, cannot be denied altogether. For example, according to Philip
Gardner, both Jim Dixon and Amis come from lower-middle-class
backgrounds, and Amis, like Dixon, also taught once at a Welsh
university. Thus Jim's different attractions, to Margaret Peel on the one
hand, and to Christine Callaghan on the other, may have some affinities
with Amis. In an interview, Amis once made a scathing remark on the
‘posh’ attitude of his second wife Elizabeth Jane Howard which most
possibly bears a very subtle hint at the artificiality of Margaret in Lucky
Jim. On the other hand, the good feature in all of Amis’s ‘good women’
characters reminds the readers of his first wife, Hilary (Hilly), and
undoubtedly so does Christine Callaghan. Moreover, in a journal, entitled,
“If Lucky Jim Could See Him Now”, Michael Barber quoted Amis’s
significant comment, “Women are hell. In lots of ways. A lot of them. A
lot of the time” (509). This sort of utterance irrefutably hints at Amis’s
disgraceful approach towards women in real life, and, therefore, it appears
fairly defensible to conclude that being an autobiographical replica of the
author himself, Jim Dixon, in spite of being an ‘academician’ of the post
1950s era, was also pretty reasonable in his treatment of the women
constituting his life.

Works Cited: