

Rebel as Social Climber' with Special Reference to John Braine's Room at the Top

Abstract

Right from the beginning of its socio-political history, Britain, like any other nation – state, has been dogged by class differences and prejudices. These differences were aggravated by the Nineteenth Century Industrial Revolution. The British society was divided into four major groups – the working class, the middle class, the upper –middle class and upper class. The disruptions of war had not been without effect on class and relationships between classes. Anger and disillusion were stalking the land. In 1956, The major parts of Europe were in a state of turmoil. There were many reasons behind the anger of young ones. There was a mushroom growth of provincial universities which imparted education to the working class youth that resulted in white collar unemployment.

By the second half of the decade, the sound of protest grew very hard. In 1957 came John Braine's novel *Room At The Top*, set in the post war era but cynical about the professed ideals of the then Labour Government. 'The Top' was to be achieved not through socialism, but by individual self – advancement. Joe Lampton, the protagonist of *Room At The Top*, does not defeat the upper class but joins them. There is no revolution sponsored by him but only personal success won by good looks. So the anger does not seem genuine but only a drama to attain his ends. In fact, he is one of those who show their anger and revolt by gatecrashing into the same class they hate most.

Keywords: Socio-Political, Resulted, Disillusion, Sponsored

Introduction

John Braine who was born in Bradford in 1922, spent much of his young life at Thackley, a village technically part of Bradford but in spirit independent of it, and went to St. Bede's Grammar School, Bradford after various dead end jobs he became a library assistant at Bingley, a small town near Bradford, and followed this career with an interval of war service in the Royal Navy at Morpeth, Newbiggen-by-the sea, and Darton near Bransley, until the success of *Room At The Top* (1957) enabled him to devote his whole time to writing. In 1951 he spent some time in London in the vain hope of making a living by freelance writing contributing mainly to the *New Statesman*. His verse play, 'The Desert in the Mirror', was produced at this time but without success. His second novel 'The Vodi' was published in 1959, and 'Life At The Top', a sequel to 'Room At The Top', in 1962. He wrote some other novels also, 'The Jealous God' (1964), 'The Crying Game' (1968) and 'Stay With Me Till Morning' (1970).

Though his other novels didn't enjoy much celebrity, 'Room at the Top' and 'Life At the Top' are the defining works of his oeuvre. In these novels he very well expresses the pulse of the young generation in the 1950's. How they revolt against the class prejudices and how far they can go to get their ambitions fulfilled? In fact, they are those who show their anger and revolt by 'gate crashing' into the same class they hate most. Actually by doing this they hit hard on the face of those who treat them as oddities in society. They always want to reach the Top but the question is are they happy after getting there. In fact, they are successful in finding The Room At The Top by Loosing the earth beneath. The same is the case with Braine's protagonist Joe Lampton in 'Room At The Top', he is bitterly conscious of his class, his humble breeding that makes him angry. He was born at Dufton and his career graph shows him as a junior clerk, Treasury's Department, Dufton; U.D.C., (1937); Sergeant Observer, (1940) 1943-1945; stalag 1000, Bavaria. He leaves Dufton and comes to Warley with high expectations. When he comes he is not spoiled by sex, money or power. But soon he becomes a part of the urban racket. He also becomes a virtual Zombie, a person made of steel, a dead person. He marries a

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grade two woman achieves what he wants but after getting this height he realizes that he has sold his independence to get an elusive success. He gets all his ambitions fulfilled at the cost of his real self, his real happiness, his true love and his sentiments and feelings and whatever peace of mind he had. At the end he feels nostalgia for old days, riches have not made him happy. He recalls his past that haunts him like a ghost every minute.

He arranges his lodgings at Mrs. Thompson and while going to her's. He feels a thrill that he is going to 'T' top . He feels that he can breathe a fresh and clean air there. He is going into a world that even from frist brief glimpses fills him with excitement; " big houses with drives and orchards and manicured hedges.....expensive cars-Bentleys, lagondas parked every where in a kind of ostantatious litter as if the district had dropped them at random as evidences of its wealth.....", (10) those are all symbols of top and Joe feels enchanted by everything. He is continuously comparing Warley with Dufton. In Warley Cyprus Avenue is broad, straight, and lined with cypresses while in Dufton the street Oak Crescent doesn't curve one inch and there is not even a bush along it, "Cyprus Avenue became at that instant a symbol of Warley it is as if all my life I'd been eating the sawdust and thinking it was bread" (10) When Mr. Thompson shows him his room he feels its atmosphere as "if a ready made suit fitted perfectly"(12) Everything strucks him too hard. The pictures belonging to the 'Medici reproduction' indicate a pattern of gracious living, Still he doesn't want to show his thrill; after all, he has not being living in the slums, Joe feels that he is also going to be a part of high-class-society. When Joe unfolds his dressing gown, remembers Aunt Emily saying – "I'd sooner see someone naked Working people look daft in dressing gowns " (13) Joe has chosen this way of life himself.

It is true he is never contented with what he has. He always longs to get what is out of his reach . Somehow the other factors are more responsible for his unnatural behaviour and frustation. The poor working conditions agitate the young very much. They are treated as dirt, they have no right to be clean "At the time the houses in Oak Crescent were built it was not considered that the working – classes needed a bath." (14) The rich fail to Understand that – "Soap and water cheap enough.....A person doesn't have to be rich to be clean". (14) He feels guilty also about leaving Dufton, because the monthly eight pounds which he gave his Aunt had been a great help to her . "But he couldn't stay in her world any longer."

Infact Joe is a bundle of contradictions. At the next moment he starts feeling lonely – " I had a childish longing for the ugly rooms and streets where to be hungry or lost wasn't possible; for the familiar faces which might bore or irritate but never hurt or betray."(15) But as for as money is concerned he starts calculating the worth of everthing in his mind . When he is asked by Mr. Thompson what kind of a place Dufton is, he recalls it with disgust. Infact, it was a small factory town full of dirt not having even a theatre. It was always 'Dead Dufton' as Charles and he himself used to call it. Charles was his best friend

with whome he could share everything. They used to call the rich 'Zombies' who vainly pretend to be alive. Mrs. Thompson reminds him of Charles again who always thought highly of him . It was he who suggested him to leave Dufton – "there's nothing in Dufton, Joe, Leave it before you become a Zombie too.....when you go to Warley, Joe, there'll be no more Zombies. Remember that No more Zombies."

When Mrs. Thompson leaves, he fixes his eyes at a large framed photograph of a young man in R.A.F. uniform. He is Smiling with his eyes. He is good looking and charming, a quality which dosen't often come through in photographs. Charm works as a very important factor in building of one's career, only if one learns how to use it. Joe also wishes to use his charm as a ladder – " The possession of charm wasn't in itself a guarantee of success but it seemed to follow ambition like a pilot fish."(18) He feels angry why he has not been given from birth the necessary background for charm. "It's astounding how often golden hearts and silver spoon in the mouth go together." The photograph of Maurice reminds him of someone he knew Infact , it is none other than he himself.

He feels surprised that Mrs. Thompson has so prominently displayed the picture of her dead son. Then he remembers Charles saying – " Zombies always pass away..... and they 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, that's why....." Mrs. Thompson is not a Zombie, she'd be able to look at her dead son without hysteria. When he reaches the town hall, he feels it like Dufton's. He feels disgusted. He goes to the Snow Park, stand between the river Marton and Warley Forest. He compares it with that of Dufton. The water of Marton is so clear that he could distinguish the colour of the stones on its bed while the water of langdon is as sluggish as pus. He feels they envy that the children here would grow up beside a river where could swim and boat and fish. On the contrary – " The langdon at Dufton could and frequently did drown people; and that was the only characteristic of a river which it possessed"

When the Wind turns cold and he begins to shiver he goes to Sylvia's cafe for a cup of tea. Joe realizes as if some barrier has been removed. He feels as if he is jerking in the zone of unreality. When he is sitting at the centre of the window. He is able to see all the streets. Then something happens which changes his whole life. He is shown the way quite different from the one he had in mind for himselfe at that time. He sees a rich man's toy. An Aston Martin Tourer having the tough, functional smartness of the good British sports car, a beautiful piece of engineering. As he is admiring it a young man and a girl come out of the solicitors' Office. Joe feels so envious of that young man. Naturally he belongs to a class for above his. It makes Joe angry. He admits to himself – "The girl.....was as far as beyond my reach as the car. But her ownership, too, was simply a question of money....."(28) Joe starts hating that young man who didn't know the word struggle – struggle for existence. The suit in which he always fancied himself so much, his best suit would seem

cheap and nasty to him. "He wouldn't have a best suit; all his clothes would be the best."(Pg29) In comparison to him, Joe is just a Town Hall Clerk, the subordinate pen-pusher, half way to being a zombie. Joe tastes the sourness of envy. The ambitions that were lying buried within his heart now begin to rise. Nothing can abate the fierceness of his longing – "I wanted an Aston Martin, I wanted a three guinea linen shirt, I wanted a girl with a Riviera suntan – these were my rights, I felt, a signed and sealed legacy." Joe has decided what he has to do. He has chosen his course of life. He has decided to enjoy all the luxuries which that young man enjoys. Joe wants to be a hero by every means fair or foul and there is no one to stop him. Joe knows that the material objects of his envy are attainable but does not know how at that time.

Joe joins the Theatre. It is more like a night club. Joe Finds the sensation of being in the know, of being close to a "wicked, exciting, above all, wealthy world," (31). Grief overpowers him when he recalls Dufton where the three quarters of working population was unemployed in 1930 that resulted in hunger, poverty and diseases; where "The streets full of men with faces pasty from bread and margarine and sleeping till noon and their children who wore plimsolls in the depth of winter. And the river thick and yellow as pus – the final insultThe slump didn't only make Dufton miserable and broken - spirited whilst it lasted, though; even when full employment come there was still atmosphere of poverty and insecurity, a horde of nasty snivelling fears left in the town like bastards in the wake of an invading army,"(34) Joe very well highlights the post war conditions. The politicians failed to do any thing good as the young ones were hoping. No political party was free of vices. Joe wants to be relieved from the memories of Dufton, Dead Dufton. Now a turning point comes in his life when he first watches Susan through Act I. The Very fact that impresses Joe is – "She might have been the sister of the girl I'd seen outside Sylvia's Cafe'."(36) Joe has got the girl, he is searching for, the grade two woman. Charles and Joe always used to calculate the income of a husband. They have not enough money to attract a grade one or two or three woman. But Joe has a chance after all he is equally as lovable and a damned sight more handsome than the Glittering Zombie, a young man with a shiny red face and a gold Rolex Oyster, gold signet ring, gold cigarette lighter case; but, not having a father who is a bookmaker. The fact is that he inherited this property by birth, he does not have to care for his livelihood and he might automatically attract a Grade Three That's the only difference between him and Joe Lampton. Joe pretends that he has fallen in love with Susan but only God knows the reality was Quite different Infact, Joe feels Jealous of Susan. Joe comes to know through Eva that Susan has got tied up with Jack Wales. "Bages of money, about seven foot tall and a beautiful R.A.F. mousache."(39) He meets Jack wales and suffers from inferiority complex. Infact, Joe is exploiting his looks to get what he wants, he gives Susan his best smile, which he has had to practise a great deal because of his teeth. He is aware of the fact that his teeth are not as white as his rival's. He also feels

anger as he is not able to travel into warmth and luxury and gaiety. Joe admits shamelessly that he always go straight for what he wants.

Joe realizes that he is also becoming the part of a class. He has begun to mix with of a kind he has never mixed with before. Thespian, more than a night club, is too exclusive, symbol of class – snobbery Though there is nothing to stop working class people joining it, they somehow never do. At Thespian he meets Alice, a powerful actress of whom every woman feels jealous and who is the first desire of any man. Joe feels immediate longing for Alice but He suppresses it . Joe notices every boy present there all of them inherited a large sum of money by birth – "They all had more money than meit was all too easy to reach their grade, so consequently I didn't respect them very much." (49) When Joe goes home and lies down on the bed, he is lost in the dreams and gets shocked that he is "calling out not Susan's name but Alice's(55) Joe feels envious of Jack Wales as he is able to join Cambridge; "I had a mental picture of port wine, boating leisurely discussions over long table gleaming with silver and cut glass. And over it all the atmosphere of power, power speaking impeccable Standard English, power which was power because it was born of the right family, always knew the right people; if you were going to run the country you couldn't do without a University education"(56) How can a middle class person join these universities when he has no money and where there is money, there is power naturally. A middle class or a working class boy can't get admitted in a university only to learn how to think, to think generally. In the words of Cedric – "All that's necessary is that Jack meet the right people and learn how to get on with them. Blinding with science – isn't that the phrase?"(56) Joe mutters to himself childishly, "I'll pinch your woman, Wales, and all your money won't stop me."

Here Joe just proves to be social climber who is clever enough to use love and marriage as a ladder. Joe phones Susan and fixes a meeting on Saturday night for the ballet. Joe's intentions are very clear, he pretends to love Susan and wants to marry her as she belongs to the right income group and has a lot of money . He thinks of her like a princess who is beautiful, lives in a golden palace, wears fine clothes and rich jewels and eats chicken and cakes . She is grade two with whom he might marry and live happily ever after. There is a big class difference between Joe and Susan and Joe thinks the rich his enemies yet it's a great irony that a person who hates so much a particular class always tries to get included in it. Joe doesn't lag behind to use the name of his dead mother in boasting the emotional atmosphere. For his wicked ends he wants to come closer to Susan. He is just spreading the charm of words very cleverly. He feels happy only in the company of Alice after Charles in reality. Before them he has not to pretend or remain in disguise. They knew very well his inner most feelings, his real – self. He feels protected in her company as she can never astray him and understand him very well. He is able to talk away all his accumulated anger and humiliation only to Charles and Alice. He confesses to himself – "I was the devil of a fellow, I was the lover of a married woman, I was

taking out the daughter of one of the richest men in Warley, there wasn't a damn thing I Couldn't do. Say what you like of me when I was younger; but certainly was not blas'e".

Joe decides to celebrate Christmas at Dufton; where Christmas always seems a bit ashamed of itself; as if it knows that it is wicked waste of good money. Infact, " Dufton and Gaiety weren't on speaking terms." Joe has just started to hate his own class. He doesn't want to go those pubs where " you were likely to see the overalled and sweaty"(Pg85) in their best rooms. He goes with Charles to Siege Gun, the only place in Dufton where one might find any of the town's upper crust. But he feels quite depressed " it was to small, too digmy, too working class." On the way to the Siege Gun he goes past his old home. He remembers everything how there had been the usual group of spectators with the usual expression of futile excitement, voyeurs of distasters. Everything was cleared out in that bombard. His father and Mother didn't take any notice of the siren as Dufton Simply wasn't worth the trouble of raiding. Outwordly everybody was kind and sympathetic to him but he found no compensation. He just hated the sluggish wind that was a killer only of the poor and the weak. He remembers his father, a good workman; too good a workman to be sacked and outspoken about his labour covictions to be promoted. He was so proud of himself. He used to think if he has joined the common club, he would be riding to work in his own car. But it was only day – dream. His mother always used to say that his father would starve before he'd sell himself for a handful of silver. Like Joe his father was never willing to exploit his look to get what he wanted. Joe thinks that he would better escape into a world like Warley without memories. Dufton seems to him Dead, Dirty, Dreary and Despicable.

Alice and Joe deeply love each- other Joe is pulled in two opposite directions. He breaks his relationship with Alice when he comes to know about he photograph in the nude. Joe starts drinking. Alice calls him a hypocritical swine who likes only little bit of fun and who is clever enough where to draw a line. Joe is very angry though he knows that his anger is "savage, useless, sick," he is more destructive rather than constructive. His anger is futile. He himself confesses that some of his standards are still Dufton Standards. He feels himself near the verge of insanity. Now there is a transparent barrier between him and strong emotions. He only feels what is correct for him to feel. He is not unhappy or afraid of death, but he is not alive in the way that he was that evening he quarelled with Alice. He is not satisfied even after getting almost everything he wanted as he has also become a "successful Zombie". He is unable to live among the people around him, to be affected strongly by all that happens to him, can't feel more and take more strain. He says, "I'm like a brandnew Caddillac in a poor industrial area, insulated by steal and glass and air-conditioning from the people outside, from the rain and the cold and the shivering ailing bodies."(Pg 124) Outwordly he professes that he is extra-ordinary not like common-people having some weaknesses and foolishness but inwardly he wishes to be. "I don't wish to be like the people outside,----- to let in rain and the smell of defeat . But I sometimes wish

that I wished it."(124) Joe is his own draughtsman. Everything that happen to him is exactly what he wills to happens he compares his emotions to steel. It just symbolizes the death of his emotions. His basic feelings have become angular and heavy just like the steel. Though he had his chance to be real person. Alice always used to tell him, "You're always in contact..... You're there as a person, you are warm and human. It's as though everyone else were wearing rubber gloves. She could not say that now,"

When Joe gets an invitation of a birthday party from Sally Carstrains, who belongs to a very rich family and who lives right on the top of Warley Moors, he feels as if two different worlds are meeting. He uses Susan as ladder. She smiles at him with full heart without reservation and pretence. "..... I'd have been able to stangle the shabby little sense of triumph that was being worn inside me"(131) the fact is that he is taking Susan not as Susan, But as a grade A lovely, as the daughter of a factory owner, as the means of obtaining the key to the Aladdin's cave of his ambitions; and she thinks him a perfect lover He loves her a " hundred thousand pounds' worth" Joe is very happy as good fortune seems to be following him like a huge affectionate dog. Joe is bitterly conscious of his class he feels defeated by the existence of John Alexander Wales who had escaped from camp '2001' in 1942. In comparison to Joe he enjoys a higher position in society while Joe remains merely a Sergeant Observer from start to finish. Joe is angry with this so called- high society where only money counts not merit or talent. Joe who didn't try to escape and completed his studies under the prison – camp conditions has no decoration . He doesn't want to demean himself by marrying a mill hand or shop-girl but he realizes when he is with Alice, he never feels lonely. He starts living with Alice as Husband and Wife. But he doesn't break his realationship with Susan also. Susan father Brown calls Joe and gives consent to their marriage as Susan's is pregnant, He advises him to leave the Town Hall at once and leave Alice too. Joe says that he has already left Alice. Now Joe has got everything he wanted the luxuries of good fortune, he has arrived. He has also been included in the higher grades. "There was a handshake, there was talk of a contract, there was tolerance- I have been young and daft myself – There was praise - You'r the sort of young man we want. There is always room at the top – there was sternness – See her tomorrow and get it done with , I'll not have it put off anymore all that I could say, again and again and again,was the equivalent of those two syllables of shocked incredulity"

Joe next goes to Alice and can't bring himself to look at her while telling her that their relationship is over. Alice is surprised how quickly he has changed. Alice is in hospital. She is very ill and Joe just wants to escape from the stuffy room with it's smell of scent and ill – health. The next day Joe is ecstatic. Now he would be able to lead a life of luxury But all is spoiled by the information that Alice was dead in a road accident and there was blood all over the road. Joe knows what had happened to her. She was so sentimental that she couldn't bear what Joe said to

her. She must have driven like a maniac. Joe is badly hurt. Infact, with Alice Joe is also dead, it is somebody else in his skin. He starts to hate Joe lampton who has murdered Alice. As a gentleman he shows his remorse over her death. Joe starts feeling sick. He finds himself unable to face anybody he knows. He doesn't want Joe Lampton to take possession of him again. "Joe Lampton Export Model Mark IA, warranted free of dust, flaws, cracks, dust or pity;....." He is going to marry the Boss's daughter, he is very clever and virile and handsome, a prince charming from Dufton, every obstacle has been magically cleared from his path. He has reached success by crooked ways.

Questions start to raise their ugly head in his mind. How he would be able to manage all this? Things start beating in his mind. He is entering the same class he hated most. He restlessly wonders here and there. He proves himself a social – climber. He has achieved everthing by murdering his realself – " I was the better – looking corpse ; they wouldn't need to bury me for a long time yet." (224) He never

thinks of launching a movement, he does not try to bring a change in society rather he changes himself and becomes a Zombie, a dead fellow. Joe Lampton buries his remorse in the dreams of future luxury. His social climbing has reached its acme. He uses love and marriage as a ladder to climb up social hierarchy and make room at the top. In the words of Malcolm Bradbury –

"John Braine's Room At The Top (1957) is the story as Joe lampton, who exploits his looks and his body to ensure his personal success and his greedy social ascent in the Yorkshire town of Leddersford and Beyond."

It's very true that he has found the room at the 'T' top by loosing the earth beneath.

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