

Wesker's *Trilogy*: An Autobiographical Study of His Working Class Characters

Dr. Subhash, Assistant Professor, English

Govt. College, Bhattu Kalan, Fatehabad

Mail ID - drsihag187@gmail.com

Abstract:

Some critics—John Elson, Richard Findlater and Walter Allen—tagged Arnold Wesker, Shelagh Delaney and Johan Arden, as the '*kitchen sink dramatists*' because their plays seemed solidly centered on their working-class life. They borrowed this expression from an art movement in the 1950s centered for its realistic depiction of domestic, working-class life. The term is not entirely appropriate to Wesker's plays because the critics could not assess their message and magnitude as they revolve around domesticity and tea, saucers and cigarettes, food and furniture. He is among the few playwrights to have explored the particulars of a Jewish working-class family. He wrote about them especially to call attention to the injustices done to them rather than to give an insider's perspective on this community. The paper analyses how Wesker portrays the lives, struggles, and aspirations of the working class characters, highlighting their social and economic conditions, political consciousness and the challenges they face within a British society marked by class division. His plays deal with human relationships between husband and wife, mother and daughter, father and son, brother and sister, man and woman and servant and master. Wesker shows his preoccupation with the working class people in many of his plays because he was born and brought up in the same class, faced its issues, conflicts and political upheavals.

Keywords: Working, characters, kitchen, domestic, personal, experience, community, struggle

Introduction:

Wesker's *Trilogy* plays—*Chicken Soup with Barley*, *Roots* and *I'm Talking about Jerusalem*-- bear the mark of his private, personal and particular affairs, exploits and experience. These *Trilogy* plays were written before he was thirty and all of them are deep-rooted in the colour of playwright's own life. Wesker has given bona fide flavour in these plays by creating a genuine atmosphere of the same working class people and places where his family used to live. His family lived in Fashion Street, in the East End of London, in an attic flat of two rooms where the kitchen was the landing. Wesker's parents brought Arnold and his sister, Della, first in rented rooms in Fashion Street, Spitalfields, and then in a new council flat in Hackney. Wesker spent his early childhood in "Fashion Street and Flower and Dean Street, where my grandmother and my aunt lived"¹(*Leeming* p.7). During the Second World War, he mostly lived in London. The objective of the paper is to critically analyze and understand the social, economic, and political experiences of Wesker and his working class people, often focusing on their labour conditions, living standards, political participations, and the challenges they face within a broader societal context.

Setting of Wesker's Plays:

The setting of the three plays of *Trilogy* and the different issues which have been discussed between different characters of the plays remind us of the *kitchen sink drama*. The aim of this kind of drama is to present the unpleasant reality of the working class people. Sarah feels uncomfortable in the basement. She says. "Air! I must have air-- this basement will kill me. God knows what I'll do without air when I'm dead" (*Trilogy* p.9).

When Wesker discussed about the setting of his *Chicken Soup* with John Dexter, he advised him to change the room into a basement setting as it is suitable for a working-class atmosphere. Wesker was amazed if it could devise and design an unaffected atmosphere. He was shifty and suspicious about using basement background because his family had lived in a working class attic flat. He thought that the rental houses in Fashion Street did have basement flat also, so he accepted it for the Kahns to live in a

basement. His characters are from working classes, so the basement setting is apt and appropriate for them. In the beginning of Act I, Scene I, Wesker gives detail of the background where the Kahns live:

“The basement of the KAHNS’ house is in the East End of London. The room is warm and lived in. A fire is burning. One door, at the back and left at the room, leads to a bedroom. A window, left, looks up to the street. To the right is another door which leads to a kitchen, which is seen. At rear of stage are the stairs leading into the street”² (Trilogy p. 7)

Their basement is full of vigour with ceaseless hustle and bustle. Their residence and the road resound with the resonance of residents and other passers who have certain sense of communal identity and the contribution that they are making to the steady march of history. The story is set in a basement flat of the East End of London in 1936 and it spans over three decades. We follow Sarah Kahn’s family from the enthusiastic rebellion against the fascist Oswald Mosley’s March in 1936, through the expectations created by the 1945 Labour Victory, to the bleak aftermath of the 1956 Hungarian uprising. Despite the apathy of her husband and the ideological and geographical desertion of her children, Sarah continues to uphold her faith in communism. The character of Sarah in *Chicken Soup* is based on Wesker’s mother. When Wesker’s mother saw the portrayal of Sarah on the stage, she was a little upset because it revealed quarrels with her husband. Wesker explained to his mother that an audience would not believe in a heroine who had no flaws. With the beginning of Act II in 1946, the working class people reserve more respect and reputation. The Kahns change their place; they now move to an L.C.C. block of cheap flats in Hackney. Wesker describes it thus:

“The scene is now changed. The KAHNS have moved to an LCC block of flats in Hackney— the 1930 kind, with railings. The working class is a little more respectable now, they have not long since voted in a Labour Government. The part of the flat we can see is: the front room, from which lead off three rooms; the passage to the front door and a door leading from the passage to the kitchen (off), and part of the balcony with its iron railings” (Trilogy p. 33).

In his autobiography, Wesker describes his new family flat which is similar in setting to the flat described in *Chicken Soup with Barley*: “We had a front door at the end of a landing - which meant neighbours on three sides instead of four—two bedrooms, a front room, a dining room, a separate kitchen, our own lavatory. No separate bathroom, not hot running water, no central heating-just a coal fire-but we had space. Space, space, space!”³ (*Wesker p.174*). This setting remains till the end of the play. Now one can find Sarah and Harry frequently alone. Their previous house was in Fashion Street very close to the place where all the marches and meetings were conducted. Previously, Sarah and her husband used to meet with their friends in their own flat before or after every meeting. There was a constant coming and going of people, something which is rarely found in Act II. Now it is more respectable for Kahn family to live in an apartment rather than in a basement. But on the other hand, their friends ceased to visit them as they are busy with their own business. With the changing of place their habits have changed, they are nearly alone.

The Class Conflicts and Family Issues of the Working Class Village Folks:

Conversation between Sarah and Harry in *Chicken Soup* suggest that he is hardly interested in any type of outside issue. He is more interested in the tasks within home e.g. reading books, smoking cigarette and taking tea. Sarah is annoyed that her husband is not active enough to take part in protest. We come across small skirmishes of the working class people throughout his *Trilogy* plays. Such small scrambles and skirmishes are also the core to Wesker’s other earlier plays. The conversation between various characters in *The Kitchen* and *Chips* suggests that the young people are all planning to perform various jobs which are assigned to each of them.

Wesker’s *Chicken Soup* deals with the class conflicts and family issues of the working class village folks. Sarah, like a working class house wife, is busy preparing tea as usual and discussing and planning about various marches and protests of the Jews against fascists. In the beginning of the play, Harry is trying to throw dust into Sarah’s eyes by telling a lie that he did not stay at his mother’s place and didn’t have a cup of tea at Lottie’s. In the very beginning of the play Sarah is in the kitchen, she is speaking from the kitchen to her husband as she is busy preparing tea. The play opens with a

conversation between Sarah and Harry. They talk about their children, demonstration, books, cigarettes and barricades. Harry feels uneasy while replying to his wife about all these things. Sarah accuses her husband of taking money out of her handbag. She calls her husband a liar: “As if he’s such an angle and never tells lies. What’s the matter, you never told lies before I don’t think?” (*Trilogy* p. 9). The weak-willed husband first tells a lie and then pleads before his wife: “Sarah, will you please stop nagging me, will you? What difference if I had tea there or I didn’t have tea there?” (p. 10). Harry shows white feathers in every family matter. Even when Dave is going to join International Brigade in Spain, Harry says: “Dave don’t go mad all of a sudden. It’s not all glory, you know” (p. 11). When Prince informs Harry that his sister is waving the walking-stick of his mother in the air, he replies: “She’s mad” (p. 11). Harry is as green as grass in taking decision. He lives a life of bit and sup. He likes to live a life far away from sixes and sevens of war and walk. He is a broken man. No one tries to buck him up. All is not well with Harry. Sarah is more aggressive partner and she is reproaching Harry for not improving his ways. He proves weak in public interest as well as in his relationship with his wife and his work. Like Harry, Wesker’s father was “a loveable but weak personality who was more intelligent than his trade of tailor’s machinist which he hated”⁴ (McGrath).

Wesker’s Working Class Characters:

Wesker has frankly acknowledged that many of the working class characters and situations in his plays are taken directly from his life. Glenda Leeming quotes Wesker, “I don’t know what it’s like for other writers, but for me the bits and pieces of myself are in different characters.”⁵ (*Leeming* p.1) In the *Trilogy*, for example, Harry and Sarah Kahn “are—in so far as it is possible—total recreations” of his working class parents, says Roland Hayman in his first interview with Arnold Wesker. About his play *The Old Ones* Wesker says, “I’m full of admiration for all the relatives, aunts and uncles, who are mixed into that play”⁶ (Catherine, Leeming, and Trussler p.11).

Everywhere in *Chicken Soup*, we find remarkable resemblances between the Wesker family and the Kahn family. Both the families have Jewish extraction and working class background. They are illiterate but intellectual and enlightened. So both the families

look alike. The mother and the father of the play have the same life style as of Wesker's own father and mother. Both were devout communist. Like Sarah, Wesker's mother, Leah, is a principal and paramount personality in their house. She is more determined and more practical in her ideas and ideals. She was deeply concerned about good behavior and honour, she felt that those who were not communists were frequently unpleasant people. Joseph, his father, is a bit passive like Harry. He was not much committed to anything, but in argument he was a communist. He found it difficult to stick at any job for long. The Kahns family includes four members with their daughter, Ada and son, Ronnie. He has infused dramatic breath in his own sister, Della, by creating the character of Ada. Ronnie is a good intellectual model of Wesker himself. Wesker explains that his working class characters in his plays are from his own working class family and working class experience:

“And then there's another explanation of my writing plays, which is that they are attempts to continue arguments that I have had with friends and relatives and people that I worked with.... The plays continue human relationships as well as arguments...Sarah Kahn in *Chicken Soup* is a member of the Communist Party, and my mother is a member of the Communist Party. Beatie Bryant in *Roots* is the daughter of farm labourers in Norfolk and my wife is the daughter of farm labourers in Norfolk. Ada and Dave in *Jerusalem*, who went to live and work in the country, can obviously be compared to my own sister and brother-in-law”⁷ (*Marowitz and Trussler* p.79–80). In Wesker view's his first play *Chicken Soup* was no more about Jewishness than it was about the working class. For him it was about the decline of idealism, about disillusionment. It happened to be played out through a Jewish working class family because that was his background, the one through which he experienced the disillusionment.

Expressing the motivational cause behind *Chicken Soup with Barley*, Wesker says that he had quarreled with his mother over politics, raging at her continuing adherence to communism. “I had screamed at her: how could she still remain a communist? The speech in the play is more or less that she replied in life”⁸ (*Wesker* p.213). After completing this play, Wesker read it to his mother; and when he finished, his mother

smiled and said something: “It’s very good, no really, I mean it, it’s a big work, a lot of work, but who is going to be interested in any of it, silly boy? It’s about us, it’s between us. It won’t mean anything to anyone else ...” (*Trilogy* p.XII)

Chicken Soup shows a working–class Jewish family, the Kahn’s of London, and the way political and social events affects their idealism. The communication gap and different life style cultivating different perceptions and attitudes between husband and wife (Harry and Sarah) arising out of a lack of mutual understanding and adjustment makes it difficult for the couple to enjoy conjugal harmony. The main concern of the play is to show the devastating impact of various sociological and psychological factors on human relations. The child–parents relationship in the play shows the impact of industrialist growth and generation gap. Customs and conventions are flouted by the young–generation. In the toeing and froing of modern era a wife frankly calls her husband a liar and children call their parents with bad names.

Wesker’s Meeting with Dusty:

Roots reveals the playwright’s experience along with his girlfriend as a kitchen porter. The play deals with why Wesker went to Norwich and what he did there. He went there to work as kitchen porter for about eighteen months and then returned back to London and met Dusty there. Wesker observes, “Dusty fell in love with me there and I told her she was a fool and that she could expect nothing from me .I’d been turned down by all my girlfriends actually”⁹(Hayman P.6-7). He was confused and confounded because each and every girl that he had smelled rejected him. Wesker left no stone unturned to change Dusty’s mind but she was always sincere and straightforward to her love and found him highly arresting and attractive. Then Wesker worked as a trainee pastry cook in the Hungarian restaurant in Lower Regent Street. He tried to leave Dusty on the ground that there should not be anything more between them. She then went to London and worked there as waitress. In London, Ronnie and Beatie meet in a restaurant, their relationship continued and they lived together:

“From the first day I went to work as waitress in the Dell Hotel and saw him working in the kitchen I fell in love-and I thought it was easy. I thought everything

was easy. I chased him for three months with compliments and presents until I finally give myself to him. He never said he love me nor I didn't care but once he'd taken me he seemed to think he was responsible for me and I told him no different.... And then went back to London and I followed him there.”(Trilogy p. 96- 97)

Wesker designs his own figure on the model of Ronnie. In an interview with Hayman Wesker said: “*Roots* was written after Dusty and I were married, so the fabrication of them not marrying could be seen as an attack on me but it doesn't bear with the truth. I was just using myself”¹⁰ (Hayman p.2). The play centers on the unlettered and tongue-tied characters living in Norfolk village of farm laborers—the Beales and the Bryants. The play displays the visible and invisible presence of the chief characters- Beatie and Ronnie respectively. Through Beatie's mouth we meet Ronnie's views on arts and agriculture, party and party politics, education and enlightenment which loom like dark veil over the heads of her family members.

Wesker's Colloquial Country Dialect:

In an interview with Ewan Jeffrey on Dec.19, 2003, Wesker said: “*Roots* had difficulty being performed abroad because its main impact was the use of Norfolk dialect.”¹¹ *Roots* is widely thought of as one of Wesker's *kitchen sink drama* and is written in the colloquial country dialect of the people on which it focuses. Wesker creates rural life atmosphere by recording the speech of his working class people with immense conviction. His people speak their native language very effectively. The Norfolk dialect is used very effectively and faithfully through the remarkable speeches of Mr. and Mrs. Bryant.

The play tells us how Beatie meets Ronnie in the kitchen of a large restaurant in London and instantly falls in love with him. The village girl begins to live in the company of the refined and metropolis lover who tries to teach her about art, culture and education. Most of the time, Beatie is unable to understand his lecture and so she starts arguing with him. Ronnie then presents before her the image of words as bridges which offers a solution to the problem between them. Wesker reveals that lack of communication in the

working class society makes their problem stagnant and smelly. In the words of Robert Wilcher, “Wesker is preoccupied with the familiar mid-century theme of language and communication”¹² (Wilcher p.41-42)

Lack of communication between Beatie and her other working class family members resulted in an undisputed nature of the contemporary working class society. Beatie comes from a benighted and inexperienced family, so ‘form of expression’ has been a permanent problem for them. The family members are thoughtless about things and discussion. So the household environment is not suitable for sound deliberation and discussion for Beatie. The subject matter of Bryants’ talk is limited to their drunken neighbors, dead relatives, poor old buggers and ‘nasty things’. To widen the limited horizon of her family members, Beatie now sounds like a preacher. When she returns home, she rattles and prattles like Ronnie by aping and imitating him but nobody is interested in her talk: “ ‘Talk,’ he say, ‘and look and listen and think and questions’ (Trilogy p.120). Words never mean anything to Bryant family. But Beatie is now determined to upgrade her family: “I don’t want Ronnie to think, I come from a small minded family ‘I can’t bear mean people’, he say. ‘I don’t care about their education, I don’t care about their past as long as their minds are large and inquisitive, as long as they’re generous” (p.114-115).

Roots is the most faithful play to have appeared about the British working class without sentimentalizing them as noble victims. In his attempt to produce working class literature that would imitate the real life of ordinary people, Wesker has paradoxically been able to produce only a caricature of real life of ordinary people based in all the century-old literary stock situations. Beatie Bryant, the central character, is loosely based on Wesker’s wife, Dusty, who had been a waitress in Norfolk at the time the playwright, first met her. The play presents a complete contrast to the other plays of the *Trilogy* but it does share with them an insistence on remaining within and offering an analysis of a proletarian milieu, though in this play a rural rather than an urban one. It presents a major departure from the established mainstream theatre. Such type of a regional play—pure and simple in outlook—is a scarce thing in the English theatre. Up to 1956 working class actors never used a regional accent in a straight part as it has been

used in this play. Through the personal experience of working class folks Wesker has used a definite accent and intonation of Norfolk people not much difficult to understand. We have a number of words and sentences of Wesker's Norfolk people in his earlier plays. Words like—'thaas' (that), 'whaas'(what), 'bin'(been), 'sin'(seen), 'hev'(have), 'hed'(had), 'ent'(ain't), 'ont'(won't), 'bor'(neighbour), 'on'(of), 'in'(ing), 'yearp'(yes), 'gal'(girl), 'wi'(with), 'em'(them), 'o'(of), 'an'(and), 'gonna'(going to), 'wanna'(want to), 'gimme'(give me), 'cos'(because)—are used in abundant at every page of his plays. The play depicts one section of society completely and faithfully.

Conclusion:

Wesker draws material from his personal experiences of life and is almost autobiographical in his plays. His Trilogy, the nucleus of my study of this paper, – *Roots* (1959), *The Kitchen* (1959), *I'm Talking about Jerusalem* (1960) – is a recreation of his family life. He has beautifully rendered his life experience dramatically in these plays. He suggests education as a beacon for the suffering masses to uplift and aware them. He was a visionary who dreamed of a golden age for the working class people. His Trilogy plays present the realistic representation of working class society. Because of the much importance to household chores, these plays were termed as *kitchen sink drama*. When these plays were performed simultaneously at royal Court Theatre, London, in the summer of 1960, Wesker received universal applaud and it added a feather in the cap of the young dramatist who had not yet attained the thirtieth year of his life.

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