

Periodic Research

Arnold Wesker and the New Wave British Theatre

Abstract

Arnold Wesker belongs to the New Wave of the British theatre of the late 1950s heralded by John Osborne's *Look Back In Anger* performed at the Royal Court theatre on May 8, 1956. This New Wave theatre was the result of dissatisfied, frustrated and angry mood of the young generation in the wake of the Second World War. All the idealized good causes for meaningful action had vanished with the failure of the Spanish Civil War, the Hungarian Revolution and the Suez fiasco. The middle class realistic themes of the well made plays did not satisfy the new generation, and the poetic drama failed to synthesize dialogue and action in the wake of the crisis of the times. The New Wave drama cleared the debris of the artificial comedies, sterile well made plays and vacant pseudo Elizabethan dramas. Mention may be made of John Osborne, Harold Pinter, John Arden and Arnold Wesker, who came out with new themes representing the mood of the youth of the times. While most of the New Wave dramatists were sensational, Arnold Wesker wrote his plays deriving themes from the 'lived experience' of his life and is almost autobiographical and positive in his approach. He is the perfect example of the new working class dramatist. Most of his contemporaries were led by the European influence of Beckett, Sartre, Ionesco and Brecht, Wesker maintains his original stand of being simple and direct. He is the most consistent playwright given to constant experiment in form and technique and defies categorization. His plays can not be straight jacketed into any set formula like Absurd Drama, Comedy of Menace, Theatre of Cruelty and Epic theatre. He is a writer, actor, director, producer—all welded into one. With his immense knowledge of stage-craft, he is unique and is a living prodigy in the British theatre today.

Keyword: Orthodox, Revolution, Autobiography

Introduction

Arnold Wesker belongs to the New Wave of British Theatre of the late 1950s heralded by John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* performed at the Royal Court Theatre on May 8, 1956. The other members of this New Wave are John Osborne, Harold Pinter, John Arden, David Storey, Edward Bond, Bernard Kops, Shelagh Delaney, Robert Bolt, Peter Shaffer, John Mortimer etc. This sudden resurgence of a new generation of the young dramatists has been termed as the Renaissance of the British Drama. John Russell Brown calls this period the New Elizabethan Age and draws parallels with the age of Shakespeare. (Brown, John Russell. 5-7). This is the time when like the Elizabethan Age 'everyone seems to be writing plays'. (Brown, John Russell. 1). Writers of all ages from Owen Wymark, a housewife with four children to Shelagh Delaney, a girl of nineteen years wrote plays.

There are several reasons to this sudden spurt of New Wave British Drama. First, it was a revolt against orthodox middle class realistic drama of writers like N.C.Hunter, J.B. Priestley Ustinov and Rattigan and the poetic drama of T.S. Eliot and Christopher Fry of the times. It was a rejection of versions of theatre reality made habitual by the Middle class drama. The orthodox middle class drama, observes Raymond Williams:

'starts and ends in appearances. It is concerned on the stage a real looking room, a real looking people making real sounding conversations. This is all right as far as it goes, but invariably it is not far. The whole world of inner and normally inarticulate experience, the whole world of social process, which makes history yet is never clearly presented on the surface, are alike exclude. The more real all it looks, the less real it may actually be.' (Williams, Raymond 28)

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Periodic Research

and didn't want to be arrested for going to gay bars.

New Wave Dramatists broke away from these conventions and appearances and used new kinds of dramatic effect for communicating this underlying reality.

Similarly the poetic drama too failed to communicate this underlying reality. The verse drama started as a reaction to the metallic and reiterative prose utterance (Nicholl, A 328) of the realistic drama and offered musical dramatic speech. But in spite of Eliot's and Fry's best efforts it ended in mannered dialogues and failed to touch the inner and normally inarticulate experience of the audience. As long as religious and historical themes were concerned, it could appeal to the audience's taste with its poetic eloquence. But when confronted with the modern themes especially after the Second World War, it fell short off synthesizing dialogue and action with its poetry. It was difficult for a character to order a servant to bring a pack of cigarette and attend the telephone call simultaneously in poetry. Its theatricality was lost. The New Wave drama rejected it and strode upon new themes of common life experience hitherto unexplored. For them the general state of feelings mattered more than any precise social setting.

The major noticeable feature of this New Wave dramatists is that they were all young. Most of them were born around 1930 and had undergone harrowing experience of the political events of their times like the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War and the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 by Russia. The impact of the Second World War was the most damaging one. The war had dealt a crushing blow leading to fractured beliefs and convictions everywhere. It bewildered them and made them disillusioned about their existing values and their faith in Christian God. It created a chaotic situation, nothing left to lean upon. It broke all shibboleth, especially the British class system. They experienced general restlessness, disorganization, and frustration. This structure of feeling or the new wave of feeling compelled them to talk in a new voice.

The year 1956 when the New Wave drama emerged, has a special significance in the British history. By now the British Empire was reduced to its minimum, its economy was in tattered condition and England was termed as the 'sick man of Europe'. (Ford. Boris 54.) The Suez fiasco has a demoralising effect on the psyche of the average English man. The ten years efforts from 1945 to 1955 by the subsequent governments in the reconstruction and rebuilding of the shattered economy of the nation were not up to the mark and many eye brows were lifted to question their efficacy. The young people, especially with working class background having the full benefit of the Education Act of 1944 were restless. The monster of unemployment gazed into their eyes. They blamed their older generation for their ills and questioned almost everything of the establishment. Getting no convincing answer they grew angry. Because of their angry mood, the image of angry young man emerged. This mood gave birth to the New Wave Drama.

Before 1956, the British Theatre was dominated by foreign productions especially those of Beckett, Ionesco, Anouilh, Brecht, Sartre Giradoux etc. The New Wave dramatists were open to this European theatre influence. Its techniques and themes influenced the British young dramatists. For example, Pinter was much influenced by Beckett's use of language of existential themes. Brecht's influence is clearly perceptible in Arden, Osborne and Robert Bolt. This exposure to varied experiments in form and technique emboldened the New Wave Dramatists to exploit their own vision in a broader perspective with the current and popular themes of their times. They came with their low- life drama with new themes involving the ordinary man's ordinary experience including the physical ones which were thought the themes incompatible to the theatre before.

This New Wave drama has been termed as 'Interrogatory drama' or drama of revolt. (Rabey, David Ian.30), that assumes a confrontational attitude towards the platitudes of the older generation, with particular attention to the question of social purpose in the wake of Second World War. The New Wave dramatists thought that Britain was not rebuilding as promised, there was stagnation in every field and the conventional life offered little excitement. The same was true in the cultural field, especially in the theatre. The audiences were what Rathigan calls 'Aunt Edna' or conditioned audience 'timid playgoers in search of reassurances'. (Brown.J.R. ed. 71). There was still a middle class Britain debating liberal values and philosophical concepts or concerned about traditional family and domestic values. The New Wave theatre broke away from the middle class inhibitions and spread out to adopt themes which were hitherto unexplored. It differed in matters of themes, characters and attitudes and dealt themes with freedom. This new freedom enabled them to tackle the subjects which really concerned them, and which have increasingly concerned the British people as a whole, in a natural and realistic way. Traditional rules of sexual morality and conventions of marriage and family life have been questioned and overthrown. It has also mocked and abused leading figures of the political, social and religious establishment.

John Russell Brown comments that these New Wave dramatists are:

Creatively involved with society and seek a full revelations in their plays of what they find in the worlds around them and within them. They write for the theatre because this is the art form which allows them to show the complexity of those worlds: the permanent and frightening forces that lie behind each explosive crisis and each boring, dehumanizing routine, the limitations, dangers and experiments of personal, subjective view: the impossibility of judging any except in relation to other, the strength of truth and permanence of idealism. They write youthful plays, logical, sensational, theatrical, exploratory,

Periodic Research

complicated and hence, responsible medium. (Brown J.R. 14)

The best specimen of the New Wave drama is Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*. This single play shattered the myth and philosophy of the British System and advocated for the complete overhaul of the British society with all its settled establishment. This was like Chekhov's ironic tragedies which sympathetically observe:

'Lost chance, missed opportunity, the sterility of self defeating, self preconception and the irreversible decline of system, in which energy exists only residually and is lost for the purpose of doing work, a situation in which both fixity and fluidity imply a sense of everything running down into inertia. (Rabey David Ian. 1-2)

Jimmy Porter with his 'burning virility of mind and spirit' and 'blistering honesty' is a university graduate, married to a middle class girl named Alison. After trying unsuccessfully various jobs, is a frustrated man who finds himself misfit and malcontent one and directs his anger against those who are responsible for creating the irreversible circumstances in which he is caught. His 'Verbal Cannibalism' (Elson, John. 72) spares none; and has 'the iconoclast peculiar to that monstrous type, the frustrated Messiah, who because he can not save the world, comes to feel the desire to destroy it instead.' (A.E. Dyson in Brown's J.R. Modern British Dramatist. 52)

Osborne's 'Look Back in Anger' kicked the door open for virulent attack on vicariousness of British society and a large number of plays dealing with themes and topics hitherto unexplored, brought a revolution in the British theatre. In themes, characters, settings, real life behaviour, dialogue, the new dramatists are obviously responding to the society in which they live. (Brown, John Russell. 9) Kenneth Tynan's significant review of 'Look Back in Anger' associated it with youth and vitality and directness of feeling. 'I doubt if I could believe anymore who did not wish to see 'Look Back in Anger'. It is the best young play of the decade'. (Rabey, David Ian, 31).

Most of the New Wave dramatists liked to be sensational, to surprise and shock, to be fantastic, unlikely outrageous, choosing themes like homosexuality, prostitution and abortion, nymphomania, violent or casual deaths, disfigurement and callow humour. In Edward Bond's play *Saved*, a baby is stoned to death in its perambulator on the open stage, in John Arden's *Sergeant Mushgrave's Dance*, Mushgrave prepares for the killing of twenty five persons, Jimmy Porter, in Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* is highly vociferous against almost all aspects of the establishment, and in Pinter's *The Birthday Party* Stanley is bashed and brain washed and made completely dazed.

But in the plays of Arnold Wesker such sensationalism is not found. He draws materials for his plays from 'experienced reality' (<http://www.arnoldwesker.com>) of his life and is almost autobiographical in his plays. His first five plays – *Chicken Soup with Barley* (1958), *Roots* (1959), *The*

Kitchen (1959), *I'm Talking About Jerusalem*, (1960) and *Chips with Everything* (1962) are recreations of his family life and his experience as a conscript in R.A.F. rendered dramatically. Initially, the critics reared on Shaw and Galsworthy, could not fathom their significance. Because of much importance to domesticity, tea and food, these were termed as 'Kitchen Sink Drama'. When these plays were performed at the West End, Wesker received universal acclaim and though, not yet thirty years of age, he was hailed as 'the most promising young dramatist to come into the English Theatre since the end of war' (Taylor, John Russell. . 143). These plays display Wesker's 'emotional maturity and his command of action in depth'. (Kitchin Laurence. Drama with a message – Arnold Wesker page no. 73).

Wesker's trilogy (*Chicken Soup with Barley*, *Roots*, *I'm Talking About Jerusalem*) is one of the first serious and successful political plays to be written in England. In these plays Wesker's instinct has worked admirably in leading him to concern himself with the changing orientation of his characters towards communism over a twenty year period, from 1936 to 1956. *The Kitchen* was written earlier but performed in 1959. It is a 'tour de force' as Wesker demonstrates the working of a large kitchen of a large restaurant catering to some two thousand customers at a time. The activity of the chefs, waitresses etc. build up into a complex image of a man as a working animal (Hayman, Ronald page no. 16), *Chips with Everything* is a factual demonstration of the conscripts in R.A.F. and the harsh mode of so called discipline practised there. These five plays impressed the audience profoundly and made John Russell Taylor hailed these plays as the result of Wesker's 'bold conception' of social realities.

Arnold Wesker is the perfect example of the new working class dramatists. He was born in the East End, London in 1932 in a working class family. His father was a refugee from Russia, his mother from Hungary. The anti-semitic 'pogrom' in Eastern Europe brought many such refugees to the East End, London. Wesker seemed in the first place a highly unlikely candidate for literary distinction. His father was a poor tailor and his mother had to supplement the family income by doing domestic service in other people's houses. Wesker makes no secret of his early life. He tells:

'I find in myself a compulsion to try as much as possible not to cheat and let people know me personally' (Hayman, Ronald. Contemporary Playwright- Arnold Wesker. page no. 1).

In an interview with Ronald Hayman, Wesker confirmed it that in order to be faithful to his materials, he has modelled most of his characters on the members of his family. (Contemporary playwright – Arnold Wesker page no. 2-4). Wesker adopted the technique of 'basic realism' and recreated scenes and situations factual to his personal life. He told Ronald Hayman that he did so 'to disarm as much criticism as possible', and let them see 'this is what I have been

Periodic Research

through. This is how I have seen it or feel about, or suffered about it or been happy about it and I think you ought to know just in case you can beware of it or share it. But I have both been through it also dared to go through it.' (Hayman, Ronald. Contemporary playwright Arnold Wesker. page no. 1)

Plays written by Wesker after he became the artistic director of Centre 42 in 1961, markedly differ from his early five plays. He now seems to be deviating from his 'basic realism' and trying to find out a new idiom for his artistic expression. His plays *Four Seasons* 1965 and *Their Very Own Golden City* (1966) are illustrations of this point. As an artistic director of Centre 42, he tried his best to make it a cultural movement for popularizing the arts. Regarding arts and its relation with society he wrote and spoke in detail. His views regarding Centre 42, its aims and objectives have been collected and published in a book called *Fears of Fragmentation* (1970). But the Centre 42 failed as Wesker could not get proper support from the trade unions which had been the source of Centre 42's emergence.

The plays which follow have varieties of interest and show Wesker as an untiring dramatic genius. *The Friends* (1970) deals with the theme of death and the confrontation of the characters with their own mortality. *The Old Ones* (1970) is related with the conflict between the optimistic and pessimistic ritual, a 'quotation competition' in which the main characters confront each other with the ultimate, the irrefutable quotations from the classics to prove that life is neither good nor bad. Wesker's next play *The Journalists* (1972) covers six days in six different weeks and offers realistic picture of reporting. The play is lauded for its originality of form and richness of content. *Shylock* (1976) is a play where Wesker rewrites Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* to remove the stigma from Shylock, the Jew as a blood sucker. *Love Letters on a Blue Paper* (1978) shows Wesker's insight into psychology of a wife who writes love letters to her dying husband. *While One More Ride on the Merry Go Round* (1978) deals with a comic plot, *Caritas* (1980) satirizes the religious dogma, dogma of any kind as a dehumanizing agent. Christina in this play is doomed by the church authorities as her natural instincts are crushed. The decade 1970 to 1980 has been a prolific one for Wesker as he ventured into untouched materials for the subjects of his plays.

Wesker made a leap forward in 1980s by working on a major project of a series of *Six One Woman Plays*- *Annie Wobler* (1982), *Four Portraits-of Mothers* (1982), *Yardsale* (1983), *Whatever Happened to Betty Lemon* (1986), *The Mistress* (1988) and *Letter to a Daughter* (1990). This project of a series of six one woman plays stands apart in the New Wave of British drama as no other contemporary writer has ever attempted a thing like this. In *Annie Wobler*, we see Annie in three different *avatars*- Annie as an old tramp cum char- lady who reminisces her old life (It is pointed out by Wesker that Annie Wobler is the real name of a childhood memory). The second is of Anna, a working class student who has done her

B.A. with first class honours and is preparing for her first date with her boyfriend. The third is Annabella, a writer whose third novel is a success and is now preparing to meet three interviewers. *Four Portraits-of Mothers* was written for a festival in Japan of one act plays on the subject of the Mother. These portraits are of Ruth, as an unmarried mother, Naomi a mother who never was, Miriam, as a failed mother, Deborah, as mother earth. *Yardsale* is about Stephanie, a middle aged school teacher who is deserted by her husband after twenty four years of married life. *Whatever Happened to Betty Lemon* tells about a widow of a Labour peer, crippled by old age. She is adjudged as the 'handicapped woman of the year' and is preparing her speech for the occasion. Wesker calls it 'a self portrait of defiance and despair' (<http://www.arnoldwesker.com>). *The Mistress* is about Samantha who waits for her 'that phone call' while deciding where to send her charities. *Letter to a Daughter* is about Melanie, an established chansonnier writing a letter of advice to her eleven year old daughter, the letter turns out to be her confession. These *Six One Woman* plays display woman in various spheres of life as defiant, supportive, frustrated, mean, suffering and joyous. About these plays Wesker tells 'the best of whatever is my talent and intelligence has gone into these plays' (*Arnold Wesker Plays 2, One Woman Plays*. Methuen 2001 page no. IX).

Wesker's experiment with form and content continued in the 1990s. The plays which he wrote in this period include *Men Die Women Survive* (1990), *Wild Spring* (1994), *Bluey* (1993), *Denial* (1997), *Break My Heart* (1997), *Groupie* (2001) and *Longitude* (2002). In these plays Wesker deals with various current themes of national and international importance. In *Denial* he deals with the theme of 'False memory syndrome' and the issue of child abuse by her own parents and relatives. It is a provocative play of ideas in contemporary British Theatre. (<http://www.arnoldwesker.com>). Similarly *Wild Spring* deals with acting as a metaphor for the false images with which we fall in love. *Groupie* is about an old woman of sixty one of East End Street, London who meets the man she admires but is shocked to see his condition.

A cursory reading of Wesker's plays reveals his profound concern for women. His women characters outnumber their male counterparts. He is different in this respect from his contemporary playwrights like Osborne, David Storey, Edward Bond, John Arden, Harold Pinter, John Whiting, Bernard Kops, Robert Bolt, Peter Shaffer, Shelagh Delaney and John Mortimer. Wesker is the only writer of the contemporary British Theatre who has always delineated women with sympathy and understanding (<http://www.arnoldwesker.com>). Women in all their *avatars* - daughter, sister, fiancée, wife, mother, aunt, grandmother etc. find full expression in his plays. Wesker's women mostly belong to the working class. He places them in various day to day situations, allows them time and space to grow and then records

Periodic Research

their idealism, their frustration and their disillusionment. Mention may be made of Monique of *The Kitchen* (1957), Sarah Kahn of *Chicken Soup With Barley* (1958) Beatie Bryant of *Roots* (1959) Beatrice of *The Four Seasons* (1965), Mary Mortimer of *The Journalists* (1972), Sonia of *Love Letters on a Blue Paper* (1976), Nita of *One More Ride on the Merry Go Round* (1978), Annie of *Annie Wobler* (1982), Stephanie of *Yardsale* (1983), Maratha of *When God Wanted a Son* (1986), Lady Betty Lemon of *Whatever Happened to Betty Lemon* (1986), Rosie of *Lady Othello* (1987), Samantha of *The Mistress* (1988), Melanie of *Letter to a Daughter* (1990), The three women of *Men Die Women Survive* (1990), Jenny of *Denial* (1997), Maeve of *Break My Heart* (1997), Mattie Beaucourt of *Groupie* (2001)

Much work has been done on Wesker. Writers like Glenda Leeming, Robert Wilcher, Reade W. Dorman have documented many aspects of his plays. Reviewers like John Peter, Kate Bassatt, Tom Phillips, Gerry Parker, Bathesba, and Richrad Cottle have written favourably about Wesker's plays in general and his women characters in particular. However, my attention has been drawn to the exclusive portrayal of women in his Six One Woman Plays namely, *Annie Wobler*, *Four Portraits- of Mothers*, *YardSale*, *Whatever Happened to Betty Lemon*, *The Mistress*, and *Letter to a Daughter*. These plays have not been adequately dealt with by critics. The women in these plays break the fetters that restrict them and breathe freely. In my study I will pay special emphasis to his One Woman Plays because none of his contemporaries have given so much emphasis to women.

Arnold Wesker's concern for women seems to be influenced by the Feminist Movement of his time. The Feminist Movement in England is associated with Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) whose *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and numerous other essays on Women authors heralded a new era in Feminist Writers.

At the time when Wesker was writing, the Feminist Movement was already established. The feminist critics derided the literature written by men for its depiction of women as marginal, docile and subservient to men's interest and emotional needs and fears. However, they appreciated Chaucer, Shakespeare, Samuel Richardson, Henrik, Ibsen and G.B. Shaw for rising above the sexual prejudices of their times. 1970s and 1980s saw an upsurge in feminist writings. *The Female Imagination* (1975) of Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Ellen Moer's Literary Women* (1976), Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of their Own* (1977), Jane Gallop's *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psycho Analysis* (1982) and Helene Cixous and Catherine Clement's *The Newly Born Woman* (1986) boosted the morale of feminist writings. I will study whether current feminist thought and practices influenced Arnold Wesker's writings.

Most of Wesker's women belong to the working classes. In Wesker's time there was much talk about unemployment and economic depression. Different trade unions were formed and labour classes

were demanding better deals. Women workers were especially more loud in their demands. There was maximum number of strikes in 1970s and 1980s. In search of work the marginal working classes moved from place to place and devised ways and means for self-employment. This aspect has attracted Wesker's attention and has been dramatised in his plays. His women characters have Wesker's sympathy because in spite of economic hardship they never lose their intrinsic values.

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