

Arnold Wesker and One Woman Plays

Abstract

The monologistic form of Wesker's Six One Woman Plays as means of popular entertainment is a spectacular phenomenon in the British Theatre of the 20th century. Earlier one character drama sketches and plays were written, by men for male characters, it is only in the 19th century did women writers join their male colleagues. Initially, these were the actors turned dramatists who wrote, acted and directed their own one man shows, their purpose being to satirise the real life characters through laughter. Samuel Foote's one man play *The Diversion of the Morning* (1747) and Alexander Stephen's remarkable one man show entitled *The Lectures on Heads* (1774) may be cited as examples. Frances Maria Kelly (1790-1882), the first woman to devise and perform a one woman show, introduced songs and music to make her shows entertaining. The later history of monologistic plays becomes history of women writers and performers.

Introduction

Wesker is the first dramatist to write one woman plays with a male sensibility and present a convincing picture of women experience situated in different socio-economic status. What matters most in these One Woman Plays, is their long continued talk of a single woman character in day-today language expressing her personal perception of life. These monologistic plays are arranged in such a way to look like a play. Initially critics treated these plays as monologues, but Wesker defended them as plays. His basic argument in the favour of one character play is that as in music, painting and dancing, solo performances is heightened, appreciated and even lauded, so why not in acting. He writes:

There is a view that dismisses the one person play as of little consequence because they are 'for one character only'. Why? We do not dismiss the great works for solo instrument simply because they are for one instrument only. Is it an inconsequential part of his talent that has gone into the composition of magnificent Beethoven Sonatas for piano—The Moonlight, the Pathetique, the appassionata? I do not presume to compare myself with Beethoven but the principle is the same. (Wesker.. Plays- 2. Introduction IX)

According to Wesker a monologue and a play for one actor are entirely different from each other. He insists that his one woman plays are not monologues:

I persist in describing them as plays rather than as monologues. A monologue is one person speaking but not engaged in any action; it suggests a character thinking loud and addressing no one else. A play for one actor on the other hand suggests a character responding to a situation, involved in an action, engaged in an exchange of some tension (Wesker Plays-2. Introduction. IX).

From the above remark, Wesker hints at the main ingredients of a play: action, situation, tension and exchange of tension and presence of someone on the stage or off the stage. A thorough analysis of these plays reveals that besides the above elements, these plays have other elements of a full length play—complex structure, cause and effect development, Rhythm, Dramatic dialogue, metaphor and resonance.

Technically, these plays are so superbly planned that their theatricality is impressive. Conceptually, all the women protagonists in these Six One Woman plays are character studies. The protagonists in the plays are not satirical portraits or caricatures; they are full human beings, the product of their time and ethos

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As in his full length plays, Wesker very often bases his characters in his one woman plays too on real life characters. In *Annie Wobbler* “had been a childhood memory and whose name really was Annie Wobbler” (Wesker, Plays 2 Introduction XI). She had been a washing woman his family employed in the thirties. Similarly, Betty Lemon the protagonist of *What Ever Happened to Betty Lemon* an older version of Wesker’s “self-portrait of defiance and despair” (www.arnoldwesker.com). Reference to Wesker’s autobiographical elements can be traced in Stephanie’s visit to Yardsale where the rejected household goods offer a metaphor of Wesker’s own rejection and unpopularity with the theatergoers.

Wesker is very careful in planning action and situation in his One Woman plays. Betty Lemon’s one hour ordeal is nicely demonstrated as she goes through her morning routine of collecting the newspaper and post and making her morning coffee. Besides this regular routine she is busy in preparing her lecture, she is supposed to deliver at the award ceremony which will honour her with the title of ‘Handicapped Woman of the Year’. She is confined to her kitchen cum sitting room in an Edwardian Mansion flat. She moves with the aid of a walking frame and reaches her electric wheelchair talking all along—all these paraphernalia complete the situation making her action rather her acting, superb. Similar situation conjoined with action is seen in *The Mistress* where Samantha is at work in her atelier while waiting for a phone call from her lover. Melanie’s effort to write a letter to her daughter sitting in her studio and Deborah interacting with a fellow shopper in supermarket are also situations where action seems natural.

Wesker subtly plans interaction of the protagonist with invisible people at various levels given the absence of other people on the stage. Sometimes inanimate objects on the stage also serve the purpose of interaction. Annie Wobbler engaged with her unusual cleaning work speaks ‘madam who is off stage and God’ who seems to be in the crevice of the ceiling. Annabelle Wharton talks to her three invisible journalists and Ruth talks and interacts with her daughter who is off stage. Betty Lemon talks to her noose and electric wheelchair whereas Samantha interacts with her tailor’s dummies. All these characters are engaged in some activity while interacting with some one else. Stephanie’s cooking and making trips to recover her depression, Samantha’s meticulous cutting out the pattern for one of her dresses and her Betty Lemon’s grinding of coffee and Annie Wobbler busy in her make-up and looking with her reflection in the mirror—all these activities catch our attention. These activities occurring simultaneously with interaction make these monologistic plays engaging and interesting.

Wesker’s practice of tragic-comic style links him to some of the earlier practitioners of the genre of one woman plays especially to Ruth Draper and Grenfell. Wesker’s protagonists in his one woman play possess a strong sense of humour and irony which keep their spirit vibrant in facing the little ironies of life. This is especially seen in the portrayal of mothers in his six one woman plays. Except Deborah all the mothers are frustrated and worried. But their

sense of humour keeps them going. Ruth and Melanie are single mothers with the responsibility of rearing a girl child. Ruth is an unmarried mother who didn’t buy a husband, because husbands are expensive. Melanie keeps her husband away, as he deserted her. But her love for music and song keeps her spirits alive. The best example of humour and irony is Betty Lemon’s queries for German diplomat about the photos of some communist leaders “why are all your left wing leaders looking to the right” (97). While sipping her coffee that she prepared with much difficulty she asserts “can’t let life’s little irritations keep me from my coffee” (96).

Most of his One Woman Plays have a complex dramatic structure. Instead of presenting his protagonist in one single scene, he divides his show into sections to create variety and offering more space to her for embracing different emotions. *Annie Wobbler* is a play in three parts, each part of a different woman—a charwoman, a young lady conscious of her sexuality as well as her brains and a writer. Not satisfied with this, the portrait of the lady writer is further divided into three parts presenting the writer as arrogant, modest and with searing self-doubt. In *Yardsale* also Stephanie’s visit to different places—the art gallery, the restaurant, the book shop and finally yardsale—are like different sections where she gets space for overcoming her depression. The best example of a complex dramatic structure is found in *Letter to a Daughter*. The play is divided into six parts each, each part being punctuated with a song.

Wesker uses enough music and song to make his one woman plays lively and entertaining. *Annie Wobbler*, the first play of Wesker’s cycle of six one woman plays begins with music and song. “Music: Ah, sweet My story of life” (Plays 2, 3). Stephanie in the *Yardsale* sings while she is preparing food for her husband. Her light mood is reflected in the following lines:

...am’ the living is easy.

Fish are jumping and the cotton is high.

Oh your daddy’s is rich and your ma is good looking

Hush, little babby don’t you cry (73)

Not satisfied with her own singing, she presses a cassette player to hear Baber violin concert. This happy mood, however, is sharply contrasted when she reads Sheldon’s desertion letter. (In *Four Portraits of Mothers*, Wesker deals with the single theme of motherhood from four different perspectives and exquisitely demonstrates the mental make-up of four different types of mother—an unmarried mother, a failed mother, a successful mother, and a mother that never was. The plot of the play becomes complex in structure that demands audience’s attention).

Music and song is the very base of the play *Letter to a Daughter*. Wesker defines it as “A play in six parts with songs for an actress who can sing (141). Melanie is a singer, composer of ballads. The play begins with the rehearsal of a song she has just written. She is not satisfied with certain words in the song and corrects them. Each of the six parts of the play ends with a song. Besides, preparing to write a letter to her daughter, she sings portion of songs she wrote in past...

...said all the worthwhile lines

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Land in your hand with a lag price

Which you have convey sooner or later (185).

With the use of colourful costumes appropriate for the woman performers concerned, Wesker brings earthiness to his theatrical presentation. In *Annie Wobbler*, the actress is to perform three roles in a continued sequence. So her first appearance is that of an old rag-lady with three layers of costumes—for an old charwoman, a young attractive woman and a middle aged writer. She goes on disrobing herself as she shifts her one role to another and appears in a new get-up. This technical device completed on the stage itself, lends special charm to the performance. Same method is practiced for *Four Portraits—of Mothers*, of course the change over from one portrait to another taking place on the stage, Samantha and Melanie are economically solvent women, so their costumes are specially designed to match their social status. Wesker's adoption of varieties of costumes makes his scenes and situation look real. His purpose is to enable the performer to be true to her situation and express her emotions fully. So, Wesker is not guided by any particular mania; there is riot of various colours and their mixed-ups in his choice of costumes.

Most of these women of Six One Woman plays are gossiping and digressive in nature. While interacting at a particular situation, they digress from the central point and start gossiping about some their relation previous acquaintances. In *Annie Wobbler*, while busy in her regular work of scrubbing floor and then preparing her, she starts talking about the previous households where she served in past. She remembers how admonished by one of her mistresses who did not like to be called Madam, and insisted that she be addressed as Mistress. Annabelle Wharton, the famous writer, remembers how once her uncle called her at his residence and advised her to write "rubbish and be famous". Stephanie creates space for self expression by switching over to telephonic talk and adopts gossip technique for her expression. Samantha, while interacting with her tailor's dummies, narrates her past loves and how she seduced a Youngman for the first time. The gossiping, digressive elements in the monologistic form of his plays provide extra opportunity to utilize the ventriloquist quality to his solo performers.

One of the contributions of Wesker to the genre of one woman plays is his use of appropriate language for his protagonists. Researchers in linguistics like Dale Spender (1990), Cora Kaplan (1976) and Sheila Rowbotham (1973) have pointed out that English language is man made language and most of the words relating to men are positive whereas their female versions are pejorated in matters of semantics and syntax. In this respect "The English language is sexist" (Spender. 29). As a result, Dale Spender comments:

English speakers believe—and linguistics appeared to be no exception—that men's speech is forceful, efficient, blunt, authoritative, serious, effect, sparing and masterful; they believe that women's speech is weak, trivial, ineffectual, tentative, hesitant, hyperpolite, euphemistic and

is often marked by gossip and gibberish. (Spender. 33).

Wesker's women are, however, exceptions to this generalization. They are independent in their views and don't conform to popular trend in their use of language.

Wesker emphasis is on everyday conversational language befitting the character in his specific socio-cultural status. Annie Wobbler as an old char old woman is an illiterate person. Her talk is mixed with cockney and middle class lingo giving the hint that she worked with upper class families in past. She is less articulate and so unable to express herself. But Anna—a graduate with first class honours in French, is voluble and punctuates her talk with French:

Ne suis-je donc rein?

Am I nothing?

Que la tempete de passions s'apaise vers toi!

Look how passion's tempest assuage around you(17)

Her analysis of her own physicality and her brain power speak out the importance of education. But in the role of Annabelle Wharton, the writer, Wesker situates himself and clears the position of language as medium of expression. She hints at the inadequacies of total communication of meaning: "Yes we all know expression convey message but pleasure, only those we want to hear, the old ones, you know, like 'death is a great leveler, or love is blind" (The Old Ones...41).

Theatrical use of slang words is one of the major elements of Wesker's working class women. His everyday language spoken by the working classes is simple, free from ambiguity and circumlocution and is punctuated with slang words. In this connection Dale Spender's finding is that "slang is the exclusive property of males" (Spender. 33), but it is otherwise with Wesker's women. Wesker seems to give the message that given space and appropriate situation, his women characters are as voluble and open as their male counterparts. In his One Woman Plays he provides them full scope to open their minds without any inhibition. Like Sonia pouring her heart into *Love Letters on Blue Papers*, the women of One Woman Plays suffer no qualm of conscience in talking about themselves. Wesker departs from common opinion that women should not use slang language. His women being matter of fact use everyday language using common slangs fully. The most popular slang 'bloody' seems to be all purpose good or bad and is used more frequently. Slangs are generally used under two situation—either mocking at some one, visible or invisible or under tense situation. When an interviewer enquired how she felt at her phenomenal success as a novelist her answer is like "fucking empress of China" (32). Stephanie's desertion by her husband makes her worried and helpless, however, while overcoming her sad predicament she recalls how she always tried to keep her husband satisfied:

Tonight is the night, he'd announce. Subtly...and then he'd leap unto the bed in his altogether and start jumping up and down so' his shlong and spheroids flip-flapped about his thighs and I'd have to join him and bounce along side of him

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so's my titties went flip-flapped too and we made such a right old slap-smaking sound that I 'm certain all the neighbours could hear (79).

Similarly, when Betty Lemon is angry at her electric wheel chair when it slides away from her, she exclaims—"piss bugger shit fuck why nothing is easy in this life?" (99). Another characteristic of Wesker's language is his use of muscular language in his dialogues for protagonists of his One Woman Plays. Besides using 'polymonologues' invented by Charles Matthews and 'clipped dialogue' created by Beatrice Herford, Wesker created 'authentic dialogue' (Dornan. Introduction. 5) for them.

As in his full length plays, Wesker has provided exhaustive stage direction for proper staging of his One Woman Plays too. As a writer, actor and director, he knows the theatrical techniques for producing the desired effects. So, very assiduously he provides stage direction for his One Woman Plays. Right from *Annie Wobbler* (1982) to *Letter to a Daughter* (1990), Wesker is very particular in his stage direction. In *Annie Wobbler*, Wesker presents the persona of Annie in detail before the actual play begins. The details build up the exact image of an old eccentric lady, and so her subsequent appearance on the stage is life like. She changes into a stunning beauty when she removes her masque and becomes Anna. She further changes into Annabella Wharton, a middle aged writer. This amalgam of three characters into one has become possible only because of appropriate stage direction. In *Four Portraits—of Mothers*, each portrait is preceded by a deft stage direction. Naomi aged 70 is presented in an atmosphere of resignation and neglect. The mention of a paperback book with its loose pages, the television screen covered with dust, a dead pot plant and a faded table cloth—all these objects serve the purpose of what Eliot called 'objective correlative' necessary for an accurate representation in a theatre. Betty Lemon's indomitable will is shown in her confrontation with the noose hanging before her. Wesker calls it a "confrontation with the ultimate" (89). More detail stage directions are provided in *The Mistress* and *Letter to her Daughter*, as both Samantha and Melanie are sophisticated ladies and need more hints for the expositions of their mindset. Wesker's bold strokes in the use of language and other paraphernalia of theatrical techniques make his monologistic plays of his cycle of Six One Woman Plays a tour de force in the modern British theatre.

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