

Arnold Wesker's Early Plays: A Study of His Personal Experiences

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ABSTRACT

Arnold Wesker's Trilogy plays specially *Chicken Soup with Barley* and *Roots* bear the mark of his personal experience. These plays were written before he was thirty and all of them are deep-rooted in the playwright's own life. Among all the modern dramatists, Arnold Wesker is one of the most personally involved authors in his own works, even though drama offers little opportunity for this kind of authorial subjectivity. His achievements as a dramatist have been perceived in close relation to the experiences of his real life. His working-class people spring directly from the texture of his own life. "When I look back it seems to me that all my writings are attempts to resolve or continue more lucidly arguments I had with my family, my friends and the people with whom I worked." (Discovery 1960) His unhappy childhood, his parents' quarrel and a raging conflict within him enabled him to bring gigantic events and ordinary people under his penetrating eyes. He articulated the issues of human relationship forcefully in his novels, letters, reviews and interviews and in his plays as well. Wesker was doing what he did best- writing autobiographically by drawing heavily on his experiences in a Jewish family with a communist mother and socialist friends. He wrote stories about his wife, about his mother and father and his working-class neighbourhood in London's East End, and his trade union aunts who fought the good fight for political causes. Being very strict to his stuff and substance, Wesker modelled some of his characters on his own family members and friends. He painted the people of his plays with the colour and culture, ethics and attitude, code and conduct, beliefs and values of his own background and surroundings. He wrote directly from the first-hand knowledge and personal experience in his early plays. His vision of life is deeply rooted in the long tradition of cultural achievement (family's roots) that can enrich the lives of individuals and the community. He made his public activities as an integral part of his work.

Keywords: *Relationship, experience, society, personal, working, characters, background, Jewish, community, socialist.*

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Methodology and Objective of the Paper

The study of Wesker's Trilogy in this paper aims to provide a more comprehensive view of his working class family, their hopes, ideals, dreams and struggles in the aftermath of World War II. His early Trilogy plays examine the complexities of his family relationships. It is a type of loose autobiography of Wesker's life. The paper deals with Wesker's working class characters and society for which he wrote, sought and fought. I think that his working class family surroundings can be found in every working class family of the world. The paper examines Wesker's personal pain for a working class family. The objective of the study is to analyze the autobiographical background of his female characters specially Sarah and Beatie Bryant. After making deep study of Wesker's early plays and his lived realities from various sources i.e. letters, reviews, interviews, plays, novels and various online platforms, I found matchless resemblances between the setting and surroundings of Wesker and his plays and then decided to bring them in light through this paper. The paper tends to bring his drama very close to the lived realities of his life. The aim of the paper is to recognize Wesker's contribution to working class people by making them part and parcel of his early plays.

Introduction

Arnold Wesker, one of the seminal figures in the contemporary British theatre, was born on 24 May 1932 at Stepney in the East End of London. His father was from Ukraine, a Russian Jewish immigrant garment worker. His mother, born in Transylvania, was from a Hungarian Jewish immigrant family. He was a Jew and Jews were treated very badly under the dictatorship of Hitler during the Second World War. The anti-Semitic 'pogrom' in Eastern Europe brought many such refugees to the East End London. He tells frankly about his early personal life: "I find in myself a compulsion to try as much as possible not to cheat and let people know me personally" (Hayman p. 1). He attended the Jewish infant school, various other local schools and in 1943 he went to Upton House Central School at Hackney where he was trained in book-keeping, typing and shorthand. He was so stubborn at this school that he had problems with his teachers there. He got much of his education outside the class room, in the Habonim. 'My sister tells me I broke the bars of my cot. I like that image—right from babyhood I was breaking the bars' (Hayman p. 44-45).

Wesker was unschooled partly because his education was disrupted by the war and partly because the young Weskers, like many of the children of the East End, were evacuated to rural

safety. This did not mean that Wesker came to adulthood without any sort of education; he was encouraged to write by one of the teachers at his school; and he read widely and voraciously. In his autobiography he describes himself as an autodidact. He considers regretfully that he always felt inferior when came face to face with those who had gone to university education. The family moved from Stepney to London county council flat in Hackney in 1942. His father's increasing ill health derived his mother took on ever greater responsibility for keeping the family going.

After the end of the national service, Wesker took on various jobs. First he moved to Norfolk where his sister and her husband had set up a carpentry business and at different times worked as a farm laborer, a freelance journalist and a kitchen porter. Working in the kitchens was to be his main source of employment for the next few years. In Norfolk, in 1954, he met Doreen (Dusty) Bicker, a Norfolk girl and they were married in 1957. The dynamic of their early relationship is caught in *Rooms* whose central character is based on Dusty.

Wesker's Recollected Reflections

Arnold Wesker opted themes of common life experience hitherto untouched, unused and unexplored. In his plays he talked and walked with a new way and new voice. He revealed what he finds in the world around him and within him. His plays are based on the lived experience of his life. Wesker sank into the psyche of his society while his contemporaries painted it with facial pose and pretense. As in the real life of Wesker, his characters try to get progress in society but their flight remains the same. His characters are representative of the real living human beings in a society. They embody values, attitudes, failures, social and political experiences that are not their alone. Wesker himself belongs to a society which is shaped and reshaped in his earlier theatrical works. His characters are from working class society from which he himself belongs. He is best known and understood in the context of the society he wrote, sought and fought. Most of his characters in the Trilogy plays are from his own working class background with which he has shared his personal instincts.

Arnold Wesker attracts critics and audiences partly because of his personal participation and partly because of the class which he has sketched very seriously and sincerely. His work makes direct and immediate appeal to his own life. When we examine his plays we can easily see that much of the material of his plays has its origin in the dramatist's own life. It is because of his first-hand knowledge and direct personal involvement that he writes about the working class man: "He is my class and my background and therefore what I say I say from love and a concern

for wasted lives.” It is necessary to understand and present Wesker’s autobiographical detail here as his personal life is scattered all over his writings. His social, political and Jewish surroundings are the background of his plays. Wesker says in his *Ambivalences*: “I’m not going to talk about my private life in an interview. My private life is splattered all over my plays, stories and poetry, and if any of your readers are interested they will have to read what I’ve written!” (Wesker p.63).

Wesker himself belongs to a society which he shaped in his earlier theatrical work. His characters are from working class society from which he himself belongs. His plays are best understood in the context of the society for which he wrote, sought and fought. In a note to actors and producers he says: “My people are not caricatures. They are real and if they are portrayed as caricatures the point of all these plays will be lost. The picture I have drawn is a harsh one, yet my tone is not one of disgust.....I am at one with these people: it is only that I am annoyed with them and myself.”(Trilogy p.7) The need to express him arouse from the rough patches of family life, its closeness and sense of identity. He expressed what he experienced in his class and with his characters. He spent unhappy childhood. His parents quarreled and he loved them both. There was always a raging conflict inside him: “When I look back, it seems to me that all my writings are attempts to resolve or continue more lucidly arguments I had with my family, my friends and the people with whom I worked.”

All the relationships and action in his plays take place within the framework of a family model in which he was born and brought up. Wesker writes about his mother: “Her priorities...consisted in loyalties– parent to child, child to parent, brother to sister, sister to brother, husband to wife, wife to husband– whatever she thought of either! A promise is a promise, blood is blood, a bond is a bond” (Trilogy p.41). So the plays are what have happened to the Wesker’s family itself.

Wesker infuses his own life and breath into the characters of his plays to divulge and disclose different facets and features of his persona. The following dialogue between husband and wife reveals mother's anxiety about her children much more than their father:

Sarah. (From the kitchen). You took the children to Lottie's?

Harry. (Taking up book to read). I took them.

Sarah. They didn't mind?

Harry. No, they didn't mind.

Sarah. Is Hymie coming? Harry. I don't know.

Sarah. (To herself) Nothing he knows! You didn't ask him? He didn't say? He knows about the demonstration, doesn't he?

Harry. I don't know whether he knows or he does not know. I didn't discuss it with him. I took the kids, that's all. (Trilogy P.1-2)

The dialogue is a heartfelt rendering of Wesker himself. When he talks about 'Tilly lamps' in the last play of his Trilogy, he is reminded of his sister and brother-in-law who had this kind of lamps in their houses. Because of Wesker's autobiographical approach, his characters become more illuminating with their own weaknesses and strengths. His presentation of women characters in his plays is mostly the direct result of his personal experience with his mother, sister, wife, aunts and maid servant. He presents the women characters with realistic approach as they met him in his real life without the hate and misogyny of Osborne.

Setting of Wesker's Plays

Wesker has given bona fide flavour in these plays by creating a genuine atmosphere of the same working class people and places where he and 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" (Leeming p.7). During the Second World War, he mostly lived in London. When Wesker discussed about the setting of his Chicken Soup with John Dexter, Dexter advised him to change the room into a basement setting as it is suitable for a working-class atmosphere. Wesker was suspicious about using basement background as his family had lived in a working class attic flat. He thought that the tenement houses in Fashion Street did have basement flat, so he accepted it for the Kahns to live in a basement. In Dexter's view, basement living would allow the stage managers to run backwards and forwards again and again, only their legs showing, giving the impression that crowds were running to the barricades to join their comrades gathering against Mosley and his Blackshirts. Dexter recommended this innovative idea to Wesker. For Dexter the active environment was only a theatrical device but for Wesker it was naturalistically correct even for stage characters. 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 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 (Trilogy p. 7)

Their basement is full of ceaseless hustle and bustle. Their residence and the road resound with the resonance of residents and other human beings 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. 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 convinced to his mother that audience would not believe in an unblemished heroine. 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 *As Much As I Dare*, 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! (Wesker p.174).

This setting remains till the end of the play. Now one can find Sarah and Harry 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 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). Conversation between Sarah and Harry 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.

Wesker's Characters and Situations in Chicken Soup with Barley

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." (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" (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 behaviour 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” (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 what she replied in life” (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 lifestyle 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 *Chicken Soup* deals with the class conflicts and family issues of the working-class village folks. Sarah, like a working class housewife, 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 suddenly. 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” (McGrath).

Wesker's Personal Touch in Roots

Arnold Wesker's play *Roots* deals with an individual's 'roots' he comes from and makes him feel proud of himself. ‘Roots’ means family ties, family feelings, family bond and attachment that links a man, an animal, a bird or a plant physically, mentally, emotionally and culturally to the society or community where he or it lives or where his or its ancestors lived. *Roots* is a harsh picture of Wesker's family and his working-class folks. He gives a feeling of overall ambience of rural Norfolk in the beginning of this play: "A rather ramshackle house in Norfolk where there is no water laid on, nor electricity, nor gas. Everything rambles and the furniture is cheap and old. If it is untidy, it is because there is a child in the house and there are few amenities so that the mother is too overworked to take much care." (Trilogy p. 85) The setting of his plays is the working-class houses and backgrounds from which Wesker was directly or indirectly attached.

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 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” (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" (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.

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." 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. 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.

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” (Wilcher p.41-42)

Lack of communication between Beatie and her other working class family members resulted in an unopposing 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).

Conclusion

In order to stimulate and awaken the working-class people, Wesker reflects upon his own life experiences. He was touched and affected by the same things people always have been. He has depicted the working-class people in their real state with a special teaching to the paralyzed to move on their own limbs. He does not describe the symptoms of their disease but enlightens them with education to cure the disease. He tried to keep his dignity and taught the working class to keep it even in the mouth of unfavourable circumstances.

Wesker's personal life affected the subject matter of his earlier plays i.e. The Kitchen, Chicken Soup with Barley, Roots and I am Talking About Jerusalem. In the introduction to the Trilogy, Wesker frankly accepted that many of his characters and situation in his plays are taken directly

from his life. When he finished it, his mother and her friend Mrs. Harrish had a chance to read it first. She finds it a magnificent work for them but unusual for the reader. In my view, Wesker universalised the storm of his family and made a mountain out of the molehill. His mother thinks *Chicken Soup with Barley* vain and worthless for a person outside their family. But to me Wesker presented the plight and sight of the world family.

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