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Impact of the New Wave Theatre on Modern British Drama with Special Reference to John Osborne and Arnold Wesker

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Abstract:

John Osborne and Arnold Wesker are the two main literary figures in the history of Modern Drama. They both belong to the New Wave Theatre. The aim and agenda of the New Wave Theatre was to liberate the mind and heart of the common masses and make them aware of their rights by writing about the mundane and harsh reality of the common man disillusioned by the current state of the world. As the name suggests 'The New Wave Theatre' was new and very different from the orthodox well made plays and aimed at bringing a new wave of revolution in the society. The paper attempts to highlight the impact of the New Wave Theatre on the Modern British Drama and the role of John Osborne and Arnold Wesker in igniting the spark of revolution in the younger generation of the Post War Britain.

Keywords: Modern Drama, New Wave Theatre, disillusion, revolution, John Osborne, Arnold Wesker.

The British New Wave Theatre was one of the most important phases of Social Realism. The playwrights explored the marginalised section of the society by illustrating the lives of working class people. The New Left was a political movement in the 1960s and 1970s consisting of a group of people mainly educators, agitators, reformists who demanded reformation in the society by dealing with various issues as civil rights, gay rights, drugs, abortion, etc.

The social and political conditions of the time were the main reasons for the emergence of the British New Wave Theatre. The after effects of the Suez crisis and the emergence of the New Left had a great impact on the younger generation. The emergence of the New Left can be traced to several historical and political factors. Dissatisfaction from the Communist Party of Britain and Hungarian Revolution of 1956 made some Marxists and some Communists agitated and they eventually formed the "New Left". The New Left had a great impact on the young generation of the country especially on the University students.

There is an authenticity found in the New Wave British Drama that is the description of the real setting, the description of the real state of characters, the problems faced by them and their regional accents gave it an originality through which the audience or readers

sympathised with the characters and developed a sort of commitment to the place and the social problems faced by the people of that place. The protagonists or the characters of the British New Wave drama were frustrated from their lives and had a desire to climb the social ladder and often suffered from cynicism. A sudden shift from the tradition was noticed for the first time that the working class people were no longer targeted for parody in drama. They were presented as real, depicting real life situations.

The New Wave British Drama was very different from the orthodox well made plays and poetic drama as they could no longer fathom the needs of the modern man, they were too ideal and romantic for the modern man affected from the excruciating experience of the disastrous World Wars and Spanish Civil War to escape from the harsh reality which they were facing at that time. The New Wave Theatre is often linked with the Angry Young Man. The arduously severe effects of the War on people made them suffer from identity crisis, they faced disorganisation, monotony, destruction, frustration and even rebelliousness living in a state of complete darkness and pessimism where they could not even get a hope of optimism they grew angry on each and everything. The young generation felt meaninglessness in their lives. To aptly sum up the disillusionment of young men I remember the lines of T. S. Eliot from the poem *Hollow Men*.

We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
Our dried voices when
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless
As wind in dry grass
On rat's feet over broken glass
In our dry cellar..." (Eliot 123)

The disillusionment, the anger, the frustration of the young mind was expressed by a single figure in the British Theatre that is the figure of the Angry Young Man. The concept of the Angry Young Man originated from the works of John Osborne, Kingsley Amis, John Braine, John Wain, Arnold Wesker, Harold Pinter, Shelagh Delaney and Allan Sillitoe. All these writers had one thing in common that is their working class origin and they wrote about the working class life. Kingsley Amis' play *Lucky Jim* illustrates the life of a young man making out his way in a post world war world. John Braine's play *Room at the Top* is about



the story of an ambitious young man of a working class origin who goes through social and economic struggles in fulfilling his dreams in Post War Britain. Shelagh Delaney can be called ‘ The Angry Young Woman’ of 19 years of age who wrote a play *A Taste of Honey* came to be known as ‘ kitchen-sink play’ as it focuses on some of the rising issues of class, gender, abortion in the 20th century Britain.

Look Back in Anger performed at the Royal Court on 8 May 1956 marked the beginning of a new revolution in the Modern British Drama. The hero of the play Jimmy Porter is the representation of the fury and anger of the post World War youth. Jimmy is an Angry Young Man who is dissatisfied with each and everything in his life. Jimmy lives a monotonous life in an attic flat with his wife Alison who comes from an upper middle class family whereas Jimmy comes from a lower middle class. The class distinction between them is the principal reason of his anger. In spite of being a university graduate he runs a sweet stall in the market for a living. Jimmy keeps on complaining throughout the play and the tone of his conversation is that of resentment and discontent. Jimmy is the spokesperson of a large section of the British society in the 1950s who suffered from identity crisis and alienation. Although Jimmy was highly educated he could not get a significant place in the society as the opportunities were reserved for the children of the bourgeoisie class. This was not only the case with Jimmy but with every single young man who was associated with the unprivileged section of the society- the lower middle class, these young men had the desire to leave their working class origin by climbing the social ladder. Jimmy Porter is the perennial rebel of the establishment. There is a kind of nihilistic pessimism in Jimmy Porter’s character. He feels that the young generation lacks courage. “I suppose people of our generation aren’t able to die for good causes any longer. We had all that done for us, in the thirties and the forties; when we were still kids. There aren’t any good’ brave causes left.” (Osborne 89)

Jimmy’s bitter childhood experience accentuated his sufferings and animosity against the bourgeois. His father was a sufferer of bourgeois indifference who fought for the Spanish Civil War and eventually died when Jimmy was ten years old. He shows his experience in the play:

For 12 months, I watched my father dying when I was ten years old. He’d come back from the war in Spain, you see. And certain God-fearing gentleman, there had made such a mess of him, he didn’t have long left to live. Everyone knew it- even I knew it... But you see, I was the only one who cared. His family were embarrassed by the whole business embarrassed and irritated. As for my mother, all she could think about was the fact that she had allied herself to a man who seemed to be on the wrong side in all the things. My mother was all for being associated with minorities, provided they were the smart, fashionable ones... You see, I learnt at an early age what it was to be angry- angry and helpless. And I can never forget it. I knew more about love... betrayal... and death, when I was ten years old than you will probably ever know all your life. (Osborne 58)

The relationship between Jimmy and Alison is that of a love- hate relationship. In order to escape from their class differences they play the bear and squirrel game. Jimmy gives vent to

his anger abusing and hurting Alison through his sarcastical comments. He calls her "Lady Pussilanimous" which means coward. The news of Helena's arrival (Alison's actress friend) exacerbates Jimmy's anger and in a state of fury he burst out at her saying:

Oh my dear wife, you've got so much to learn. I only hope you learn it one day. If only something- something would happen to you, and wake you out of your beauty sleep! If you could have a child, and it would die...Please- if only I could watch your face that. I wonder if you might become a recognizable human being yourself. But I doubt it. (Osborne 36)

The play can be called autobiographical as there are various similarities between Jimmy and Osborne, they both belong to lower middle class. The anger and frustration of Osborne as an Angry Young Man of the age could be clearly heard from the monologues of Jimmy in which he condemns the family of Alison as if they are the representatives of the entire middle class. According to John Russell Taylor, "Jimmy is the saint like witness to right values in a world gone wrong, the mouthpiece of protest for a dissatisfied generation." (Taylor 45)

Look Back in Anger serves as a turning point in the history of Modern British Drama and can be called as the pioneer play of the New Wave Theatre with its tremendous impact not only on the younger generation of the time but also proved as an inspiration for many young playwrights for exploring this new genre of kitchen sink drama where they could serve and speak for the rights of lower middle class society in Post War Britain. Arnold Wesker acknowledges this fact that this play has "opened the doors of theatres for all the succeeding generations of writers." (Taylor 195)

Arnold Wesker is one of the exuberant writers of the Modern British Drama, member of the New Wave British Theatre and also a member of the group of Angry Young Man of the late 1950s. His concern for the working class is clearly visible in the plays he wrote as he himself was of a working class origin. He was born in the East End London in 1932 in a Jewish family, his father was a tailor and his mother had to do household works in other people's house to run the family. John Russell Taylor calls Wesker "the most promising and exciting young dramatist to come into the British Theatre since the end of the war." (Taylor 147). In his early life Wesker engaged himself with the occupation of a carpenter, plumber, kitchen porter, pastry cook and farm labourer. The toil and turmoil which Wesker had gone through in the early days of his life made him realise the actual state of a common man in the society and he became more concerned about improving the condition of the unprivileged section of the society. Wesker was a man of great zeal and enthusiasm which is not only reflected in the plays he wrote but also in his engagement to the political activities outside the theatre. He was a member of the Young Communist League, member of Labour Party and artistic director of Centre 42. He felt the failure to reach the working class, through centre 42 he tried to make his voice audible to the working class by introducing culture to them.

Wesker says: "I want to write my plays not only for the class of people who acknowledge plays to be a legitimate form of expression, but for those to whom the phrase "form of expression" may mean nothing whatsoever. It is the bus driver, the housewife, the miner and the Teddy Boy to whom I should like to address myself." (Leeming 96)



Most of Wesker's plays are autobiographical, the situations and characters of his early plays are drawn from his own life." His mother was a communist, for example like Sarah in *Chicken Soup with Barley*, and his sister and brother in law tried to escape the pressures of city life by moving out to a cottage in Norfolk, like the central characters of *I'm Talking about Jerusalem*." (Leeming 03)

Harold Pinter, Samuel Beckett too come under the category of New Wave Dramatists. They presented their character's an isolated being living their futile and monotonous life by isolating themselves from the society. Unlike them Wesker has shown individuality of his characters by living in a social group under the same roof. Wesker started writing at an early age, his first play was "The Kitchen", followed by trilogy, comprising of "*Chicken Soup with Barley*" "*Roots*", "*I'm Talking about Jerusalem*". Wesker was essentially a reformist and was familiar with Marxist's theory of Alienation and this theory of alienation could be clearly seen in his play *Kitchen*. It can be interpreted as the microcosm of the capitalist society and how the workers in a capitalist society suffer from alienation in the hustle bustle of a busy London restaurant. Having had the first hand experience as a cook, Wesker recreated the kitchen routine in his play. "The first important point is that one complete, typical day is traced in *The Kitchen*, and this very completeness and typicality is a means of suggesting the monotonous imprisonment of its character's working class life." (Leeming 07)

The cooks, waiters, workers in the kitchen are like the workers in a big factory where the workers do their work not because of their personal interest but as a means of earning wages which is necessary for their living, hence suffered from alienation instead of working with a large group of people. In the play, "The Kitchen" Kenin shares his views on the futility of life in such an environment: " I don't dream of men.. Most people sleep and dream; me- I dream of sleep." (Wesker 53)

Wesker's first play from the trilogy "Chicken Soup with Barley" is about the disillusionment of a family in the East End of London over a period of 20 years. In the beginning of the play (1936) all the family members are involved in the Anti- Fascist Demonstrations. Towards the end of the play all the characters become hopeless and feel that their fervour and enthusiasm was of no importance, except Sarah Kahn who is persistent in her ideas from the first to the last act of the play. She is inspiring, motivating and a caring mother whose husband Harry Kahn is weak and he runs from responsibilities. Gradually the enthusiasm of the characters diminishes. Ada their daughter feels dejected and goes away with her husband Dave. She says to her mother, "I'm tired, mother. I spent eighteen months waiting for Dave to return from Spain and now I've waited six years for him to come home from a war against Fascism... Oh yes! The service killed any illusions Dave may have once had about splendid and heroic working class." Towards the third act, Harry becomes paralysed. Sarah remains firm with her ideals and play ends with the last words of Sarah: "Ronnie, if you don't care you'll die." (Wesker 76)

Wesker being labelled as an 'Angry Young Man' is a pacifist by nature. Through this play he depicted the moral and psychological trauma in the lives of characters but he is still hopeful for bringing a revolution in the society.

The second play *Roots* from the Trilogy has a more personal tone. The main character of the play is Beatie Byrant who belongs to a working class family of farm labourers in Norfolk. She is engaged to Ronnie whom she met in London. She comes back home and Ronnie would follow her later. She obediently follows Ronnie's ideas and blindly loves him. In the last act, when the family members of Beatie are watching for Ronnie, a letter comes from Ronnie in which he says that the marriage between them would not work. The dream like illusion of Beatie is shattered with this news. The play revolves around the life of Beatie Byrant and how she gradually grows and liberates herself.

I'm Talking about Jerusalem is the story of Dave Simmond from the *Chicken Soup with Barley* family who has moved to Norfolk from London in order to escape from their traumatised situation in city. Dave has an ambition of proving himself as an artist by building his woodcraft shop. But this experiment fails and he becomes disillusioned once again.

Arnold Wesker and John Osborne are the two pivotal figures in the history of Modern British Drama and representatives of the New Wave Theatre. Their plays have a genuine appeal to the working class gentry because of their casual, colloquial, working class speech patterns and dialogues.

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