

# Trends in Twentieth Century British Drama with Special Reference to Sir Arnold Wesker

Ankita

Research Scholar, Department of English  
L.N.M.U. Darbhanga  
E-mail: [ankita.88shri@gmail.com](mailto:ankita.88shri@gmail.com)

---

**Abstract**—*Twentieth century British society saw many social, political, and religious changes because of World War II. These changes after the brutal world war brought insecurity, temper and frustration in youth that led to many reactions against modern development. Twentieth century writers collected all the points together and created an integrated picture of Britain in their plays. Sir Arnold Wesker is a product of New Wave Movement of British Theatre which commends in the decade of 1950s. This decade has a historical importance because it records the mood of anger, frustration and disillusionment of a new generation which had no faith in the higher idealism and modernism of the 20s and 30s. This has been reflected in the works of a number of young poets, novelists and dramatists who are known by various critical terms such as 'movement poets', 'angry young men'. In his famous trilogy *Chicken Soup with Barley, Roots, I'm Talking About Jerusalem*, he traced the impact of leftist political ideology on a Jewish working class family and their progressive disillusionment with it. In spite of dramatic maturity and insight into his contemporary society, Wesker has not received that attention which he deserves in modern British drama. His plays have not been studied seriously in the same way as his contemporaries John Osborne, John Arden and Harold Pinter have been treated with critical indulgence and favour. This paper is a sincere effort to assess the significance of Sir Arnold Wesker as one of the foremost writers of twentieth century British drama.*

**Keywords:** *Twentieth century, World War II, New Wave Movement, Modern British Theatre, disillusionment, working class.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Modern drama is not a completely a new product but has come into existence after a continuous process of literary evolution and changes. The change of culture in British society and taste of man led to the change in contemporary drama in Britain. A number of historical factors have influenced the work of a new generation of playwrights. Contemporary drama in Britain reinforces a lengthy and strong theatrical tradition, while employing innovative strategies and themes that reflect recent developments in British society and culture. English men whole heartedly welcomed what tasted new. However, the origin of English drama took place ages back in the form of Mystery, Miracle and Morality plays in the Middle English period. The drama as a literary form reached its peak in the

hands of Shakespeare. In later years drama and theatre went through numerous experiments and changes. The main aim of this research paper is to assess the significance of Sir Arnold Wesker, a British Jew of Russo-Hungarian descent, as one of the foremost of the New Wave Dramatists of the working class. 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 and John Mortimer. This sudden resurgence of a new generation of young dramatists has been termed as the 'Renaissance of the British Drama'. Most of the New Wave dramatists were sensational and liked to surprise and shock. They chose outrageous themes like homosexuality, prostitution and abortion, nymphomania, violent or casual deaths, disfigurement and callow humour. While talking about Wesker, he was one of the founder members of 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. After the play was produced, a popular catch phrase "angry young men" was invented. The catchphrase was coined by George Fearon, a Royal Court Theatre's press officer who abhorred Look Back in Anger. The Angry Young Man (AYM) Movement took pride in lower class manners and loathed the phoney manners of the upper classes. Wesker was a part of The Angry Young Man movement. "In some respects, the history of theatre in Britain for much of the Post-war period might be characterized as an attempt to break the association of theatre with likeminded middle-class audiences. With the decline of the music hall in the 1930s, theatre became renowned as a predominantly middle-class form of entertainment. Several generations of dramatists since the 1950s have attempted to widen the appeal of drama."<sup>1</sup> He was a prominent figure in post war drama whose works dealt with the search of the East End Jews for security principles and happiness. Wesker makes no secret of his early life, later when he became a successful writer and an acclaimed playwright he confessed, "I find in myself a compulsion to try as much as possible not to cheat and let people know me personally."<sup>2</sup> He was the founder member of Centre 42 which began as a movement of New British

Dramatists to create a permanent home of all the arts acting as a reservoir of talent and professional companies. Royal Society of Literature and was knighted in 2006. Wesker draws materials for his plays from the 'experienced reality' of his life and is almost autobiographical in his plays. His first five plays *Chicken Soup with Barley*, *Roots*, *The Kitchen*, *I'm Talking about Jerusalem* and *Chips with Everything* are the recreations of his family life and his experience. Inspired by his Communist Jewish upbringing his plays dealt with the lives of working class people and trafficked in matters of political struggle and self-determination. His plays have always evoked extreme reactions. Though they were not liked in the beginning but later on they were acclaimed by the critics with words like 'great' and 'masterpiece'. The main contribution of Wesker lies in dramatizing the working class participation in the socialist movement of Britain and in demonstrating deep insight into the pathos of a political movement. He leaves his mark as an autobiographical writer not only in the choice of the plots but also in the sources of the characters from which they spring. Harry and Sarah Kahn in the trilogy are closely modeled on Wesker's parents. In his study of the New British Drama, John Russell Taylor observes: "Arnold Wesker has acquired a greater reputation on the strength of a still relatively smaller body of work than any other dramatist of his generation."<sup>3</sup> Throughout his career, he continued to have international success. He had the privilege of directing his own texts, believing that plays belonged to writer-directors and not to autocratic artist. However, his success mainly as a dramatist lies on his trilogy and he spoke of it on a BBC Radio 4 interview before the National Theatre premiere: "I don't feel I'm known. I'm frozen in the trilogy of the 1960s."<sup>4</sup> David Edgar pointed out that while Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* articulated the social fury of 1950s it was Wesker "who put that anger into the context of history and who tapped into the political disillusionment that is one of the key themes of post-war drama."<sup>5</sup> Even during the decades of 30s a kind of domestic drama known as suburban drama was tried by writers like Aa Milne or Dodie Smith, Daphne du Maurier and Merton Hodge and it was regarded as 'middle brow literature' as something but gradually London Pub and Manchester Suburb tried a new kind of drama taking interest in social and political questions. This is sometimes referred to as Kitchen Sink Drama, a term which was specially applied to the plays of Arnold Wesker, Delaney and John Osborne which dealt with the lives of working class people or even middle lower class people and the noted critic Kenneth Tynan became a major advocate of this kind of new drama. 'Kitchen Sink Dramas', a term coined to describe a British Cultural Movement which developed in the second half of 1950's and early 1960's in theatre, art, novels, film and television plays, whose heroes could usually be described as angry young men. "In the UK, the term 'Kitchen Sink' is derived from an expressionist painting by John Bratby, which contained an image of a kitchen sink. Unfortunately, not much serious discussion has come up from other critics apart from the writers and the reviewers and some theatre critics who were

courageous enough to appreciate such plays with deep autobiographical shades. As Stephen Daldry, the director of one of the plays, *The Kitchen*, wrote: "The plays were extremely personal. They are an obvious expression of left-wing ideas dreams and hopes, but, he is never for a moment dogmatic and more in that Royal Court tradition of liberal humanism."<sup>6</sup> Wesker was a self-made intellectual who refused to flatter the theatre elite. His distinctive achievement lay in reminding audience that Jews are an essential part of British history and in presenting a vibrant working class dynamic that was radical for its time. The plays that opened in New York, sometimes years after their British premises were- "*Chips With Everything*" (originally produced in 1962). The play was about Royal Air Force Cadet training, a work that drew on his own experience in R.A.F. "*The Kitchen*" (1957), his first play, which features a large cast of 29. "*The Four Seasons*" (1965), a symbolic drama involving a man and a woman in their 30s who have experienced love and rejection. "*The Old Ones* (1970), a play about the three aging siblings, originally set in the East London. "*The Merchant*" (1976), a reimagining of Shakespeare's *Shylock*. *Annie Wobbler* (1982), a trio of one-act plays about women and the English social structure. At the same time that he was producing these serious plays, Wesker was tapping a vein of comic writing first displayed in *The Old Ones* (1973). *The Wedding Feast* returns to the Norfolk setting of *Roots*, and was also one of his best received plays in this period. As with many of his works, a Jewish character is the protagonist, but tragi-comic Louis Litvanov is a small-time capitalist running a shoe factory rather than a socialist radical. Arnold Wesker has written a number of collections of short stories including *Love Letters on Blue Paper: Three Stories* (1974) and *The King's Daughters* (1998). He published *As Much as I Dare: An Autobiography*, a memoir covering the early part of his life, in 1994. To conclude, Arnold Wesker, a prolific British dramatist is specially known for his contribution to the protest plays which were written in the decade of 1950s and afterwards. His name also figures in a dramatic movement known as Kitchen Sink Drama which includes the plays of John Arden, Harold Pinter, Shelagh Delaney. Though he is an important figure of the trinity of Osborne, Pinter and Wesker himself, he is a committed dramatist with a coherent social philosophy and distinctive originality. Wesker is fiercely and overtly political but with a difference. His plays are strong plea for socialist, political attitude covering all aspects of lifework and arts and pleasure. Another feature of his plays relates to his Jewish background and is particularly a very accurate observer of that segment of life. He, himself grew up among Jewish families in the East End of London and had special knowledge of the cooks working in a kitchen of a restaurant among farm laborers and also about his training as a R.A.F. serviceman. Infact, his plays like *The Kitchen*, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, *Roots* and *I'm Talking about Jerusalem* are all plays with autobiographical shades. They reflect his close knowledge of the lives of Jews living in London, showing courage and frustration, hopes and despairs, humours and harshness by

turns. Consequently, Wesker has a special charm of his own and is reflected in his various plays not to mention his well known trilogy. His plays are also worthy of serious attention because they have dramatic qualities and mastery of theatrical techniques in which proverbial and colloquial language blend with dramatic conventions. Even in terms of characterization, his plays require serious attention because they often surprise us with their reactions and revelations. However, for all that his plays have not been studied seriously in the same way as his contemporaries John Osborne, John Arden and Harold Pinter have been treated with critical indulgence and favour.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Marwick, Arthur. *British Society Since 1945*. England: Penguin Books Ltd. 2003
- [2] Hayman, Ronald. *Contemporary Playwright: Arnold Wesker*. London: Heinemann Educational, 1970
- [3] Taylor, John R. *The Angry Theatre*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1962
- [4] <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/apr/13/sir-arnold-wesker-obituary>
- [5] <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/oct/10-arnold-wesker-tribute-forgotten-plays-royal-court-theatre>
- [6] <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/may/25/arts.artsfeature>