

Understanding the New Phase of Drama: A Critical Study of Arnold Wesker's "Chicken Soup with Barley"

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Abstract

Mainly during the first half of the twentieth century European theatre presents two types of mind-sets of the people of the European continent. People of the time are deeply influenced by the absurdity of human life, a kind of existential philosophy or negative aspect of life on the one hand and on the other hand by a committed philosophy of life – a movement towards better positive life. This is happened mainly due to the effects of the wars, depression and the nihilistic philosophy prevalent at that time. A kind of committed outlook of life was also cherished a large number of people motivated by left wing politics. These are reflected in the dramas composed by the so called committed and absurd dramatists like Bertolt Brecht, Arnold Wesker, John Osborne, Samuel Becket, Herold Pinter and others. This study focuses on how Wesker has dealt the critical situation and exposes his own standpoint. In the play "Chicken Soup with Barley" tries to show how to combat the negative spirit of apathy and to lead a better positive life. Being a committed dramatist Arnold Wesker always fights against the forces which hinder human beings to shape life in a meaningful manner. In the present context of the world Arnold Wesker may be accepted as an artist who has shown a way-out towards a better meaningful human life.

Keywords: Committed, Positive, Meaningful, Absurdity, Negative Spirit

1. Introduction

A series of socio-political-cultural-scientific events occurred in the European continent during the first half of the twentieth century vastly affected the thought-process of people. Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy and a kind of nihilistic attitude to life are very much reflected in the writings of Kafka, Camus, Sartre, Beckett, and Pinter. Political turmoil situation and consequently the world wars push the inhabitants of the world towards an unprecedented vacuum. The scientific inventions like Darwin's evolution theory and some nuclear weapons like atom bomb, hydrogen bomb have shaken the base of traditional faith in human life. People were in deep dilemma what to follow and what to resist. When Camus, Kafka, Sartre speak of the nihilistic approach to life, Bertolt Brecht relies on the Marxian philosophy, a committed attitude to life. In "The Waste Land" T.S. Eliot exposes the complex and perplexed situation. This situation has been presented in their literary works from their own perspectives.

During the decade-the 1930s the English writers committed themselves to the struggle against the conventional way of thinking and engaged themselves to the cause of the common people fighting

against the exploitative system. It is a decade people in all types of creative activity coming from different classes dream of a new social system replacing the existing one. The political situation has been rapidly changing; as time has been passing the political awakening specially among the common people tend to turn radical as Great Britain has been experiencing a series of shattering domestic and international crises including the Great Depression. World War II already reduced Britain to a second class power; even the Labour Party Govt. failed to retain its power for long time and could not minimize the issues of the common working class people. The ideal state based on socialist principle did not come into being. Loosing its own authoritative role in world politics and economy the Union Jack could not yet establish its importance in the fast changing scenario, Among the common people as well as the aspirant youths a belief was deepened that drastic political measures were needed to overcome the crisis. The growing unemployment and economic chaos sensitized the intellectuals to a remedy in communism or left oriented politics. In this situation a new group of writers emerged – Auden, Day Lewis, Stephen Spender, Isherwood, and Mac Neice. They felt to do something for the betterment of common society. Even the installation of Labour Govt after World War II the socio-political-economic scenario was not changed radically for the basic development of common people. Kinsley Martin, Editor, New Statesman observed that technical and scientific advances made society much richer, but these did not bring more equality or happiness. The gap between the very poor and the normal rich was wider than ever before. In such a situation the young people who believed in socialism found themselves plunged in a moral vacuum, felt themselves cheated, given false hopes, and ultimately trapped by the negative aspects of life. In the international arena the remarkable events – the suppression of the Hungarian uprising by the soviet armed forces terribly affected the English youth who were the ardent supporters of the soviet socialist principles. At the same time the prominent events – the fascistic activities of Stalin, the strange disappearance of Professor George Lukacs of Hungary, and ten years' imprisonment of Professor Wolfgang Harich, the 'reforming' communist leader of the East German Communist Party helped to increase their frustration and bewilderment. A kind of hopelessness was all the more intolerable as they felt that there was no way out of the impasse. At this juncture the middle and working class youths found an outlet to their anger and dissatisfaction in the angry young movement. The angry young writers of the fifties were very much influenced by the disgust with the futility of modern life, the alienation from the elite society and the utter disbelief in old values. The cry for commitment comes from a freshly articulate branch of the English left widely known as New Left. It appeared that the post-war society was in complete turmoil. The writers felt the demand for commitment all the more.

Arnold Wesker as a dramatist is visibly distinguished from his contemporaries for his approach to life, maturity and insight. Like others he too exposes the utter frustration and desperation of the younger generation of the post war Britain in almost all of his plays, but he possesses an energetic fighting outlook which makes him the most positive playwright of the decade. It appears that his main intention is to make people feel 'being alive'. He tries to affirm something, which he feels in contradiction to the pre-dominant mode of the time, its skepticism, cynicism, political indifference, despair, and disillusionment. Wesker says in an interview that "Chicken Soup with Barley" was triggered off by "Look Back in Anger": "When I saw it, I just recognized things could be done in the theatre, and immediately went home and wrote Chicken Soup".⁹ Wesker writes a series of plays attacking class-conscious British society and exposing the apathy and indifference of the young people. Speaking of the function of art in a capitalist society, Wesker remarks: "You know a capitalist society would be only too pleased to keep us in a numbed state of stupefaction. If we are stupefied then we are a quiet and

harmless mass, but once we are moving, once our spirit is alive, then we begin to ask questions about the world we live in – and this the art does – it makes us look at the world in which we live and it teaches us to ask question about ourselves and the way we live. I believe that art is the means with which we break down the whole terrible wall of myth, that confuse, frighten and limit us- and only when those walls tumble can we grow into real human beings”.(p-38) He clarifies his motto: “I want to write to write about people in a way that will somehow give them an insight to an aspect of life which they may not have had before; and further, I want to impart to them some of the enthusiasm I have for that life.I want to teach. I want to write my plays not only for the class of people who acknowledge plays to be 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”.(p-96)

“Chicken Soup with Barley” written in 1958 is an important political play that deals with the working class people of the post world war Britain. It is a dramatic presentation of the impact of the world’s political events from 1936 to 1956 on the common working mass of Great Britain and their reactions to them. Through a close focus on a Jewish family socio-political-economic-cultural life of the British working class people comes out.In course of time, how their mentality changes is also one important focus area. In this play. In fact, the dramatist tries to present the reaction of the English mass who have a rosy dream of socialistic pattern of life as against some political events like Spanish Civil War in 1936, the World War II, and the suppression of Hungarian uprising by Russia in 1956. As the social history indicates, in 1930s all the people of the jewish community residing in the East End were the faithful supporters of communism. Most of them were refugees from various countries threatened by fascist forces. It is clear to all socially conscious people that Hitler and Mussolini were the eternal enemies of jewish people, because they had a firm faith that the jews were sub-human beings and they were contaminating the superior races of the world.The fascist, a jew and a communist at the same time is the first target of attack. In such a turmoil situation the jews in Britain were entrapped by the vicious atmosphere. The followers of fascism headed by Sir Oswald Mosley in Britain threatened the jews who specially declared as leftists; from the political and racial point of view at that time the jewish community also considered themselves as the enemy of the fascists both in the national and international field. The communists and the other leftist forces were very much sympathetic to the Republican Government and Russia supported it massively. In the Spanish Civil War ,thus, it is seen that the left-wing supporters are locked in struggling with the right. In such a political struggling situation the play “Chicken Soup with Barley” starts.

The play “Chicken Soup with Barley” opens in 1936, on the day the East End blockaded the streets against the parading fascists of Sir Oswald Mosley. The action in the drama ends in late 1956, after the Soviet invasion of Hungary. One event brought hope and other one despair to those who espoused communism as a moral creed and faith. It is seen in Act I all the members of the Kahn family except Harry, and their friends are very much excited and enthusiastic. At that time all the communists have an expectation that something great is going to happen very soon. They have a definite glow in life, are very sure about their direction of struggle and are happy in dedicating themselves to the cause of a socialistic society. Monty Blatt looks forward to “ a revolution soon”.(p-27). Side by side a sense of disillusionment lurks behind the fighting spirit of the young idealists, Prince is reminded that many of the anti-fascist demonstrators are “just sightseers”(p-27)Harry has lost his faith in revolution; even he does not care for himself. He remarks: “ You can’t alter people, Ronnie. You can only give them some

love and hope they'll take it".(p-56}14By the course of time ten years roll on, Act II of the play starts in the setting of 1946 and 1947. In this Act the audience is introduced with Ronnie, the only of Harry and Sarah, highly hopes that with Labour Party in office the whole country will be reorganized for the betterment of the common people. He blames his father and sister for their sceptic outlook to life. Many of the so called socialists are utterly disappointed and disillusioned with the Labour Govt. It is indicated that Dave, once a fire brand communist, no longer cherishes the idealistic notion he had in 1956. In fact, in Act II the audience witness the petering away of the glow of the leftist idealism which brought the young idealists so close. The process of disillusionment is completed in the Act III of the play. Sarah is quite alone. Harry, her husband, is physically and mentally invalid; she has to look after him bearing the burden of her old age. Though her family is now disintegrated, Sarah still is an active party member and holds the banner of socialism above all things. The entire group involved in progressive politics is degraded to such an extent that the people only desire to have a house, some friends, and a happy well-settled family. They have forbidden and forgotten the struggle for the development of the depressed section of the society. Still in such a situation Sarah alone hopes for a bright future of her son, Ronnie, a robust optimist and a faithful follower of communism. But making his mother disappointed Ronnie returns home from Paris in a state of exhaustion and deep despair. His faith in communism is badly shaken by some events. Now he accuses his mother for injecting socialistic idealism in him and blatantly announces: "I've lost my faith I've lost my ambition... My thoughts keep going pop, like bubbles."(p- 72) But Sarah constantly tries to recharge her depressed son with a new hope and struggling spirit. She remarks: "Socialism is my light, can you understand that? A way of life.(p-74) By her simple faith she realizes that communism as a principle is not a fault if there is a wrong done by the practitioners. In the struggle for a socialistic pattern of life, some mistakes may have occurred, but it does not question the validity of the ideal. She confesses, "We got scars but we got through".(p-75) She assures that barriers may come to the aspirants for socialism, but they have to overcome. Keeping ideology aside, Sarah reveals another truth that everyone at least has to care in order to live in this world as a human being. Sarah as a mother, as a communist, and as a bold fighter against any kind of negative view of life, tries to awaken her son from the claptrap of delusion: "Ronnie, if you don't care, you'll die".(p-76) Sarah appears to be the only positive character in the play for undaunted spirit and her simple unperturbed faith in an ideal. Undoubtedly "Chicken Soup with Barley" ends with a definite positive outlook. The stage direction at the end- "He turns slowly to face her"(p-76) emphatically indicates that Ronnie turns to accept his mother's philosophy of life.

2. Conclusion

Arnold Wesker's personal experiences and his inclination towards humanism at the core ultimately helped him to understand that only to be angry with the social set-up and to be frustrated is not a positive sign of life. The play dramatizes the corroding effects of disillusionment, frustration and apathy on the socialists, specially of the young group during the late fifties in Britain. How the high hopes for a socialistic pattern of society gradually fades out due to the adverse turn of the political events all over the world, has come out vividly in the play. But Wesker's main intention in the play is not to expose the dark side of the picture, but to show a ray of hope, a positive sign that can make life worth living, and the future something to look forward to. His passionate concern is to regenerate the people who are entrapped by the negative aspects of life. Arnold Wesker's approach to life may be taken as a positive way of life even in the turmoil situation in the present world.

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