

# The Kitchen: An Assessment Of The Sir Arnold Wesker's Play In The Light Of Kitchen Sink Drama

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Kitchen Sink Drama emerged at the surface of British Theatre in the mid of 1950s when nothing ground-breaking was taking place in the British dramatic landscape. The writers of such plays concentrated upon the issues of lower-middle class and particularly they were concerned with the exploitation of the dissatisfied youth. The play entitled "The Kitchen" by Sir Arnold Wesker is regarded as his first play which has some auto-biographical elements in it as Wesker also worked as a pastry cook for four years. The play revolves around the theme of betrayal, love, jealousy and anger and gives an account of a whole day about the lives of the kitchen workers. At last the central motif of the play emerges out that how a positive attitude of mankind is destroyed by the industrialization of the society. The extreme work pressure changes the human side of a person into a brutal and machine-like with zero feelings and emotions left.

**Keywords:** Exploitation, Dissatisfied, Auto-biographical, Betrayal, Love, Jealousy, Anger, Industrialization.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Sir Arnold Wesker was admittedly one of the most uncompromising playwrights of the post-war British drama. Born in the East End of the London to a Leftist Jewish family of Russo-Hungarian descent, he soon rose to fame in 1950s with striking dramas about working class community and the life led by them. Wesker emerged as a dissatisfied youth who disagreed with the norms of present day England. He started up as a social rebel who wanted to change the ways of the world which mistreated the under privileged section of Britain. His own working-class background, his political involvements and communist ideology, over his entire milieu shaped up his thought process that went into the making of his plays. Wesker along with the other playwrights of New British drama of 1950s such as John Osborne, John Arden, Shelagh Delany and Harold Pinter created a new kind of drama and theatre with new subjects and new techniques. This new drama was obviously based

on the themes of anger and protest on the one hand and it also dealt with the burning issues of social problems on the other side such as failure in love and marriage, sexual jealousy and betrayal. Here, the contribution of Wesker lies in dealing with the problems of working class in general and the workers associated with kitchens, factories and Army in particular.

While looking back at the advancement of Drama of Protest, Alan Carter makes it clear that what led to the development of such dramas in theatre and later in society in these words, "the movement it could be called anything as definite as that, was in its essence an expression of disillusionment. Many people were fed up, they were bored and had little opportunity for achievement. They were searching for a world they could believe in..." (Carter, p.p.20-21).

The writers of drama of protest mainly concentrated upon the lower working class as a whole and particularly on the exploitation of the

dissatisfied, educated, jobless youth. Such plays were later termed as 'Kitchen Sink Drama' which mainly included the plays written by Osborne, Delaney, Wesker, Arden and Pinter. Kitchen Sink Drama emerged as a part of the larger social and political disorder which was the result of the aftermath that was caused due to the two disastrous World Wars. By the mid 50s, British Drama continued to showcase the artificial drawing room comedies which were set in the luxurious county- house with carpets and wall paintings and were mainly made for the elite and middle class. But the playwrights of British Drama after 1950s shifted their focus on the proletariat who were the victims of the Second World War. In this respect Hunt has expressed his thoughts in these words –

“The old conception of theatre as a cultural decoration was dead; so, too, was the conception of theatre as the entertainment of an exclusive leisured class. The end of the war was the beginning of a social revolution that has not yet ended. This revolution has deep spiritual as well as economic and social significance; it demands from the theatre a corresponding revolution in its outlook”. (Hunt, p.150)

A change in the stage setting was also experienced by the audiences as the writers of such plays know that the real life cannot be produced on a drawing room atmosphere, hence the post war dramatists practicing this kind of drama emphatically underlines the living conditions of the character who lived in congested rooms of rented flats.

“Gas stoves, sinks, creaking wooden chairs and bare kitchen tables replaced the earlier fashionable decors with their overstuffed comforts, velvet draperies and stylish paintings.” (Cornish and Ketels, p.vii)

## DISCUSSION

This paper aims to study at the key elements of the Kitchen Sink Drama in Sir Arnold Wesker's play “The Kitchen”. Sir Arnold Wesker's first play, “The Kitchen” (1959), was actually based on his personal experience as a Pastry cook. The play was first presented in a brief style at the Royal court theatre in 1959, after that it was again premiered there in its revised and expanded version in 1961. The play presents an account of a whole day in the lives of the workers in the kitchen of Tivoli. It deals with the rude and mechanic effect of work done only to get money. The important characteristics of Kitchen Sink Drama can be described tentatively in a number of ways. In this respect, the play will be analyzed in three parts namely social and political motifs of the play secondly unconventional characterization and friction between the characters and lastly voicing of vehement emotions by the characters of the play.

Starting with the first segment, that is the social and political motifs of the play, Sir Arnold Wesker here gives an account of the meaningless mechanical life in the modern commercial society where the concept of brotherhood and love relationship between man and women fall into the trap of hectic modern life. In the Introduction and Notes for the Producer, Wesker utters,

“The world might have been a stage for Shakespeare but to me it as a kitchen, where people come and go and cannot stay long enough to understand each other, and friendships, loves and enmities are forgotten as quickly as they are made.” (Wesker, p.9).

Shakespeare once philosophically remarked that for him the world is a stage and people are like actors but for Wesker world is like a kitchen where everything is mechanic. For him the kitchen becomes the microcosm of the larger world where there is no value of emotions and feeling rather people fall for materialistic comforts of life. Here in the play, the author emphasizes more on the dehumanizing mechanical society. Further in the play, Wesker stresses this point when one of the characters of the play, Dimitri says,

“People come and people go big excitement, big noise. What for? In the end who do you know? You make a friend. You are going to be all your life, but when you go from here – psht! You forget! Why you grumble about this one kitchen? (Wesker, p.50)

The characters of the play are shown to be in the highly pressurized situation and they react in a very violent way to vent out their anger and frustration. Fight between Peter and Gaston is one of the best example to justify the statement and Gaston shouts at Peter “DON’T TALK TO ME” (Wesker, p.26). But Peter on the other hand is not affected by his anger and gives a cold shoulder to Gaston every now and then. However, Peter in the end of the play is not able to handle his breakup with Monique and increasing intensity of the kitchen at the same time. Peter reacts aggressively and smashes the ovens and plates and cut the gas tube and also injures himself in the action.

Another mechanical trait of modern day hectic life is choosing between material happiness and emotional happiness. As the play opens up we come to know that the main characters of the play Peter and Monique are in love. Peter on the one hand chases for emotional bond with Monique and gives up on the materialistic happiness of the world. He is ready to leave everything, even his job to be in love with her and build a family with Monique. But on the other hand Monique gives importance to materialistic happiness and financial security. Monique seems to be in a difficult situation in which she has to choose between a financial secured life with her husband, Monty, or an emotional but unstable love life with Peter. Monique obviously goes for material and financial secured life. Even the owner of the restaurant Mr. Marango, believes that happy life can be attained through monetary gains,

“I give work, I pay will, yes? They eat what they want, don’t they? I don’t know what more to give a man.... what is there more? What is there more?” (Wesker, p.71).

He only cares about his property and treats his staffs as machine. He also shouts at Peter when he gives left over cutlets to the poor man – “Sabotage, all my fortune you take away”. (Wesker, p.65)

Further as the play proceeds, we are introduced to a dream sequence in the interlude Wesker in the play aims at the ability and inability of kitchen workers to dream. Most of the characters of the play have embryonic creative talents but their efficiency decreases because of the work pressure and they are not even able to dream and put their thoughts in their own words. Peter in this context laments his past and utters these words – “build things-castles, hut, camps. Romantic! Youth! The world was young. Everything was possible”. (Wesker, p.51)

Peter was once passionate and efficient to work on his dreams but working in the busy life of kitchen has snatched away his ability to work and dream. Peter in the interlude of the play urges his kitchen co-workers to dream in the day-light. He tells them to ease their work pressure by thinking of something out of the box. But their stated ambitions revolve around money, girls and sleep. He finds them to be less inspiring. Later when Peter is asked about his dreams by his colleagues he bursts out saying “I can’t dream in a kitchen”. (Wesker, p. 64). These words of Peter show his protest towards the claustrophobic workplace, his suffocation created by the dull and boring life of a kitchen. Here the kitchen forms the metaphor of the busy, tiring workplace in which people work to full fill their basic needs and demands. Brown highlights this idea in the following extract:

“Although Peter can play games by making a triumphal arch through which he goose-steps and although he asks for dreams to be told, he is incapable of describing any dream of his own, he escapes for a walk with Monique. The kitchen is not a place for dreams; in the interlude, the characters are set to talk and they cannot..... All three parts of the play hold the kitchen up as a barbarity, an

almost helpless inhuman world”.  
(Brown, p.p.172- 3).

Second aspect while analyzing the play as a typical example of kitchen sink Drama is its unconventional characterization and friction between the characters. The friction between the characters somewhere or the other form one of the bases of the play. This upcoming battle is indicated by Wesker in the initial part of the play. While describing the empty kitchen author remarks,

“There is smoke, flame, and soon the oven settles into a steady burn, and with it comes its hum. It is the hum of the kitchen, a small roar. It is a noise that will stay with us to the end. As his light search oven, the noise grows from a small to a loud ferocious roar. There will be this continuous battle between the dialogue and noise of the ovens”.  
(Wesker, p.15)

The author makes it very clear that there will be a “continuous battle” between the thirty characters of the play in the backdrop of the “noise of the ovens”. The characters of the play consist of cooks, chefs, porters, hostesses and waitresses. Hayman on the unconventional working-class characterization of Wesker argues that the author presents large slices of working life and bundles them so unceremoniously on to stage” (Hayman, p.43). While making his characters of the play, Wesker here opts for many other nationalities other than English people. Peter, the main characters of the play is German, another cook Hans is also German, Kevin, the new cook is Irish, Gaston and Nicholas is Cypriot. Wesker in the play deals with the concept of multiculturalism and cosmopolitan society which led to the formation of a diverse English society particularly after the World Wars.

However, despite of having thirty characters in the play the main line of action is based on two characters namely Peter and his beloved Monique. Thus, this section will focus on the prominent characters of the play, their internal conflict and its impact on the play. Peter is the

protagonist of the play who is a cook at the kitchen and is specializing in fish. He is a German but has been working at Tivoli for past three years. As the play proceeds he actually becomes the driving force behind much of the play’s action. Peter achieves a dominant role in the play because of his nervous as well as excitable energy. He is jealous and keeps on fighting and laughs in a hysterical manner which reflects his emotional instability. As the play opens, his fight with Gaston is the talk of the town. Further, as the play progress his romance with Monique is revealed. He passionately loves Monique but has nothing to give her other than his pure love. His unstable relationship with Monique defines his behavior and mood with his co-workers. Monique lastly betrays him as she is not ready to leave her husband who gives her financial security. Peter turns hyper aggressive and maniac at this point. He refuses to full-fill the orders, smashes everything and even hurt himself in the process. Despite being a light hearted man he at the end turns out to be a personality of unresolved contradictions and unchanneled energies.

Another character who needs to be discussed here is Monique, a waitress. She is Peter’s married lover. Although she is in love with Peter, she is not ready to leave her husband, Monty who is able to give her financial stability. As the character of Monique develops it becomes very clear that she cherishes materialistic happiness more than emotional fulfillment. Hence at the last she declares to Peter that she is not leaving her husband but tries to convince Peter to have an open relationship without any attachment. She also decides to abort Peter’s second baby which deeply breaks his heart. The pressure of this up-and-down relationship contributes to Peter’s final act of destruction.

Other characters of the play also show case their inhumane side at times. For example, Mr. Marango, the owner of the restaurant, is a greedy materialistic man who does not care about the feelings of his workers. He only wanders around the kitchen, keeps on eye on his workers but does not contribute anything to the kitchen. All he cares for his property and money. He also questions Peter when he gives leftover meat cutlet to the Tramp. He is completely non-

affected by Peter's violence but rattles with rage when Peter starts smashing his property. Thus comes up his mindset and philosophy of life in these words:

"He works, he eats, I give him money. This is life. Inst it? I haven't made a mistake, have I? I live in the right world, don't I? (To Peter) And you've stopped this world. A shnip! A boy! You've stopped it. Why? Many be you can tell me something I don't know. Just tell me. I want to learn something (To thekitchen) Is there something don't know? (Wesker, p.71)

Every character in the play "The Kitchen" falls prey to the tedious working environment now and then. There is continuous verbal battle between them and at times some physical tension is also visible in the play. Wesker by his art of characterization tries to demonstrate that in this modern society of hustle and bustle everybody thinks of themselves and becomes selfish. Nobody cares for emotional fulfillment rather they chase for materialistic happiness which is not real and is for the short period.

Another important feature of Kitchen Sink Drama is that, the characters of such plays are not hesitant in showing their raw and real emotions. They do not hide their bitter feelings and vehement emotions towards other characters of the play. In the play *The Kitchen*, the feelings of contempt and hatred are also the outcome of the severe work pressure. Some of the characters in the play are also dissatisfied by their personal and social life. They do their job because it earns them money but they are not enjoying their work, in fact some of them are even frustrated with their jobs. Wesker himself describes about such situation in the introduction of the play,

"All kitchens, especially during service, go insane. There is rush, there are the petty quarrels, grumbles, false prides, and snobbery. Kitchen staff instinctively hate dining-room staff and all of them hate the

customer. He is the personal enemy". (Wesker, p.9)

A typical example of a dissatisfied youth is Peter, a twenty three years old German who is a cook in the kitchen. Peter and Monique are having a love affair Peter keeps an eye on Monique. She however on the other hand keeps on irritating Peter and while crossing his work station calls him "bully" (Wesker, p.30). This makes him very angry, he is also jealous of the fact that Monique converses with other workers of the kitchen, he even tries to prevent her from interacting with the customers.

Peter: (Following her like the pathetic, jealous, lover)- And remember you're a hostess today. I can see you in the glass. No flirting, do you hear? (Grips her arm) No flirting.

Monique: I shall talk to who I like. (Moves off)

Peter: (hoping no one can hear him). Cow! Disgusting cow! All the restaurant can see you. (Wesker, 31)

Other workers of the kitchen are also backbiting about him and particularly regarding his rude behavior. Max targets Peter in these words – "He's a bloody German, a fool, that's what he is. He is always quarrelling, always. There's no one he hasn't quarreled with, am I right? No one!" (Wesker, p.p.17-18)

Another argument takes place between Peter and Violet while serving food, for a trivial reason. It is a busy afternoon and the kitchen is heavily rushed as customers are pouring in. The waitress orders food and the cooks cook their orders in a quick speed. There is a conversation between Peter and Violet in which Peter tries to humiliate Violet as she is demanding for her order fast. This interaction between Peter and Violet discloses the gradual pressure that is building up in the workplace.

Violet (to Peter): Two turbot. (As there is a queue she tries to help herself)

Peter (to Violet): You wait for me yes? I serve you. You ask me.

Violet: But you were busy.

Peter: I don't care. This is my place and there (points to other side of bar), there is for you.

Violet: Now you want a bloody minute will you? Who the hell do you think you are, you?

Peter: You don't worry who I am. I'm the cook yes? And you're the waitress, and in the kitchen I do what I like yes? And in the diningroom you do what you like. (Wesker, p.p.68-69)

Again when the rush increases in the kitchen, Kevin, the new and inexperienced cook gets nervous and moves to Peter's station in the need of cutting board. Peter leaves all his work and jumps on him and grabs the board. "Oh no, no, nomy friend. The plate room, in the plate-room, you'll find them. This is mine, I have need of it". (Wesker, p.p.46).

Then follows a string of rude conversations

Kevin: But I'll give it back in a few seconds.

"Peter (pointing): The plate-room. (Slamshis hand down on the board for emphasis; to a waitress) what do you want?"

Kevin (going to plate-room): Will, speak a little human like, will you please?

Peter: No time, no time. Next." (Wesker, p.p.46-47)

The presented quotations clearly demonstrate the conflict between the workers and their negative mindset for each other. They do not leave a single chance to express their bitter feelings towards

their co-workers. They keep on commenting upon the personal and professional level and they fight on trivial issue.

## CONCLUSION

At last it can be said that the characters of the play become the mouth-piece of the author and they show their struggle with the day to day life of modern British man. Wesker in the play succeeds in touching the effects of busy, tiring life of the Britishers and the impact of cruel, demanding material life that succumbs every personal and professional relationship of the man-kind.

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