

CHAPTER ONE

WESKER THE REALIST

1. The situation before and after the second world war

To understand Wesker we have to understand Britain, the hopes and sufferings of Britain, the rules of conduct and honour in Britain, the pride of the people, life and death in Britain. Throughout his entire work Wesker is excessively a British, both in thought and action.

Today Arnold Wesker (1932 -) has been accepted as one of the leading dramatists of England. As a literary figure his works spread over a period from the early fifties uptill now. He was born at a time when England with Europe was suffering from economic depression. He was brought up in a period when Britain was making strenuous efforts to develop its own remedies for its economic problems with the financial aid from America. In those days the rates of profit and interest were much lower¹. He came from the East End slums of London where his parents of Russo-Hungarian origin, came to settle as Ashkenazi Jew evauees. He was in his early teens when the Labour Party, for the first time², gained complete control in the British Government in 1945 at the end of the Second World War. As a British dramatist internationally recognized he has possessed a basement flat in a trim suburban

1. William Bernstein : Today's Issue, p. 15

2. The first Labour Government was in 1924 and the second Labour Coalition Government in 1929 - 31.

avenue, with a living room, a television set, record player, contemporary standard lamp, abstract paintings alongside a photograph of young men playing football in a street, a bookcase devoted to good books bound in boards and a long shelf of excellent paperbacks resembling those of many mid-century lovers of the cultured way of life³. But there was a time in his early youth when there was food rationing⁴. Misery and depression were his constant companions till 1958 when he began to earn averaging £ 15,000 a year⁵. There were the days of chill penny when he spent for consumption whatever little he had earned. He, in his early years, could afford a little out of his individual income for future study.

Weaker sense of a working-class family and lower middle-class backgrounds. He tended to be left-wing⁶. He was a furniture maker's apprentice, a carpenter's mate, a bookseller's assistant, an enlisted airman, a plumber's mate, a farm labourer, a seed sorter, a kitchen porter, and a pastry cook⁷. He had no god-father to rescue him from the dust and slush. Yet schooling he had had

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3. Lawrence Mitcheil : Mid-century Drama, p. 194
 4. W.N. Medlicott : Contemporary England (1914-1964), p. 506
 5. Ronald Hayman : The Set-up, p. 236
 6. I. Quenna : Britain Today, p. 196
 7. The Cocker Trilogy, p. 1

the ground was being prepared for him to take the task of a literary artist. When many of the westerners saved money for investment⁸, and when everybody made money during the war⁹, his father cared little for it, and obviously had little or no prospect at all. He had, therefore, to struggle as much as any toiling man. He had, however, ample scope to have a slip and a fall as a slum-dweller, or he might have been a renegade like Monty Blatt¹⁰, Bibby Hobson¹¹ or Alfred Harrington¹². But his is the way quite different from theirs. There were two ways open for him - to tread on the way to individualism symbolising the loneliness of modern man with a view to serving the interests of the establishment or upholding the greater cause of his class conjuring up inspiring ideals from arid Marxist jargon and humanism. He brings his words in tune with the grandeur and achievement of actual life. Weaker prefers the latter because he has a profound sympathy for the class to which he belongs, and he never abandons his class as W. H. Auden, Arthur Koestler and many others did.

With the keen eye of an observer he observed that while the industrial labourers in a city like London actually got two rooms

8. Gunnar Myrdal : Asian Drama, abridged by H. S. King, p. 30

9. Arnold Weaker : Chicken Soup with Barley, II, 1

10. a character in Chicken Soup with Barley

11. a character in Weaker's I'm Talking about Jerusalem

12. a character in Weaker's Their very own and Golden City.

along with civic amenities, to the farm labourers in the countryside civic facilities were real luxury. When Professor Myrdal claimed that the western countries were entering an era of rapid development¹³ or when Doctor Benstein saw greater social equality in post-war England¹⁴, Tasker observed that the real condition in the rural areas in England was worse than that in the cities and towns. The rural people had to spend nights on squallid beds and to live in the countryside that smelt "like a cow with diarrhoea"¹⁵. Unemployment and insecurity of service were the constant companions of the labourers¹⁶ either in a city or in the country although some documents bear evidence to the contrary¹⁷. Britain had been turned into a big kitchen that catered for the needs of many countries of the world¹⁸, although Britain failed to solve unemployment problem even in 1963¹⁹. A chain of efficient labourers in co-ordination with a salary-earning class was, therefore, necessary to fight against the massive evils of unemployment and insecurity. This salary-earning class is, however, the product of the capitalist society and may reasonably be classified as the new middle class. This class may be small in number in comparison with the working class, but it does exert not a little influence in society. Let us see the position of this class in relation to the working class:

13. Tasker : Years of Presentation, p. 120

14. Ibid., p. 235

15. op.cit. I'm Talking about Jerusalem, II, 1

16. J. C. Hardman : Britain in the Modern World, pp. 90-91

17. Sidney Pollard : The Development of British Economy, p. 347

18. W. Friedman : An Introduction to World Politics, p. 222

19. op.cit. Contemporary England, p. 561 and p. 565

In 1939 the salary-earning class numbered only about 3,000,000 whereas the wage-earners in industry were about 10,000,000, in the 'commercial proletariat' of shop assistants and warehouse workers another 3,000,000 and the workers in personal service and miscellaneous wage-earning occupations yet another 3,000,000 - in all 16,000,000 (or with the agricultural workers 17,000,000) of wage-earners as against 3,000,000 of salary-earners²⁰.

The working class people, as the above scrap of evidence shows, far outnumber the salary-earning class, and yet they have no qualitative prominence in the super-structure of the society. The irony is that while they remain in the background, the salary-earning class

lived along the by-pass roads, they crowded more into the shopping centres, they thronged theatres and shows in the middle of the great towns much more than the wage-earners. They were above all visible in London; and their very obtrusiveness led easily to an over-impression of prevailing propensity²¹.

Let us see, in this connection, what the condition of the people of the upper class inclusive of industrial bourgeois, and commercial bourgeois of the society is in Britain. They are glugged with wealth, glory and ostentation; their pomp and splendour is in evidence everywhere.

Since the Industrial Revolution there have been political, social as well as economic changes, but those hardly touch the lower strata, with the exception of some changes in the super-structure of society there is no radical change after the second world war which, we assume, shook the foundation of British economy.²²

20. G.D.H. Cole and Raymond Postage : The Common People, pp. 616-657

21. Ibid.

22. "In 1945 America lent Britain £ 3,750 million, to be repaid over fifty years at 2% interest". op. cit. Britain in the Modern World, p. 91.

The picture of the post-war Britain is not at all brilliant:

There had been no equivalent change in the distribution of property. Industrial capital was still held mainly by a fairly limited class; rent, interest and profits still accounted for about one-third of the gross national product, as against two-thirds for wages, salaries and forces' pay; more than one-third of the total number of incomes over £ 135 were still under £ 200 a year. The great majority of those who died still had almost nothing to leave to their successors²³.

Here we have a glimpse of the miserable condition of the working people too. They have been steering the wheels of progress and prosperity, they are actually the pillars upon which rest the safety and security of the ruled, but it is an irony of history that, in return, what they receive is neither enough nor honourable. Yet the funny thing is that the working-class families, who form the majority, pay more in taxes and contributions than they receive in social service benefits²⁴. The possibility of equality and equal opportunities are, however, completely denied to this class. There is the accumulation of capital on the one hand, and the deprivation of the working people of adequate opportunities on the other. With the unerring eye of a social scientist Arnold Wesker snarls and looks at such a colossal waste.

But the people who are deprived of their socio-economic rights are not slow to react. They voice their protests:

23. Cole & Postage: The Common People, op. cit. p. 688

24. Sidney Pollard: The Development of British Society, p. 408

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The immediate post-war years were marked by serious industrial conflict, and the workers were looking for fundamental, social policies. They want nationalisation of mines, railways, and land, a capital levy, and an end to poverty and class distinctions²⁵.

The fact is that neither the Parliament nor the establishment was ready to meet their legitimate demands. The toiling people, as a result, resorted to relentless struggle for a better living. What they actually did was to have recourse to socialist movement against the political and economic doldrums²⁶. Left-wing associations for the working people and of the working people were constituted. Arnold Jucker, in his teens, became a member of the Young Communist League that chiefly aimed at socialism. They did not prefer Platonic Communism that ultimately aims at intellectual aristocracy, but they advocated modern socialism that aims at socialization of all the means of production by the working people. Jucker was nurtured^e in such an atmosphere of socialist family, breathed among the socialists and made himself prominent with the socialists²⁷.

The movement of the toiling people, however, did not altogether go in vain. Some progress was made, no doubt, for the low-income group, and special protection was provided for the sick, the unemployed, the old and the widows²⁸; L.C.C. block of flats

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25. F.L. Jarman : Socialism in Britain, p. 152
26. W.L. Langham : The World since 1919, p. 622
27. Ronald Hayman : The Set-up, op. cit., p. 154
28. W. Ebenstein, Today's World, op. cit. p. 236

were constructed at the end of the war and the working class was a little more respectable²⁹, but all these were meagre palliatives.

There has been limited progress, and

poverty has not entirely disappeared There is still hunger, cold, preventable disease and there is still the demoralising fear and the lowly social place that have ever been the lot of the poor. Moreover, they were made up not merely of the eccentric or the unemployable, but of men and women passing through a phase in a normal life which might easily become a phase in the lives of many, perhaps of a majority of the population³⁰.

The flank of the society remains tacit to the interest of the working man who cannot but mobilise themselves through trade union movements. Consequently the trade unions are continuing their traditional policy of freedom of action in wage bargaining³¹. Thus Britain becomes the hot-bed of the two conflicting forces. But the qualitative integration in the camp of the capitalist proves stronger than the quantitative integration in the camp of the toiling masses. Socialism is, therefore, a far cry in Britain.

At the end of the fearful second world war, the prize the working people sought was not won as well. Beside the developments in machine technology Britain has yet to tilt against the giants like want, disease, ignorance, squalor, idleness and disillusion at home.

29. G. S. Leaker : Chicken Soup, II, 1

30. G. S. Collard : Development of British Economy op. cit. pp.504-505

31. G. S. Jarman : Socialism in Britain op. cit. p. 174

The excitement of the first 'total' war and the subsequent reaction left Britain a complete washout. The prevalent mood of disillusionment that was such analogous to that of T.S. Eliot's wasteland, was in the air. While the British life, as a demand of history, was tending towards metropolis (owing partly to the liberation of British colonies and partly to liberal principles), British plays either were tending to use verse to decorate a romantic action, or began using old realistic social drama rarely dealing with acute social problems, or dealt with the various experiments in more imaginative styles³². Those dramatists most probably forgot that drama is an integral part of life and it ought to respond to the facts of contemporary life. The statement made by Raymond Williams in his article "Recent English Drama" is worth quoting here :

What was wrong, it was widely felt and argued, was that the speech and action of the typical majority theatre were miles away from contemporary life³³.

The British people have life of unrest and fragmentary living. Therefore they will not definitely be blamed if they seek to arise with a determination more cautious, but even more dauntless.³⁴

32. A. Nicoll : British Drama, p. 324

33. Boris Ford (ed) : Helicon Guide to English Literature, Vol. 7
p. 501

34. A.S. Hollins : English Literature of the Twentieth Century,
p. 2

During the time of Shakespeare the life depicted in the British drama was mainly of the aristocratic or of the upper class people of the society, and the Restoration theatre became almost exclusively identified with, and supported by, the middle and upper classes³⁵. These people played the most important roles in art and literature. The ordinary working people, who were introduced into the plays, used to play, indeed, the inferior roles. Twentieth century drama begins to have a sociological bias and it tends to come to terms with the material conditions of modern life³⁶.

The twentieth century modern drama is modern in the sense that it, more or less, reflects modern life either from the psychological, biological or sociological point of view or from the viewpoint of sheer technique. But most of the modern British dramatists, who are much more age-conscious, aim at conveying their purpose using in general the central character as their mouthpiece, or tending to follow in the footsteps of Shaw who through Back to Methuselah (1923) look forward to the time when the life force is freed from the bondage of matter, where there is 'no people, only

35. John Allen : History of British Drama, p. 173

36. H. Grierson and J. E. Smiths : A Critical History of English Poetry, p. 491

thought'³⁷, or are ready to compromise with the conservative tastes of the commercial theatres³⁸. Sometimes problems are posed either to invite a solution or to defy it. Sometimes their inspiring motive is to criticise, overtly or covertly, some characteristics of society or social, industrial or familial life. But all they aim at is either the sheer entertainment of the theatre-fans who constitute mostly the middle class people or gratification of their own intellectual passion for the display of dramatic art. But evidently they seldom reflect in their works the hopes and aspirations of the common man. There are occasions when the dramatic artists take refuge in the ivory tower of poetic drama, or resort to the outworn shibboleths of the past decades, or their characters are apt to use the language of Babel³⁹. It will not perhaps be irrelevant here to quote what Carl Radex opines in his article "Contemporary world literature and the task of proletarian art":

The artists of dying capitalism seek to hide themselves under the cloak of impartiality. They are sceptics; they are convinced that they believe in nothing although the very essence of their work is a faith that this decaying world will exist for ever⁴⁰.

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37. R. Hartnall (ed) : Oxford companion to the theatre, p. 203
38. G. S. Fraser : The Modern writer and the world, p. 37
39. Vladimir : Charming evening we're having.
Estragon : Unforgettable.
Vladimir : and it's not over.
Estragon : apparently not.
Vladimir : It's only the beginning.
Estragon : It's awful.
Vladimir : It's worse than being at the theatre.
Estragon : The circus.
Vladimir : The music hall.
Estragon : The circus / Samuel Beckett: Waiting for Godot, I
40. B. P. Mukore (ed.) : Dramatic Theory and Criticism, p. 98

Attempts in literature and art are, however, made as a means of enriching individuals or groups quite independent of the common cause of the working people. This is, to be precise, the common feature till the fifties of the twentieth century in spite of the realistic endeavours at the beginning of the twentieth century.

If the interests of the minority are cared for, those of the majority cannot be ignored for an unlimited period of time. The stages that were catering mostly for the needs of the minority had been preparing to offer scopes for the majority. The trend of a change, however, was discernible :

Since 1965 interest has shifted from the poetic dramatists like Fry to a group of playwrights who have reacted violently against the stereotyping processes of mass civilisation, the regimentations of the welfare state, and the anxieties of the atomic age. They suspect that contemporary democracy is a facade concealing an oligarchical establishment, which they associate with an effete middle-class morality, imperialism, the use of nuclear weapons, and capital punishment. Hence they have created a drama of protest and satire, which exalts the non-conformist, the misfit, and the martyr, and sympathizes at times with the frustrations and fears of the common man⁴¹.

Slowly but steadily the ground was prepared for the common man, or precisely, the working class who, according to V.I. Lenin, are the flowers of the country, its strength and its future⁴². These common people are present in the plays of the previous ages

41. P. Martmel (ed.) : Oxford Companion to Literature, op.cit. p.200

42. V.I. Lenin : On Literature and Art, p. 36

no doubt, but they are not the principal characters. They are the objects rather than the subjects. The time is, however, ripe, the ground is prepared too:

Protest was in the air, and the mood of the country, especially, that of England, veered sharply from the preciosity and dilettantism which had been in vogue at the universities and elsewhere for the last few years to one of grim political consciousness⁴³.

All that is needed is a timely jerk by a competent person who himself should have the working-class origin⁴⁴. It is Arnold Wesker who has to conform to all the conditions to come forward to promote the cause of the working people and to use contemporary reality as the basis of art, to emphasize the new world of the working class over the dying world of aristocrats and moneyed class. While the bourgeois society, according to Olive Bell⁴⁵, is about to sever economics from moral norms to allow the individual to pursue his own self-defined wants or propagate the ideas of the ruling class which upholds the glossy images of glamour and sex, promoting the hedonistic way of life and promising the voluptuous gratification of the lineaments of desire - Wesker is out to explore

43. John Dussel Taylor : anger and After, pp. 36-36

44. Cf. in his poem 'Niketan' (or the concert) Rab. Tagore (1861-1941), the first Nobel laureate (1913) of Asia for literature, was under the impression that the working class people would come to the forefront of literature.

45. in an article "Modernism & Capitalism" in Partisan Review/2, 1973, Vol. XLV no. 2 p. 217

a cultural hegemony, which according to a critic⁴⁶ may be defined as a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of living.

2. Wesker's idea about the world and the people he deals with

To live is to fight with trolls
in the vault of the heart and brain;
to write - that is to hold
Judgement Day over oneself⁴⁷.

Henrik Ibsen knew that a man must fight with odds; so must the artist. Heroic or not an artist is willy-nilly to wage war against something. It is particularly true in the case of an artist who is more earthly, materialistic and independent of bourgeois aberrations. But however powerful the artist may be he is expected not to go against his own class sympathies and political prejudices for "each individual, each civilization, each age", according to Murray Guyman⁴⁸, "will arrive at different points of emphasis according to its own need and history".

A dramatic artist too, ought to comply with the need of history and the need of art at the same time. He should neither be a victim of silence nor be prone to desperate actions. His is the way that most probably lies midway between 'silence' and 'desperate actions'. Arnold Wesker evidently believes in the third way, that

46. Raymond Williams : Marxism and Literature, p. 110

47. James McFarlane (ed.) : Henrik Ibsen, p. 402

48. UNESCO : The Arts of Man, p. 11

is the midway. He is not ready to dart out with a sword in hand either to jab or hack. He has a mightier weapon - and it is the art which weaker like Ibsen⁴⁹ prefers to wield. He may be said to have scorned the social and literary traditions, or his writing might have been deliberately anti-intellectual, but he forced people to think for he had something new to say⁵⁰.

Art, we know, is the affirmation of definite viewpoints in life. Again the artist's viewpoint may be progressive or reactionary. When an artist deviates from truth to life inevitably combining with the propagation of amoral principles leading to the forfeiture by art of its ethical significance he becomes a reactionary artist⁵¹, because art is always bound up with morals. Again art depending on social consciousness is inseparable from politics, religion or philosophy, and to sever art from these elements is to deprive it of its life blood. Therefore, the aesthetic function of art is to help people to cultivate a definite social and aesthetic ideal and develop their artistic capacities on the one hand, and to reflect the truth of life reproduced according to the laws of art on the other. Weaker through his works attempts to perform this task in two ways, and that is his ends.

49. "The thinker and artist Ibsen represents the spirit of man, fighting for its rights - nay, for its existence - in a mechanized world". - Eric Bentley : The Modern Theatre, p. 39

50. R. Musman : Britain Today, p. 197

51. A. Lis in an article on "axiological (value) aspects of art in the light of interaction of forms of social consciousness" translated by K. Harwood from the Russian in the volume Marxist-Leninist Aesthetics and Life (a collection of articles of many authors) edited by I. Sulikova and A. Lis, p. 61

Stepney in London's East End, where Mosker was born and brought up, was a place for the working people. The twentieth century, that has entered upon the nuclear age, has given these people a little. The rights of these people are either usurped or are almost denied to them. This, according to a critic⁵², happens because they live in a world where two cultures stand in opposition to each : one brings to mankind the high ideals of freedom, peace and the flowering of the human personality and by its very nature is profoundly creative; the other is a false culture inextricably rooted in the philosophy of the bourgeoisie, an art which promulgates the most reactionary and inhuman ideas of the age.

There is no doubt about it that working people are occasionally given the opportunity to appear in plays. But it is a matter of pity that the appropriate position and prestige cannot be given adequately even by those play-rights who themselves descend from the same class. It is unhappy to observe that many of them maintain and strengthen the foundations of exploiting society, which stifles man's longing for freedom and raises him in the spirit of antihumanism and distrust in ideals. Credit, therefore, goes to Mosker who is passionately interested in defending the interests of the most revolutionary class, that is, the working class, in order to defend the true interests of humanity. So he is attached to that literature which is, according to a critic⁵³, an

52. Yuri Hambash : Aesthetics and Poetry, p. 11

53. N. Vokhrevko : Socialist Realism and the Modern Literary Process, pp. 115-116

inseparable part of literature, imbued with conscious historical perspective and with this conscious aspiration to remake life, and literature that is truly meaningful.

The English plays after the Second World War did not, in general, defend the true interests of humanity, but sometimes portrayed the loneliness of life belittling people's role as a trailer to bourgeois life and culture. Wesker is the first 'successful' English dramatist⁵⁴ who takes infinite pains to bring the people of his own class to a sharp focus free from naturalism, sentimentalism and barren symbolism. There are, in his plays, dirt and disease, love and loss, happiness along with misery, hope and despair, faith and disillusionment — but Wesker in the line of Malraux⁵⁵ chooses natural circumstances and turns them into elements of truth, that is to recast the truth of life into the artistic truth most equivalent to it for portraying the world as it is.

The mirror, that Wesker uses for this purpose, is the plain mirror, neither concave nor convex to produce distorted figures.

Consequently his mirror reflects the life-like pictures of the real people of his class. The people with whom he grows up are brought

54. It is the time to remember that "the working class themes were introduced to the theatre sixty years ago by Maxim Gorky and his lead was soon followed in the country by Stanley Houghton, Harold Brighouse and others". — J. L. Brown and B. Harris (eds.): Contemporary Theatre, p. 36

55. Œuvres complètes de Honoré de Malraux. Œuvres diverses, III (1936-1943), Paris, 1940, p. 320 quoted from A. Leiserov's article "The birth of a new art" in the book Marxist-Leninist Aesthetics and Life, edited by I. Kulikova and A. Lis, op. cit. p. 156

to the limelight. Moreover, he takes the task of reflecting their striving for a better lot and the desire to shake off the shame of the shabby past. For he believes like Lenin who once said that art belongs to the people and it ought to extend its deep roots into the very thick of the broad toiling masses.

The plays of Yeats may rightly be called the plays of the working-class people and for the working-class people. In a sense, his plays toll the death-knell of the exploiters, and at the same time, invoke and pave the way for the exploited. So his aim is the manifestation of human reality, human activity and human suffering in an awkward predicament.

Yeats, it is certain, never prepares himself to justify the ways of God to men as Milton attempted in his grand epic, or to show the universe as divine Providence as Dante did, or to depict man as a blind and helpless plaything of an inscrutable power as in the Shakespearean tragic heroes, or to show the characters as mere mechanisms of accidents and coincidence as in Thomas Hardy's, but he is determined to save the toiling masses from the imminent 'lunatic waste of life':

Living is filled with a thousand clashes and problems — from the problems of the world around us to those of our own personal relationship. God knows that it is possible to have lived and fought and still not know what it was all about—but to have lived and not fought at all, to have lived and never stirred beyond one room—this is desperately sad, this is surely a lunatic waste of life⁵⁵.

55. W. Yeats: SEAS of Fragmentation, op. cit. p. 33

True, the people he deals with in his works does not always prosper, but they find considerable importance from the ruling people. In dealing with the life of the ruled in the background of the life of the ruler Arnold Wesker does not ultimately bring in the eternal note of sadness as did Matthew Arnold in his Dover Beach, but he wages war against despair, for art to him is not an organ of surrender, but a challenge. There is no doubt about it that he presents the littleness of everyday life of the ruled, but there lies his greatness too when he manages to suggest the largeness of their everyday life⁵⁷. Wesker may, therefore, be regarded as the bard of all the infinite variety of the working-class epoch.

Wesker as a literary artist is endeavouring to make it felt that the new working-class—the most revolutionary class—is rising up to usher in a new era. The labouring people who had so far been ignored or relegated to the background come up to assert themselves, and Wesker is ready to uphold their cause through his art. Their role may not be regarded as "a profound illumination of the contemporary dilemma" nor as "a portrayal of sordid nihilism in the post-atomic age" as Sir Ifor Evans⁵⁸ observed. Wesker diagnoses the malady and gives a clarion call to the workers and makes them veer round him⁵⁹. He intends to plead for their cause

57. G. Bentley : The Life of the Theatre, op. cit. p. 7

58. I. Evans : A Short History of English Literature, p. 148

59. It is the objective behind opening Centre 42, a cultural organisation directed by Wesker.

and attacks the capitalist society with the confidence of a passionate, rational socialist, with a firm determination to use his art consciously to promote ideas and devise ways for their better living.

Hecker is the last man to suggest a solution or to prescribe a curative medicine, because he is essentially an artist for the working people. He sees their great survival in the modern age. In this regard we are reminded of a story about Bertolt Brecht, one of the chief exponents of modern German drama:

Somebody once asked him what the purpose of a good play ought to be. He answered by describing a photograph he had seen in a magazine, a double-page spread of Tokyo after the earthquake. Amid the devastation, one building remained upright. The caption consisted of two words: 'Steel stood'. That, said Brecht, was the purpose of drama - to teach us how to survive⁶⁰.

Hecker does not intend to make the working people the cannon-fodder of capitalism, but, on the contrary, he attempts to inspire them to stand erect. Playwriting, to him, is to teach them how to survive. Therefore, he begins to tell stories — and this is his art — a sort of hymn in praise of man.

3. His indebtedness to authors, and his distinctive qualities with a note of modernity.

It was Shakespeare who never took the trouble of inventing a story for his own play. He could, quite easily, ransack a

60. Kenneth Tynan: Surveys, p. 461

Boccaccio, or Cinthio, or a Latin Grammarian, or a belated for the materials of his plays. Wesker takes neither a story nor a plot from any of his predecessors. Yet he is indebted to a thousand and one authors. It is true that he hardly takes refuge in nature, nor does he make an escape in the timeless realm beyond the grave, but he finds men in slums, language or dialect in countryside, life in restaurants or struggle in military barracks — all as a journey in the realm before the grave. The immediate predecessors to whom Wesker is indebted most are not all English or European, but he remains indebted to those from either shore of the Atlantic Ocean. Behind Shakespeare we behold Plautus, Terence and Seneca, behind Shaw we behold Ibsen and Strindberg, behind Wesker we do behold Maurice Ibsen, Maxim Gorky, Anton Chekhov, Clifford Odets, D.H. Lawrence, Arthur Miller, Sean O'Casey, Eugene O'Neill, Bertolt Brecht, John Osborne, and many others. Yet he is believed to have been advocating something radical with the insistence that his is the play to meet the needs of a new scientific age.

It is worth noting here that many of the above dramatists are themselves of working-class origin or deal with the people belonging to this class. They pave the way for Wesker along which he moves. But he is never their blind follower, nor does he always take finished materials from them. He may have borrowed a plume or two from them, but the artistry is absolutely his own. It is through the alchemy of art that he reflects life through his works absolutely in accordance with the exigencies of circumstances.

Wesker may have been influenced by the poetic language and the realistic pictures of Ibsen and Gorky's faith in the brotherhood of man and the hopefulness of the new generation. Wesker's The Kitchen is, we may say, an age-wise improvement of Chekhov's The Cherry Orchard (1904); he is influenced, to a great extent, by Ibsen's Waiting for Lefty (1936) and Wake and Sing (1936) for his devotion to social realities. To D.H. Lawrence in general and to his Sons and Lovers (1913) in particular, Wesker owes much for his TRAGEDY. Modern capitalist civilization thwarts the spirit of both Lawrence and Wesker, but while Lawrence burrowed in the dark either resorting to an orgy of sex or evoking the fertility images of English culture, Wesker invents a means to present a vivid and realistic picture of the working people either of town or country to whom change was a trajectory of the culture. He is one with Arthur Miller who aimed to present man as the creature of society, and at the same time as its creator. He catches the whole atmosphere of working-class life as Sean O'Casey, and he listens to the language of the London slums as Sean O'Casey listened to that of the Dublin poor. Yet there is a striking difference between the two. Sean O'Casey gave Ireland its first true proletarian drama in the two masterpieces Juno and the Paycock, and The Plough and the Stars, but his realism, according to John Gascoyer, was not nourished on the soil⁶¹ whereas his later plays deviate from his

61. John Gascoyer: The Treasure of the Theatre, p. 510

earlier faith. But even a severe critic of Wecker may not find such a vulnerable point. If Wecker is directly indebted to anybody for his play The Friends it is Longinus Laughed (1928) by Eugene O'Neill. Both the plays pronounce an affirmation of belief in humanity and the ultimate triumph of life over death. Sometimes the use of raw language and some moments of The Kitchen are reminiscent of O'Neill too. Wecker would have been greatly influenced by Brecht both from the viewpoints of technique and subject-matter. He has followed the manner of Brecht who, according to a modern critic⁶², analysed the social facts or produced an active desire for the overthrow of the existing social order. Wecker takes his cue from Osborne's Look Back in Anger for his portraiture of angry persons in The Kitchen.

However indebted Wecker may have been, he has some distinctive qualities of his own. To make a proper study of his drama is to make a proper study of the working-class. He tries to expose the hidden meaning rather than to perform the role of a sight-seer. His premise is 'manescape' rather than 'inscape' of man. He does not, in general, aim to hold up the inner psychic realm but to hold up social characters, prefers autopsy of society to that of individuals. There are characters in his works who are allowed to play their roles in a realistic manner, their manners may sometimes border on vulgarity when they are judged from the sophisticated angle of vision. Yet there is not a single

62. Martin Esslin : The Choice of Evils, p. 201

articulation or a hint that smacks of pornography or anything obscene.

While the contemporary prominent dramatists had the general tendency, after their outstanding success on the stage, to look back or to have recourse to remote past or something absurd indicating no destination but advocating "darkness and despair"⁶³, Wesker makes the past, present as well as the future a living element as distinct from those as possible. While such dramatists were making use of the dramatic vocabulary of a newer kind ignoring the prime necessity of their age, Wesker is, however, intent on injecting vitality into his characters making them fit to combat the dark and to invoke the light. He, who has, according to Lawrence Hitchin⁶⁴, a mastery of London or provincial working-class speech rhythms and dialect, regards to dialects and dialectics. Again, while some plead for well-made plays giving vent to bloodless drums, Wesker shows in his plays how life can be sprightly and gay in the garden of a selfish giant of commercialism. Whether it is a flash-back or a flash-forward technique is a secondary question, the primary question, to Wesker, is to find out nobleness in the so-called ignoble strife without having any cause to mourn. Wesker is essentially a rebel. His plays, therefore,

63. Eugene Ionesco in his article "Why do I write" in QUARTY, Vol. 3, No. 32, 1978 writes: If my characters wander uncomprehendingly through darkness and despair, drift in the absurd, it is because no signpost indicates which path they should follow.

64. Lawrence Hitchin: Drama in the Sixties, pp. 99-100

can only be understood in the light of what he rebels against. His plays neither give us the empty photographic replicas of everyday life, nor do they uphold emotional uplift or after-dinner entertainment. His plays convincingly become tools of social engineering and laboratories of social change. His works may, therefore, be regarded as a prelude to the final struggle with the ruling class. Whereas the trend of many of the contemporary dramas is towards contemplating clinical investigation or the creation of a convulsive theatre unleashing a new theatrical hysteria, or merely providing mental nabulus to be gobbled up and then forgotten, his plays depend much on action and sociological implication. While many of the contemporary dramatists take shelter in a glass house to escape heat and fire, wecker plunges into the fire not to be reduced into ashes but to come out like a phoenix alive.

Wecker deals with the community or the class rather than individuals. It is needless to say that so far as the structure of his society is concerned, it is capitalistic — no individuals are sure to come. So come characters like Libby Robson, a disillusioned rootless pessimist who is tired of democracy, civility, civilization or even women. Sometimes he depicts the conflict of self-interests of individuals like Boony and Manny. But almost always his aim is to depict the social feelings or class feelings rather than individual feelings.

All art, to a great extent, is autobiographical. Wecker's art may not be an exception to the rule. If reality be the direct

materials of art, an artist is bound to draw upon from reality. But he knows that art is definitely not the torn pages of a diary nor does it carelessly pick up the tidbits at random from anywhere without deliberate selection and rejection. Neither he designs his works stuffed with pseudo-cultural elements for mass consumption nor does he infuse his works with spy-mania creating super-heroes like James Bond giving a performance of courageous feats signifying nothing. He knows what to take up and use and what to reject. One may detect young wecker in Connie Kahn or Garry, or wecker — the Director of Centre 42 — in Andrew Robham, wecker — the pastry-cook — in Adam preparing an apple strudel, or wecker — the conscripted man of the I.C.C. — in — has or sailor in the sand; his mother in Sarah Kahn; his father in Harry Kahn; his sister in Ida Diamonds; his brother-in-law in Dave Diamonds; his aunts in Jessie and Esther Kahns; his wife in Bessie Bryant. but all these tend to give us an impression of the truth of art and beauty rather than the truth of raw facts only.

Wecker is a master artist not because he introduces autobiographical details in his plays, but because he discovers reality for himself to handle the details in a superb masterly fashion, here the flavour of his personality is not difficult to trace. There lies his mastery where he is able to make his personal feelings impersonal by rediscovering the magic of his life, the joy and harshness of it. He aesthetically perceives the world around and the result of the influence of the environment in which his

personality has been formed from early childhood. Nature, people, the environment, the world of music, the mode of life do not leave him unaffected. Their aesthetic significance is discernible in his works. It is known that a man in a class society is a representative of a definite class and lives in a specific socio-historical environment. Here every personality is characterised by a certain age, sex, and a certain psycho-physiological and psychological nature. Every individual has a world outlook and belongs to one national group or another. This individuality and uniqueness are the sources of his art. So he makes the correct evaluations of reality in class consciousness. He also evaluates the aesthetic taste both of a social group and a separate individual, taking into account that individual taste is determined by the content of the social taste, and by the world outlook and class position of the individual. Thus reality is there in his art. He explores the real condition so that others may react. He makes the subjective things objective, and objective materials subjective without being sentimental or idealistic. Again and again he depends on the re-creation of experience, but his craftsmanship, according to Becker himself, lies in either the organization of experience or the transformation of experience:

In thinking about the structure of my work I have come to consider a possible theory about the composition of any work of art. On the assumption that all art is the re-creation of experience whether imaginative or actual, then the re-creative art happens under two headings, both of which are valid. One heading could be called 'the organization of experience' and, the other

'The transformation of experience' - transformation, that is, into poetry. And from such a theory one should then analyse a work of art to discover how much is organising and how much is transforming an experience. The more moments of transformation one can find, the greater the work of art⁶⁵.

Now a pertinent point may be raised how far Wesker is a modern artist. There are dramatists like Sophocles, Shakespeare, Goethe, Ibsen or Chekhov who may be classified as modern on the ground that their plays do still have some inherent qualities to move the twentieth century audience, and it may perhaps safely be conjectured that they will do so even in the centuries to come. Will Wesker's plays be able to do so? - is a relevant question.

Before we attempt to answer on Wesker let us examine where lies the 'modernity' of the above dramatists or what is our idea about modernism. It is generally seen that all the plays are not those that have made the above dramatists 'modern'. Only those plays that refuse to conform to the traditional norms either in form or in content, seem to be modern. Therefore modernism tends towards the rejection not only of 'old' form but also of 'old' content, that is, the rejection of everything that is hackneyed and haggard, and the acceptance of everything new. The concept of modernism is, according to Ovcharenko⁶⁶, associated mainly or in

65. Ronald Hayman : Arnold Wesker, pp. 9-10

66. A. Ovcharenko : Socialist Realism and the Modern Literary Process, op. cit. p. 50

part with the store of devices and techniques of artistic creativity. It does not necessarily mean Dadaism or surrealism, naturalism or realism, expressionism or symbolism, avant garde or existentialism. It directs our attention to a true unity of new content and new form. It does not simply focus on individuality nor points to the increasing individualising and anthropologising tendencies. It suits the aesthetic tastes of contemporary man but which is not incompatible with the depiction of life in its revolutionary development. Thus it guarantees an unbreakable bond with the life of the people. It has obviously no connexion with anything fetish or thoughtless, but it enriches the treasure house of art with their selection of motifs. Modernism does not necessarily mean that a man should be merely a critical being, nor a hopeless being always at war with a society, but he should be in action to change his conditions, to master life, to keep pace with the course of history and finally to be the creator of his own fate. To weaker modernism means all these.

It is the struggle of the hero against fate or circumstances and the universality of appeal that make Sophocles modern for his plays transcend the bounds of a particular age and a particular society. Shakespeare's modernity lies not in conformity with classical rules but in their rejection. When contemporary dramatists failed, Shakespeare came just at the right moment to make full and fresh use of the drama of his time using the man and the time in harmonious conjunction with each other. It is Shakespeare who

transform the world of thoughts and feelings to move still farther from the animal world into the only real future endowed with sobriety and clarity. It ^{is} ~~has~~ Goethe who did not like to deal with God. He felt himself at home only in the human, and it was this humanity, this emancipation of art from the fetters of religion that determined Goethe's greatness and modernity.

Now inference may safely be drawn that modern dramatist is he who has something novel to profess about either form or content or both. Unlike those of his contemporaries Wesker not only introduces **TRILLOGY**, flash - forwards or compresses one or two decades into a unifying whole, but also is able to explore the possibilities of the working class people in the social, or political context. Politically these people are deemed to be the most determining factor either in abolishing or in maintaining the existence of a capitalist state which is, in fact, the organ of coercion. From the social point of view Wesker is more radical than his contemporary dramatists. His modernity consists in his ability to choose natural circumstances and turn them into elements of truth or his task lies in recasting the truth of life into artistic truth most equivalent to it for portraying the world as it is. He is modern in the sense that he depicts life and the world with perfect verisimilitude reflecting life and society of the age to which the dramatic action belongs.

It may be assumed that under capitalism there is a single cultural hegemony — the ideas of the ruling class. At the start

capitalism repudiated tradition and the authority of the past on the one hand, and sponsored the ideas of liberty and liberation in the shape of unrestrained individualism on the other. Thus capitalism has acted as a brake upon the dying culture and has taken the initiative in promoting change. In this world of capitalist enterprise, according to Daniel Bell⁶⁷, the nominal ethos in the spheres of production and organization is still one of work, delayed gratification, career orientation, devotion to the enterprise.

As a consequence of this contradiction man becomes either the ruler — an embodiment of power, or the ruled — an embodiment of property. In the sphere of social production the capitalist or the ruler becomes the embodiment of power enjoying liberty, and the labour or the ruled, becomes the embodiment of property reduced to slavery.

As far as marriage is concerned the capitalist law is pleased when the couple formally register their desire to get married. What happens behind the legal curtains, where real life is enacted, how this voluntary agreement is arrived at — is no concern of the law which is actually the coercive measure of the capitalist state. As a result of that indifference on the part of the law generally a family fosters the enslavement of women.

67. Daniel Bell's article on "Modernism and Capitalism" in Partisan Review/2 op. cit. pp. 217-218

Wesker in the above light never accepts marriage that is officially sanctioned, for official sanction means sanction of the state as a coercive organ. In a capitalist society matrimony is a contract depositing of the body and mind of persons for life. Since such contract actually means slavery, overt or covert, marriage never takes place in Wesker's works. Secondly, Wesker always sponsors monogamian family where the equality of the sexes is almost maintained. Thirdly, through his works he advocates that full freedom in marriage can never be operative till the abolition of Capitalist production and the removal of property relations. Importance is, therefore, given to mutual affection rather than sex. In this regard he is more modern than many of his contemporaries.

Wesker accepts families mostly consisting of two generations only, but there is not a single play where a marriage takes place ceremoniously. In this respect he is more chauvin than Bernard Shaw himself. Moreover, there is not a single play (except China with Everything which is a play where there is no female character) where a male character remains all along supreme and dominating over the female counterparts. As marriage and male chauvinism are the two essential features of a capitalist society, these are, of course, considered to be not only the relics of coercion, but also taboos to Wesker's works. Peter cannot marry Monique, Rennie cannot marry Beatie. Garry and Harriet like Beatie and Adam live together, love together and even sleep together without thinking of marriage.

4. A dramatist with a mission

"If we search for one single epithet to apply to the modern stage, "so says Professor Nicoll", "we are forced in the end to select the adjective eclectic"⁶⁸. When one has the occasion to come across varieties of drama such as 'impressionistic', 'expressionistic', 'domestic', 'realistic', 'naturalistic', 'surrealistic', 'existentialist', 'avant garde', 'epic', 'absurd' or 'anti-theatre' etc., one is sure to agree with Professor Nicoll. We, at once, come to realize that most of these different 'schools' tend more towards 'form' than towards 'content' proper. Form and content are the different facets of the same gem. Art is never possible without the intermingling of the two, and it is the symmetrical balance of form and content that makes an art, for subject without style, according to H.G. Collingwood⁶⁹, is barbarism, and style without subject is dilettantism.

Yet a question remains ---- which of the two is more important --- form or content? A picture is properly a picture inseparable from the frame and one may be rather disinclined to derive any pleasure out of the picture when it is without the frame. To a lover of pictures, frames may be superfluous. We definitely do not agree with him who rejects the existence of the frame. At the same time we are not at one with him who finds possibility in

68. A. Nicoll : British Drama, 99. cit. p. 267

69. H. G. Collingwood : The Principles of Art, p. 299

the discovery of new forms or techniques at the cost of the extinction of content or subject-matter. We are contented with him who deliberately ignores form for the sake of the content. While the greatness of the Elizabethan age according to Professor Tillyard⁷⁰, contained so much of new without bursting the noble form of the old order, Webster often batters the old form with the new content. While the whole activity of drama was, as observed by John Elson, gripped by establishment forces, monolithic and unchangeable⁷¹, it is Webster who effectively ventures to use drama as a weapon. Even the best known plays of Webster, thus opines Robert Brustein⁷², are characterized by social revolt.

The artist who is to put stress on form is, in general, one who aims chiefly at amusement or entertainment. He has got to tell nothing which is deep. As his chief aim is mere recreation or amusement, he may divorce content for the espousal of newer technique or form. The artist of this category may be a partner of life, but he may possibly be so with the limited liability. His zest for life or even for art may possibly be skin-deep or lip-deep. Therefore whatever he does, he does it with the significant failure of expressing himself freely, fully and forcefully. We may, in a relaxing mood, enjoy his work superficially, but we never expect anything serious from him. Such a type of artist may

70. S.H.. Tillyard : The Elizabethan world picture, p. 6

71. J. Elson : Theatre Outside London, p. 166

72. Robert Brustein : The Theatre of Revolt, p. 22

intend mainly to reside on an ivory tower far away from the common run of people. Wesker is never such an artist. He is a revolutionary as regards subject-matter as well as technique. He stands on the threshold of a new drama. In this regard let us hear what J. Chiari says about him :

He is a very active, industrious writer dedicated to the task of bringing art and enlightenment to the masses. Although ideas and ideals do not necessarily make good art, his enthusiasm is infectious and he has quite a following. Even if one might doubt the soundness of his approach to the problem of enlightening the masses and of improving their lot through art, his heart is in the right place, and one cannot but admire and be prepared to applaud his zeal. Besides that, whatever he may lack, he does not lack boldness of conception⁷³.

The people Wesker deals with are, in general, average run of common men. He takes much interest in them whether they be bus drivers or miners. He realises that art should not be the monopoly for the select few but is for the majority to participate. Let us quote Wesker himself who develops his idea through an article --- 'Let Battle Commence' :

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 myself⁷⁴.

73. J. Chiari : Landmarks of Contemporary drama, p. 115

74. Charles Marowitz, Tom Milne and O. Hale (eds.) : The Modern Theatre, p. 96

He is supposed to have turned into a twentieth century Messiah whose duty is not only to strive for the working class but also to make drama, according to an encyclopedist, the platform of his message of brotherhood for strife-torn humanity and the quest for the fulfilment of individual lives⁷⁵. As wecker believed in neo-brotherhood, he endeavours, on his own account, to unfold new opportunities and possibilities in politics, communication, living and above all, in art⁷⁶. It is, therefore, his business to try art on the working people, but not to ignore them even when they do not sufficiently respond. Garry, for example, with the assistance of some of his friends reads poems and plays on guitar to the factory-workers during their recess hours with some success, but ultimately he does not despair of continuing his attempt with art.

Wecker upholds his task for he has firm faith in socialism⁷⁷; but to him, it is not merely an 'ism' as other professed 'isms' are. Socialism is, to him, what oxygen is to a living creature. The socialism he seeks and adores is not the Fabian Socialism as Bernard Shaw believed in or Guild Socialism as Bertrand Russell propagated or Utopian Socialism as Robert Owen, Francis Charles Fourier, Saint-simon or William Morris believed in. To him socialism

75. Myron Matlaw : Modern World Drama, p. 813

76. Marowitz, Milne and Hale (eds.) : The Modern Theatre, op. cit. pp. 110-111

77. A. Wecker : Chickens down with Barley, III, 11 ("Socialism is my light ... A way of life" tells Sarah to Ronnie)

is a 'living', a 'singing', 'a dancing' and above all, it is being concerned about people and the world⁷⁸. Menzies is a propagator of this type of socialism to which Beattie Bryant is initiated as well as baptized. Socialism and art are, to Yecker, but the two lungs of an organic whole.

Yecker believes in nothing that is stagnant and stereotyped. He believes in everything that is dynamic and progressive. To him the purpose of life is the perpetual re-enactment of the first great myth of all time: the creation of order out of chaos. If to search order out to chaos is a mission, he is a missionary; if to find out diapason under a heap of jarring atoms is the task of a prophet, he is a prophet. Whether he is a missionary or a prophet is a secondary question; he is primarily an artist who finds chaos around him, but attempts to crystallize it into an art of harmonious order — an art that strives to steer a course amidst cacophony towards symphony. He finds chaos in an affluent society that probably moves from distraction to distraction. But he feels the necessity of bringing order into life through drama as well as through theatre. He is put to gaol for his protest against nuclear diplomacy. His attempts for the propagation of culture for the members of the trade unions through Centre Forty Two may have proved baffling, yet he is never ready for snapping his ties with art which is his first love and perhaps the last resort. He cannot have mid-day siesta till the general malaise persists. Menzies may

78. Yecker : 1961a, II, 11

be there, but he is to carry the banner of eros, or the life-
instinct in the midst of Thanatos, or the death-instinct. He
declares the glory of man or the resurrection of mankind. Thus
Wesker with the earnestness of an artist, assimilates the
intellectual ferment of his times as if by Osmosis. He does not
care to capture all the phenomena presented by the Europe of
sixties and seventies, but he is able to produce man's aspirations
that affect him most. While many of Wesker's contemporaries are
hopeless about the revival of humanity, it is Wesker who is not
only hopeful about the role of humanity, but he tries to
materialise it through his works as if ushering in a new era. We
are of the opinion that humanism has definitely added a new dimen-
sion to his plays. We are even prepared to say that in his plays
there is a cross-fertilization of humanism, social realism and
autobiographical elements⁷⁹.

79. T. A. Monk : *Britain (1945-1970)*, p. 384