

**SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION OF WORKING CLASS THROUGH SELF  
EXPRESSION AND EDUCATION: A STUDY OF ARNOLD WESKER'S  
*ROOTS***

**Dr Anil Sehrawat**

Assistant Professor,  
Jaypee University of Information Technology,  
Waknaghat, Solan,  
Himachal Pradesh 173234

**Deler Singh**

Associate Lecturer,  
Jaypee University of Information Technology,  
Waknaghat, Solan,  
Himachal Pradesh 173234

**Abstract**

Arnold Wesker shows his preoccupation with the working-class conditions in Britain in many of his plays. His genuine anxiety about the lack of culture in the workers' lives and his passionate plea for the upliftment of their lives merges into an exploration of the possibility of human fulfillment in an industrial society. He believes that once these people, who form the foundations of the society, are awakened culturally, they can be stirred morally and socially also. His chief concern is the welfare of working class society. This paper deals with his play *Roots* which proves Wesker as a socially committed writer who consistently searches for the establishment of a humanitarian society. The play *Roots* tries to examine the viability of means other than socialism, such as language, knowledge, art and culture to improve the impoverished lot of the agrarian workers in post-war Britain. Also, Wesker tries to emphasize the importance of spiritual and social emancipation in a capitalist society.

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which proves Wesker as a socially committed writer who consistently searches for the establishment of a humanitarian society. The play *Roots* tries to examine the viability of means other than socialism, such as language, knowledge, art and culture to improve the impoverished lot of the agrarian workers in post-war Britain. Also, Wesker tries to emphasize the importance of spiritual and social emancipation in a capitalist society.

*Roots* take into account only a fortnight in the life of Beatie Bryant, “an ample, blonde, healthy-faced young woman of twenty-two years” (*TWT* 86). In the Norfolk village things moved slowly and centered round the small family circle. Without any breath of fresh air from the outside world, their poverty is unmitigated. It is a life which is industriously devoted to the elementary needs of the family and governed by petty personal concerns devoid of any spiritual element. This play is the playwright’s attempt to understand the plight of the working class and to show that lack of education, lack of awareness, acceptance of social injustice and preference for third rate art are the root causes of their degradation. Tom Costello rightly observes *Roots* as “a representative play of modern English naturalism: the focus in the text on working - class culture, the Norfolk dialect, characters presented as determined by environment and habit, the sense of the play having been written as an expose for a particular moment and point in historic time, and last, but not least, the dullness, monotony and literal tone of so much of the dialogue.” (Costello 39)

In the first two acts of the play, we witness the routine life of the Bryants in poverty stricken households, where the bath has to be filled with a bucket, where time is measured by the distant murmur of a bus, where there is “no water laid on, nor electricity, nor gas” (*TWT* 85). There is a strange silence shown through the stage directions:

This is silence that needs organizing. Throughout the play there is no sign of intense living from any of the characters ... They continue in a routine rural manner. The day comes, one sleeps at night, there is always the winter, the spring, the autumn, and the summer - little amazes them. They talk in fits and starts mainly as a sort of gossip, and they talk quickly too, enacting as though for an audience what they say. Their sense of humour is keen and dry. They show no affection for each other- though this does not mean they would not be upset were one of them to die. The silences are important - as important as the way they speak, if we are to know them. (*TWT* 92)

The un-stimulating Norfolk rural environment where these farm workers live seems to be the basic cause of their rootlessness, alienation, selfishness, apathy and lack of communication. Their relationships are impoverished, lacking in humanity. For example, Mr. Bryant does not allow his daughter Beatie to prepare a cake for his other daughter Jenny. He says: “I aren't spendin' money on electricity bills so's you can make every Tom, Dick 'n' Harry a sponge cake, that I aren't" (*TWT* 120).

There appears to be no love among the family members as they seem to be emotionally dead. Beatie’s sister, Jenny Beales greets her “with reserve” (*TWT* 87). When Beatie asks her: “Are you in love with Jimmy? (*TWT* 97), she replies, “Love? I don’t believ in any of that squit- we just got married, an’ that’s that (*TWT* 97). Her mother's first reaction on seeing her daughter is “Blust, you made me jump” (*TWT* 108), followed by “Well, you've arrived then” (*TWT* 108). These people stop talking to each other over petty issues. Pearl, Mrs. Bryant's daughter-in-law,

quarrels with her and they stop talking to each other. When Beatie's parents quarrel they don't speak straight to each other and use their daughter as the intermediary. Mrs. Bryant is not on speaking terms with her daughter Susan also. Mrs Bryant's talks are petty and trivial as is shown by Wesker in the stage direction:

She spends most of the day on her own, and consequently when she has a chance to speak to anybody she says as much as she can as fast as she can ... She speaks very loudly all the time so that her friendliest tone sounds aggressive, and she manages to dramatize the smallest piece of gossip into something significant. Each piece of gossip is a little act done with little looking at the person to whom it is addressed. (*TWT* 106)

Mrs. Bryant, most of the times talks about meaningless things and repeats her illogical conversations. Benedict Nightingale rightly observes: “After the spritely language of the Kahns in *Chicken Soup with Barley* the very rhythms of these Norfolk people seem numb and dead, incapable of expressing the least enthusiasm or excitement” (Nightingale 322). Wesker attributes Norfolk people’s inability to express themselves to their lack of education and knowledge about art and culture. They are concerned only about their families and are ignorant about their surroundings. The following dialogue between Beatie and Jimmy very aptly confirms this point:

Beatie : Do you know how the British Trade Union Movement started? And do you believe in strike action ?

Jimmy: No to both those.

Beatie: What you goin’ to war to defend then? (*TWT* 94)

Jimmy is not only unaware about working class movement, but he also serves as a divisive force for the movement. When Beatie, Jenny and Jimmy are talking about the strike in London, Jimmy says: “They wanna call as Territorials out- we'd soon break the strike” (*TWT* 92). Like others, he does not at all react to any social or political issues such as price rise, exploitation and sackings by the employers. Instead his attitude is that of total apathy. Similarly, Beatie's father accepts without question Mr. Healey's decision that after eighteen years of work on the farm he should now be put on a casual labour and half wages. Instead, he cringes before the manager “I can manage, sir-'course I can” (*TWT* 119) which shows the oppressions of rural agricultural labour. When Beatie asks her father to fight against the sackings, he says: “You can't, you can't-that's what I say, you can't. Sharp as a pig's scream they are-you just can't do nothing” (*TWT* 120). Because of their ignorance for their values and rights, Norfolk farm labourers become vulnerable to the exploiters. They shut the world outside and in the process get themselves ignored by it. Glenda Leeming rightly perceives the entire situation when she says that, “Roots here are what give a sense of belonging to a world that has purpose, instead of which her family are helpless passengers, ignored by those in power” (Leeming 45).

Wesker's greatest concern here is that 'social upliftment of the working class can be made possible by their active participation in social and political issues which will in turn depend on their education. These Norfolk proletariats are irresponsible and take everything casually. They pass judgment on anyone in a casual manner but when it comes to taking responsibility, they fail to express themselves. For example, when Frank reads from a paper about a boy, who assaulted an old woman being imprisoned for six years, Mrs. Bryant is quick to add that she would have given him more. But when she is put in the role of a judge, she finds herself lost. Beatie is anguished to say, “Then why do you sit and pass judgment on people” (*TWT* 138). Wesker wants to show that their mental faculties are blocked and they don't want to open them.

Beatie, the central character of the play, becomes the mouthpiece of Wesker in exposing conservatism, stubbornness, inertia, and triviality, incoherence and untidiness of the working-class. She has an immense love for life and a considerable resilience. Unlike the other family members, as we are told: “Beatie's bursts are the exception” (*TWT* 116). The basic cause of this difference can be ascribed to her life in London and her boyfriend Ronnie Kahn, a young intellectual. So she gets an exposure to the outside world which other family members don't. She tries to pass on to her family members whatever she learns there.

Beatie's zeal to reform is based on her vision of a better life. She does make efforts to improve herself and her class. She persuades her mother to listen to a piece of music by putting on a record of Bizet's *L' Arlesienne Suite*:

Beatie: Listen to it. It's simple isn't it? Can you call that squat?

Mrs. Bryant: I don't say it's all squat.

Beatie: You don't have to frown because it's alive.

Mrs. Bryant: No, not all on it's squat.

Beatie: See the way the other tune comes in? Hear it? Two simple tunes, one after the other.

Mrs. Bryant: I aren't saying it's all squat.

Beatie: And now listen, it goes together, the two tunes together, they knit, they're perfect. Don't it make you want to dance? (*TWT* 129)

Through dancing, Beatie gives a practical demonstration of how a good piece can vitalize and activate one's life. Mrs. Bryant, too, begins to feel moved and starts clapping which is a sure sign of the potential efficacy of classical music. Wesker wants to show here is that the working classes are salvable. The very hesitant and reserved manner of Mrs. Bryant's response to the music serves to indicate that such cultural change takes time as Ronnie says: “Give yourself time woman ... Time! You can't learn how to live overnight” (*TWT* 115). Wesker believes that there are no short cuts to acquire social ideas. The process of getting knowledge is slow and it needs time. Wesker therefore advocates a policy of evolutionary changes rather than the revolutionary reforms.

Though Beatie's self-discovery is slow and gradual, she establishes her identity by discovering her potentials and the power of expression. Her self-discovery in a way stresses the need of education of the working class. Ronnie's letter informing Beatie of breakup of their relationship does wonders for Beatie. When the responsibility to take decision falls upon her, she is faced with two possibilities: either she remains silent or she takes full control over her expression and decision. At this moment, she finally finds her confidence. For the first time we find Beatie's speech without Ronnie's influence. She verbally assaults the laziness of the working class when she says, “Education ent only books and music - it's asking questions, all the time. There are millions of us, all over the country, and no one, not one of us, is asking questions, we're all taking the easiest way out. Everyone I ever worked with took the easiest way out. We don't fight for anything; we're so mentally lazy we might as well be dead” (*TWT* 147). The ruling class exploits their laziness and their acceptance to maintain the social status quo as is confirmed by the following arguments of Beatie:

But us count? Count mother? I wonder. OO we? .OO you think we really count? You don't wanna take any notice of what them ole papers say about the workers bein' all-important three days - that's all squat! 'Cos we aren't. Do you think when the really talented people in the country get to work they get to work for us? Hell if they do! Do you think they don't know we

'ont make the efforts? The writers don't write thinkin' we can understand, nor the painters don't paint expecting us to be interested-that they don't, nor don't the composers give out music thinking we can appreciate it.. 'Blust, 'they say, 'the masses is too stupid for us to come down to them. Blust, they say, 'if they don't make no effort why should we bother? 'So you know who come along? The slop singers and the pop writers and the film makers and workmen's magazines and the Sunday papers and the picture strip love stories - that's who come along, and you don't have to make no effort for them, it come easy. ' ... The workers've got it so let's give them what they want. If they want slop songs and film idols we'll give 'em that then. If they want the third-rate, blust! We'll give 'em that then. If they want words of one syllable, we'll give 'em that then. Anything's good enough for them 'cas they don't ask for no more! The whole stinkin' commercial world insults us and we don't care a damn. Well, Ronnie's right-it's our own bloody fault. We want the third-rate-we got it! We got it! We got it! We ... (*TWT* 147-48)

This speech of Beatie could well be interpreted as a passionate plea for educating the working class in the right direction. She does not accuse the slop singers or the pop writers or the film makers but she puts the blame on the passive minds of members of her own class. She believes that workers must accept the blame for their unsatisfactory lives. Beatie, by doing so takes the first steps towards liberating herself. She now no more quotes Ronnie and asserts that: "I'm beginning, on my own two feet - I'm beginning ..." (*TWT* 148). She recognizes that the Bryants and Ronnie are incomplete as the former act without thinking while the latter thinks without acting. Beatie on the other hand tries to combine both - the thinking and the acting. "Beatie, unlike the girl left standing by the shore, begins "crossing the river" in order to join her wiser self, but this time she journeys without the "ferryman's" help. She does not need to strip, "to blindly obey the demands of others; she can cross the river using her own ingenuity. With Ronnie and her family left behind her, she strives to join her two selves: naive girl and wise man, acting and thinking" (Stevens 47-48). Thereby, *Roots* illustrates both the concept and the approach by dramatizing cultural and spiritual resurgence of the working class.

At the end Beatie is ecstatic because she has found her identity while the rest of the family sits to eat and ignore her as "they will continue to live as before" (*TWT* 148). Benedict Nightingale rightly observes that the play dramatizes "a perennial problem of adolescence: the newly awakened, increasingly critical consciousness in conflict with an apathetic, unchanging family" (Nightingale 8). Through this transformation of Beatie, Wesker offers us a criticism of social and cultural immobility. He stresses the point here that man is not necessarily an ignorant victim. At the same time, he cannot be called a passive sufferer unable to change his world. Beatie represents Wesker's commitment to the value of teaching and learning that can bring down the barriers of ignorance and thus provide the working class a decent life. *Roots* therefore reveals Wesker's deep sense of concern for the ordinary man that "he should begin by thinking not by reacting with mental conditioned reflexes not by repetition of fixed attitudes and certainly not by learning new reflexes and attitudes to replace the old ones, To think one must react spontaneously and of oneself" (Leeming 44).

Wesker in this play traces the roots of social evils and suggests the ways to improve them. His concern here is education for the suffering masses which would provide them an awareness of their problems and rights. He wants them to awaken to the values of refined and

cultured living. Hence the title of the play is ironical. It does not take into account a rich family tradition and respect for the past but it suggests the organic development and wholeness of human personality.” (Leeming 44) Roots in the play, thus refers to a sense of belongingness and knowledge about the environment surrounding us, an awareness of the culture and society. Wesker's basic concern is to uplift the life of working class. His vision of life is an ideal, culturally rich life that will open all the gates of success and prosperity, bringing a hope for change in working class society.

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