

## **Experiment in Socialism as Depicted in Wesker's *I'm Talking About Jerusalem***

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*News Wave dramas written by writers who were born of working-class parents started to be enacted in the West End. These new writers come from the East End, the densely populated working-class and immigrant area of London containing industrial and dock areas.*

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Arnold Wesker (1932 - 2016) is one of the most important British dramatists of the “New Wave”. The “new wave” as far as drama is concerned coincides with the performance of John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* (1956). This performance in the words of John Russell Taylor, “marks *then* off decisively from *now*” (11). In other words, a new mode of dramatic expression was inaugurated in 1956. “Then” refers to the senior dramatists like Shaw, T.S. Eliot, Maugham, Galsworthy, Christopher Fry, and “now” refers to a new group of young dramatists – John Osborne, N.F. Simpson, Ann Jellicoe, John Arden, Arnold Wesker, Brendan Behan, Shelagh Delaney, Bernard Kops and a few others.

In order to appreciate the work of Wesker, something must be said about the salient features of the “New Wave” that mark it off from the traditional drama. Social realism, working-class attitude to life, political element, angry protest, “low life”, and probing into the minds of the characters are a few of the striking features of the New Wave. The dramatists of the 50’s and 60’s attempt to present the “low life” in their drama. John Russell Brown in his introduction to *Modern British Dramatists* points out that the new writers have chosen popular, up-to-date, topical, vulgar and obvious subjects; theirs is “pop” art.

Wesker was the son of the Jewish tailor and Pinter was also of Jewish parentage. Most of these writers had not had university education. Shelagh Delaney did not even manage to scrape into a local grammar school. These writers were exposed to poverty and suffering and worked in various capacities before coming to write dramas. Therefore most of the New Wave dramas are autobiographical.

Wesker is the perfect example of the new working-class dramatist. Born of a Jewish-Hungarian father and a Russian mother, he was an unlikely candidate for literary distinction. His father was a tailor. After leaving school, Wesker became a plumber’s mate and then a kitchen porter. Then he became a pastry cook to work in Norwich, London and Paris. There is every reason, therefore, to infer that much of the material of Wesker’s dramas has been drawn from his own experience. *The Kitchen* (1962) describes a day’s life in the kitchen of a London restaurant. The Norfolk dialect as found in *Roots* comes from his own stay in Norwich and his wife belongs to that place. Therefore, as in the case of many other new dramatists, Wesker too belongs, to the working class and writes about his own class.

The kind of social realism as portrayed in the working-class drama is a picture of people disorganized and desperate, dissatisfied and frustrated, and restless and rootless. The new dramatists, in one way or another, register their protest against the existing social order, the class structure and other maladies. Of course, in the post-war era there were many international and national problems – the bomb, the

cold war, and starvation in the underdeveloped countries.

*The Wesker Trilogy* (*Chicken Soup with Barley*, *Roots*, and *I'm Talking About Jerusalem*) has a strong political and the influence of political changes on two families, the Khans and the Bryants, through two decades from 1936 to 1959. The Spanish Civil War, the rise of Fascism, the Hungarian Revolution, the German violence and idealism and the various social welfare measures of the post-war England have their part to play in the trilogy.

The last play of the trilogy, *I'm Talking About Jerusalem*, begins with the arrival of Ada and Dave at their cottage in Norfolk. The first Act brings out the reason why Ada and Dave decide to live in the country. It is known that they are proud because the labour party is in power. The National Health Service and the Millennium have come. Still they select country life. Further, the place they prefer to live in is not provided with comforts. There is no road, no electricity, no running water and no proper lavatory. But Ada hopes that they will have improvement soon. And she desperately needs her mother's help and blessings, but actually Sarah is not really satisfied with the ways of her children. She does not understand why her daughter and son-in-law choose such a kind of life. Everyone who meets the couple does not understand them, for example, the removal man, Dobson, Sarah, Ronnie and their aunts. In Sarah's view, Ada and Dave are running away from socialism to an ivory tower. For Dave it is an experiment in Socialism on the level of personal and family relationships. He explains that he left the city because he saw man becomes dehumanized in the factory where he worked. Dave says:

Since being demobbed I've worked in a factory turning out doors and window frames and I've seen men hating themselves while they were doing it. Morning after morning they've come in with a cold hatred in their eyes, brutalized! All their humanity gone. These you call men? All their life they're going to drain their energy into something that will give them nothing in return (Jerusalem 164).

But in the country,

..... In a year's time that barn will be my workshop. There I shall work and here, ten yards from me where I can see and hear them, will be my family. And they will share in my work and I shall share in their lives. I don't want to be married to strangers. I've seen the city make strangers of husbands and wives, but not me, not me and my wife (Jerusalem 165).

The first moment which is dramatic comes nearly at the end of Act One when Sarah shows how personally she takes what Dave and Ada are doing. She thinks that Dave is taking her daughter away from her because he dislikes her. But the family squabble which follows after a scene with the Colonel remains a private

joke; Ronnie sits down to eat in his raincoat and refuses to take it off until Sarah mocks him by sitting at the table with her umbrella up.

The play proper begins in the Second Act with Dave's dismissal by his employer for a bit of pilfering and lying about it. Noticing the rolls of linoleum outside the cottage, Ada asks Dave what they are. Dave first says that the Colonel has thrown them away and that he has left them lying around for months in the shed. So Ada makes use of two rolls of linoleum. The Colonel accuses them of stealing. When Dave explains that the Colonel has thrown linoleum away, the Colonel charges him with lying. Though unused by the Colonel himself, the linoleum must not have been taken without his knowledge. Dave must have asked the Colonel for the linoleum, and then he would have got it. The Colonel asks in genuine puzzlement why they come to the country at all.

But I don't understand why you're lying. In fact I don't understand you at all, Simmonds. What did you come to the country for? It's a different way of life here, y' know. They're slow people, the country people—slow, but sound. I know where I'm with them, and they know their place with me – but with you I could never – (Jerusalem 191).

Anyhow, for the moment they are permitted to continue in the Morris dream of a life in which each workman is a creative craftsman.

The interval of six years between the Scene i (1947) and Scene ii (1953) in Act II leads to some complex exposition at the beginning of the Second Scene. Dave has now converted the barn into a workshop for making furniture. He has an apprentice. A customer is on his way to see a chair he had ordered. Ada is due back from London and Harry has had his second stroke. In this scene there is an argument between Dave and his apprentice on factory work versus craftsmanship. They are interrupted by Ada's return from London.

In this scene, again the recurrent pattern asserts itself: if Ronnie is perhaps a repetition of his father, she is a repetition of her mother. She says to Dave: "My mother is a strong woman. She was born to survive every battle that faces her. She doesn't need me. You say I'm like her? You are right. I'm strong, I shall survive every battle that faces me and this place means survival for me. 'We-are-staying-put!'" (Jerusalem 200).

Then, three years later (1956) in Act III Scene i, the aunts come down on a visit to Norfolk and their conversation is allowed to dominate the scene. Too much of their dialogue fails to bear either directly or indirectly on the real subject of the drama, which is that of the failure of Dave's experiment. The aunts try to find out why Dave no longer wants to discuss his problem with them. This discussion about discussion is made into a cue for explicitness. This is in the form of an outburst in

which he considers himself prophet: "Once for all I'll tell you – you call me a prophet and laugh do you? Well, I'll tell you. I'm a prophet. Me. No one's ever heard of me and no one wants to buy my furniture but I'm bleedin' prophet and don't anyone forget that"(Jerusalem 212).

The final scene is set against the background of the conservative victory of 1959. When the Labour Government was voted out of office, Dave and Ada pack up and return to London. Their experiment has failed. Ronnie's view of failure of Dave and Ada is in a half-ironic tone: "You came with them and you go out with them – whist" (Jerusalem 214). Ronnie explains the reason for the defeat of the Labour party and Socialism: "Yes, me! Jesus, one of us has got to make a success of something. You can understand the Labour Party losing the elections again, they change their politics like a suit of clothing or something, but us—well you two, you put it into practice, God knows why you lost (Jerusalem 215). Dave's moment of vision in which he decided he was a prophet, has faded with it. Now he is defeated. He accepts the defeat sadly but not despairingly, and recognizes that he is not important. He says:

Well, now the things that seem to matter to me are the day-to-day problems of my wife, my kids and my work. Face it as an essential member of society, I don't really count. I'm not saying I'm useless but machinery and modern techniques have come about to make me the odd man out. Here, I've been, comrade citizen, presenting my offering and the world's rejected them. I don't count, Ronnie, and if I'm not sad about it you mustn't be either. May be Sarah's right, may be you can't build on your own (Jerusalem 222).

The progress of disenchantment that starts in *Chicken Soup* comes full circle here. Harry is dead. Cissie the trade unionist, sister of Harry has left active politics and life. Sarah is an old woman stubbornly sticking to her political idealism. Ada and Dave have reached bitter realization that one cannot create a small Jerusalem in a land of Philistines. Have Ada and Dave gained anything from their experience? Ronnie suggests that they might have purified themselves. But no answer confirming or denying is given by any at present: "May be by coming here you've purified yourselves, like Jesus in the wilderness" (Jerusalem 217).

Dave and Ada fail for two reasons. First, opting out of modern industrial society is impracticable and secondly there is a considerable gap between Dave Simmond's ideals and his actual way of life. He loses his first job as a carpenter

because he takes a bundle of old linoleum belonging to his employer and then denies having done so. It is a well-chosen incident which clearly points out the gap between idealism and practice of the characters.

The various reasons for the failure of Dave as a carpenter may be examined. The dismissal by Colonel Dewhurst is unexpected. The bank manager refuses to offer a loan to Dave. This breaks his plan: “Nothing much. He said I could have an overdraft of two hundred pounds but no loan” (Jerusalem 207). The inartistic lorry driver who spoils the beauty of the furniture by his careless handling breaks Dave’s heart. Cissie says to Esther, “..... he built a beautiful dressing-table for someone and he had a lorry to come to collect it, and the driver took no care on the bumpy lane so that by the time they reached the main road they’d knocked all the corners off it. A two-hundred-pound job it was ruined, all his own design, ruined! (Jerusalem 204). There are not enough buyers of furniture in the country. Of course, in a vast city, productions move fast; but in a sparsely populated country side, there are no people to buy the handmade furniture. Dave himself guesses the contents of a letter received by him: “I know what’s in the letter. Dear Mr Simmonds, after having carefully considered your designs and estimate we feel sorry to have to inform you – God! I’m learning to hate people” (Jerusalem 211).

Again in the present century, whether capitalists are right or wrong, human or inhuman, the Factory Age has already set in. A handicraftsman will not be able to compete with machines. The cost of handmade furniture is naturally for above that of mass-produced articles. Therefore, the venture of Dave is not economically viable. John Russell Taylor points out: “the manufacture of furniture on the scale Dave envisages is not an economic proposition” (141).

Ronnie in his own half-mocking, half-heroic way offers Dave and Ada some hope. “Righto me hearties. The cheerful side. Let’s look at the rainbow. The silver lining” (Jerusalem 218). In Shakespearean tragedy, in the end there is always a note of hopefulness, a sign of regeneration. *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello*, and *Antony and Cleopatra* conclude with an element of good still alive. In *I’m Talking About Jerusalem*, Ronnie’s statements play, atleast, at a lower key, the note of optimism.

The reason for Dave’s disillusionment with country life has nothing to do with politics. Dave’s earliest frustration with society might have been the result of the Spanish Civil War, the repressive attitude of the Soviet Government and the dehumanised industrial life in the big, developing cities. It may be said with certain amount of authority that politics has brought about his turn of mind.

But, in the case of the second disenchantment—that with the country life—politics has no role to play. Only individuals contribute to Dave's failure as carpenter. The lorry driver or the customer who fails to buy Dave's furniture has nothing to do with socialism or communism or fascism. The bank manager who refuses a loan is an unsympathetic man. The rash proprietor Colonel Dewhurst is simply a rich man who dismisses a carpenter for a flimsy reason. Therefore the conclusion may be drawn that personal relations matter more than political theories, at least as far as *I'm Talking About Jerusalem* is concerned.

Finally, the double-disillusionment in *I'm Talking About Jerusalem* only leads to the family reunion. After all the fruit does not fall far from the tree. Sarah is reunited with her children. The result of disappointment with socialism experienced by Dave and Ada is their turning back to their mother. As Ronnie exclaims: "Well Sarah – your children are coming home now" (Jerusalem 218). So personal and family relationships will, after all, defeat and outlive all differences in their individual attitudes to politics. The family is reunited in spite of the failure in their experiment in socialism - that seems to be the underlying tone of the play *I'm Talking About Jerusalem*.

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