



Arnold Wesker's *The Kitchen*: Lending Voice To The Working Class

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Arnold Wesker's *The Kitchen* has been hailed as one of the finest dramatic works of the New Wave – the theatrical revolution that took the British drama by storm in the late fifties. In the words of Kenneth Tynan (*The Observer*, 2 July 1961), "*The Kitchen* achieves something that few playwrights have ever attempted, it dramatizes work, the daily collision of man with economic necessity, the repetitive toil that consumes that large portion of human life which is not devoted to living" (Qtd. in Leeming, *File 12*). In this context, the play highlights an industrial set up, where workers reel under the dehumanizing impact of the oppressive, hot and inhospitable atmosphere of their work place within the span of a single day.

The current paper seeks to examine the atrophying horrors of the unimproved, uneducated and unfulfilled lives of workers in *The Kitchen* and their daily struggle to find a place, a voice and an identity of their own. Such people as factory workers, cooks, farm labourers, apprentices, recruits etc who occupy the centre stage in Wesker's plays had never, till now, appeared before the theatre going audience. In fact, their existence in the social spectrum had never been recognized. They had been unceremoniously dismissed as low, inferior, unworthy, and unimportant; in other words, as subalterns. Probing into the dynamics of social equations with a polemical and pragmatic approach, Wesker lends voice to these voiceless workers.

Wesker's emotional anxiety for the working class rests on his own affiliation to the same class. Born to parents who were immigrant Jews, he had spent much of his childhood in the minority Jewish locality of Stepney, East London where a typically working class environment pervaded. Moreover, as a young man, Wesker had garnered a first hand experience of a worker's life in the several brief spells of employment as a book seller's assistant, a plumber's mate, a kitchen porter, a farm labourer, a furnisher's apprentice, a pastry cook and then as a restaurant chef in Paris. Having done these menial jobs in the lowest of capacities, Wesker was well versed with the plight and challenges confronting this class. His abiding concern for them may also be attributed to the impact of his literary predecessors such as D. H. Lawrence, Arthur Miller and John Osborne. Wesker's commitment to the cause of the subalterns, especially the workers, has its roots in his Socialist leanings too. He was troubled to see workers as victims of denial, ill treatment and deprivation in a system that was exploitative, divisive and insular. Being a product of the times, and sensitive to undeserved human suffering, Wesker responded through his plays which catapulted the less than ordinary to the centre stage.

In this "dramatic metaphor for industrial capitalist society," (Leeming and Trussler 31) Wesker brings out the predicament of the subaltern class of workers in an industrial set up. The theatrical environment of the kitchen in Tivoli, a London restaurant, symbolizes the oppressive, indifferent and inexorable atmosphere of a typical manufacturing unit. The play charts vividly the imprisonment of the poor workers in a monotonously repetitive and cyclical routine in, what Laurence Kitchin calls, "a cavernous place" that deadens their minds and hearts. Through the metaphorical representation of this kitchen and its overbearing atmosphere, Wesker lays bare the soul killing conditions under which work is a cumbersome burden. Since it is devoid of any creativity, it also denies any satisfaction. This is visibly realized from Betty's lament, "...this bloody kitchen affects me with its bloody boring menu" (12). The deadening monotony, sameness and repetitiveness deprive the workers of any scope or opportunity to be original or creative despite their talents.

In this perfect paradigm of what Laurence Kitchin regards "compressionist drama," Wesker graphically documents the relationship of workers with their work in a milieu where their voices are lost amid the din of gadgets. Laced with Marxian overtones, this naturalistic work enunciates how both the worker and his work environment not only mould, but also define each other. It seems to re-establish Karl Marx's concept of alienation evinced in "The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844" that:

Labour is external to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his intrinsic nature; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denied himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind...His labour is, therefore, not voluntary, but coerced; it is forced labour. It is, therefore, not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it...External labour, labour in which man alienates himself, is a labour of self-sacrifice, of mortification. (Elster 39)

Such a work which belongs to someone else arouses a feeling of alienation in the worker, and therefore, does not involve or invite any creativity on his part. Since the means of production are owned by someone else, work ceases to be a joyous activity. It is rather, akin to enslavement, breeding a state of displeasure and apathy – a fact brought to life in *The Kitchen*.

Thus, Wesker presents a vivid and disturbing image of how “the individual actions become mechanical, meaningless units of a larger, monstrous machine which produces luxuries for the bourgeois clients who do not appreciate the art of the cooks” (Sicher 67). Since the task leaves no scope for creativity as nearly two thousand meals are to be mass produced by human hands under immense pressure of time, the cooks are reduced to mere machines, churning out products from the same mould automatically just as one would do in a factory. Naturally, the actions of these workers appear conditioned, and programmed like those of robots. The kitchen, by not allowing any escape from the endless humming of the ovens, the soul killing monotonous routine and intolerable heat, reminds us of Sartre’s *No Exit*. Just as in a factory, here the chef, cooks, waitresses and porters - all have been assigned their respective stations near the blazing ovens, and sharply defined roles with absolutely no scope for any variation or innovation. A disturbing picture of a cook’s mechanical and monotonous regimen is painted vividly by Peter:

PETER...You stand before them all day! They’re red hot! Someone orders an onion soup and you put soup and bread and cheese in a tin to grill – jump! Then someone orders ham-and-egg, in another tin – jump! Then someone orders an omelette and you jump to mish that; then someone throws you a hamburger and you jump to fry that. You go up you go down, you jump here you jump there, you sweat till steam comes off your back. (68)

No wonder, they produce dishes mechanically - irrespective of who gets them, who relishes them or appreciates them, if at all. Instead of the personal touch generally associated with the

art of cooking, a sense of alienation and unconcern prevails. Food is prepared with automatic precision and shoved into serving plates with an identical indifference to be served to the customers amid the frenzy and chaos that marks the peak time lunch and dinner hours. The waitresses shout orders at different stations, faster and faster, all the time collecting and managing the serving plates, constantly shouting and arguing with the cooks who, drenched in sweat, cook involuntarily while the porters clear the shelves and tables ceaselessly. As the frenzy of executing the orders reaches crescendo, the chaos is unmanageable, and tension extremely palpable as is evident in the following lines:

GWEN. (To HANS.) Four veal cutlets.

HANS. Four veal cutlets.

(Kevin rushes to his station.)

MOLLY. (To KEVIN.) Me sole, lovey, where's me sole?

KEVIN. Wait a bloody minute, can you?

MOLLY. (To KEVIN.) Two of them.

GWEN. (To PETER.) Two halibut.

PETER. Two halibut.

BETTY. (To MICHAEL.) Three hamburgers.

MICHAEL. Three hamburgers.

CYNTHIA. (To KEVIN.) Three plais.

KEVIN. Let me breathe, will you?

CYNTHIA. No time for breathing, Irishman.

KEVIN. Is this a bloody madhouse?

NICHOLAS. Plates!

MANGOLIS. Plates!

KEVIN. Have you all gone fucking, raving, bloody mad? (54)

It is obvious that the art of cooking which involves time, patience and taste is reduced to a nerve-wrecking mechanical process. Unable to handle the heat and pressure of work, Kevin, the new comer, warns his colleagues to quit it or "you'll drop dead if you stay," for "this is no place for human beings." It is not Kevin alone who succumbs to the inordinate pressure of working at the tempo of a machine; Violet, a new waitress, also fails to cope up and complains, "I can't work like this. I'm not used to this kind of working" (50). Glenda Leeming's observation in this context is noteworthy:

The dehumanizing effect of turning out two thousand indifferent meals a day under terrific pressure is made to typify the dehumanizing effect of all mass production, and the kitchen itself with its incessantly hissing ovens and looming equipment functions as a concrete symbol as well as a specific example of the system. (Leeming 7)

Treated more like gadgets than thinking and feeling human beings, these workers are pushed by their unfeeling employer into a deadening drudgery for his private gains. Despite being unhappy in this soul-denying atmosphere, they are unable to voice their discontent openly and clearly. Rather, it manifests itself in petty quarrels and high tempers. Wesker's stance on the issue of the ills wrought by mass production bears great affinity with that of William Morris. Condemning the degrading impact of the machine on the working class, Morris laments that the workers are forced to toil in unhealthy working conditions far removed from beauty and freshness, and detrimental to their pride and dignity. He vociferously rejects mass production on the assembly line which earns huge profits for the Capitalist but deprives the worker of his creativity. Instead, Morris favours small workshops where skilled workers can mould unique pieces of art and craft at their own leisure. However, the play displays a world that denies all liberty and individuality. Deprived of any opportunity to help themselves in this crucible, these hapless men and women turn against both, one-another and the system. Amidst blazing ovens and the din of ceaseless activity, these people fall prey to frayed tempers, verbal squabbles and accidents. In fact, their loud debates, violent rows, and angry outbursts are attempts at self assertion and self expression.

Built on Wesker's first hand experience as a cook in the huge kitchen of a restaurant in Paris during the mid-fifties, *The Kitchen* widens in its scope to turn into what Efraim Sicher calls "an allegory of the human condition." To quote Ronald Hayman:

...the play as a whole succeeds brilliantly in crystallizing what it has to say in its theatrical form. Above all, the image of the kitchen comes richly alive. The work of the harnessed cooks and hurrying waitresses grows into a theatrical metaphor that stands for all work. The low sound of gas in the ovens, the sheer physical pressure of the labour involved in preparing meals for such a big restaurant, the extra strain created by tensions between the national and racial groups, the babel of different languages, the hierarchy of the kitchen with the owner at the top, the cooks able to lord it over the waitresses and the kitchen porters at the very bottom, except for the tramp who wanders in to beg for

food – all this builds up into a complex image of man as a working animal. (Hayman 15-16)

Thus, the kitchen becomes both, realistic and representative. In fact, Wesker views it as an image of the world itself, for as he had once claimed, “The world might have been a stage for Shakespeare, for me it is a kitchen: where people come and go and can not stay long enough to understand each other, and friendships, loves and enmities are forgotten as quickly as they are made” (qtd. in Leeming 25). Since Tivoli is a popular London restaurant catering to thousands of guests everyday, it is bound to have a large kitchen that draws its employees from a wide cross-section of racial and national identities -- English, German, Italian, Cypriot, Maltese and Jewish workers – each distinguished by his own specific affiliation, racial background, language and preferences in life.

Peopled with a “polyglot cast list” (Leeming and Trussler 34) which includes chefs, cooks, waitresses and menials, the dramatic action also showcases the absolute failure of communication among workers not only because of their different racial backgrounds, as Leeming opines, but also due to their linguistic limitations. One discerns barriers of all sorts in the kitchen – racial, economic, regional, linguistic, skill based, and even personal – segregating these people along several lines. Unsavory comments, abuses and names such as “bloody German”, “Lousy Cypro”, “bastard” and “bully” are hurled at one another. The addition of newcomers who are also foreigners add to the racial and national prejudices. The task of cooking which banks on co-operation and harmony is infested with discord, bickering and heated arguments. The recurrent mutual skirmishes expose not only the dichotomy and inherent heterogeneity within the working class, but also underscore the stultifying atmosphere which nullifies all attempts at friendship and love just like the caves in E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*. In this context, Leeming and Trussler very aptly remark,

The conflicts whether dramatic, personal or social resolve themselves into this reconcilability between man and a setting that diminishes his humanity. The overwhelming heat, speed, noise, smells and curtailed or elliptical human interactions of the kitchen illustrate in the course of the play just how little the very different personalities of the polyglot staff mean or matter in the pursuit of meal-mongering. (38)

The fact still remains that the world in Wesker's kitchen is essentially a fragmented one, the most prominent of the divisions being between the proprietor and the subordinates. Standing at the top of the hierarchical pyramid is the owner Morango, while the chefs and cooks, followed by waitresses and kitchen porters occupy the lower rungs. The owner is a typical capitalist, an industrialist, selfish to the core and indifferent to the needs, problems and feelings of his workers who too reciprocate his contempt. For Laurence Kitchin, the kitchen can be accepted as "a capitalist microcosm with the proprietor standing in for God" (qtd. in Brown 77). In this regard, the play presents a sharp critique on the capitalist social order that encourages compartmentalization and alienation of the working class. The gulf between the owner of the means of production and the workers signifies the divide between the elite class and the subalterns, the master and the slave. Peter's introduction of Morango to the newcomer Kevin typifies a man of commerce—selfish, heartless and indifferent:

PETER. You think he is kind? He is a bastard! He talks like that because it is summer now. Not enough staff to serve his customers, that is why he is kind. Wait till winters. Fewer customers. Then you'll see. The fish is burnt! Too much mise-en-place. The soup is sour! A man? A restaurant! ... Here he stands. Sometimes he walks round touching the hot plate, closing the hot plate doors, looking inside the thing then that thing. Till the last customer, he stays, then he has sleep upstairs in his office. Half an hour after we come back, he is here again—till nine thirty, may be ten. (30)

However, the situation is further exacerbated by the ceaseless pulse of activity and the arid environment in the kitchen, devoid of any human touch or consideration. The rhythm of work, dictated by profit motive, relegates all human interest in the background. Supremacy of money disallows even a small gesture of charity. When Peter is caught offering two meat cutlets to a hungry tramp, his superior, the Chef openly threatens to fire him:

PETER (Impatiently). So what's a couple of cutlets – we going bankrupt or something?
CHEF. It's money, that's what, and it's me who's Chef that's what and ... (Peter moves away muttering dismissively "Ouch"! The Chef follows him, furious.) Don't think we're too busy I can't sack you. Three years is nothing you know, you don't buy the place in three years, you hear me? Don't go thinking I won't sack you. (73)

Thus, any act of an independent mind is regarded equivalent to insubordination or “sabotage,” and the threat of sacking hangs perpetually like a sword. It is this suffocating atmosphere that breaks Peter’s spirit, and we see him unleash a furious and violent diatribe against the entire system. For Glenda Leeming, the play establishes the belief that people are shaped, or perhaps, more accurately in this case, stunted by their environment, and by extension, their society. Here, the workers are condemned to a subordinate position in a typically indifferent, predatory and hostile environment which denies them any freedom or voice. In this context, *The Kitchen* can be viewed as Wesker’s critique on “all those constraints of society which impose soul-destroying patterns on people’s lives” (Leeming and Trussler, 40).

Wesker’s focus, however, is not merely on the presentation of this life-denying atmosphere, but also on exploring how it shapes the mindset of those condemned in it by denying them their identity and voice. We find the workers losing their cool and humanity when confronted with the relentless demands made by this repulsive environment. Peter poses a very pertinent query on behalf of everyone, “What kind of life is that, in a kitchen! Is that a life I ask you?” (12). Here, Peter is not speaking for himself but on the behalf of the entire working class which is enslaved by the capitalists to serve their commercial ends.

Thus, the play is a potent statement on the condition of the workers in a working environment that negates and stifles. Its polluted climate throttles sane thinking and camaraderie, though they do possess feelings. Peter, Kevin and Dimitri, for instance, are all romantic at heart, impulsive in nature and creative in their own ways. They exhibit the human need for something more lasting and fulfilling in return for their labour, except the mere wage. As the afternoon frenzy of hectic activity subsides, the same men share their enthusiasm for motor bikes, engines, cars, home made-radios and the glamour of New York. When calm prevails during the lull between two meals, the workers are able to approach each other as social beings, and escape to the world of fancy. They strive to lend expression to their smothered impulses, and snatch moments of respite only in this short span. Creativity which is denied in cooking finds expression in strange and innovative creations as in the case of Peter who constructs a precarious but symbolic archway out of whatever comes handy in the kitchen – dustbins, saucepans, a broom, and dish cloths. Just like Dimitri, he too displays his creative impulse, which Wesker holds intrinsic to every man:

PETER. Hey, Paul, Raymond, Dimitri, stop work a minute. You got time. Here, come here. We are all given a chance to dream. No one is going to laugh, we love each other, we protect each

other – someone tell us a dream, just to us, no one else. The ovens are low, the customers – gone, Morango – gone, it’s all quiet. God has given us a chance now. We never have the opportunity again, so dream – someone – who? Dimitri – you, you dream first.

DIMITRI. In this place? With iron around me? And dustbins? And black walls? PETER (Coaxing, inspiring). Pretend! There’s no dustbins. That’s a big beautiful arch there – pretend! The walls are skies, yes! The iron – it’s rock on a coast. The tables – they are rose bushes. And the ovens are the noise of the winds. Look at the lights – stars, Dimitri. (59) What Wesker is trying to suggest is that even a poor worker has aspirations; he too deserves a life of his choice. The games that Peter and his companions play are symbolic of how these men retain their sanity and child-like delight in such a mechanical and dehumanizing environment that breeds aggression, frustration, and violent temper. Their fury against one another is, in fact, a vicarious protest against the environment they are holed in. It is directed not as much against one another as against the systemic oppression which treats them like non-entities.

The unbearable work pressure surrounding these workers has left an indelible imprint of depersonalization not only on their work but also on their personal relationships. They have no interest in the work they do, except for the wage it offers. Their labour caters to no social purpose, but only the private interest of the owner they serve. Indifferent and impersonal, they are associated with and identified only by what they cook. This alienation has corroded both, their personal relationships, and the product of their labour. The callous, indifferent and inhuman attitude of the elite come to the fore when Winnie passes out in the kitchen and suffers a miscarriage during the working hours, but no one seems concerned. She is hurriedly removed from the site so that work does not suffer. The tragedy of Winnie and all women employed on low income jobs in the kitchen or any other production house, is emblematic of the exploitation of this subaltern class, not only by their capitalist masters who pay them frugally, but also by the men folk who use them for pleasure and then discard them ruthlessly. Since they, as Gayatri Spivak says, “can not speak,” their suffering remains unmitigated and unheard.

It is against this demeaning, alienating and dehumanizing atmosphere of the kitchen in the background that Wesker situates the individual drama of his protagonist Peter, a victim of monotony in both personal and professional lives. The shocking scene involving a violent outburst of Peter, with which the play ends, is symbolic of a deep and serious social issue – the growing restlessness, a gnawing sense of alienation and resistance among these subalterns

which Antonio Gramsci had envisioned as natural. Here, Peter may be perceived not as an individual but as a representative of the working class reeling under hegemonic control of the owner of the means of production. Dispossessed of his right to voice his needs, he erupts like a volcano. His virulent outbursts, both in the beginning of the play when he gives Gaston a black eye, and in the last scene, go on to vindicate Wesker's own belief that man's real tragedies are bound inextricably with his social environment. Peter's violent action is a cry for change. It is a revolt against the plight of all workers in the suffocating kitchen. Longing for love, care, creativity, change and fulfilment in life, and suffocated by the inhospitable work place, Peter lodges a protest against the entire oppressive system that denies him any freedom, individuality, and liberty of expression. He uses the language that everyone is familiar with – angry words and violent action. It is only Dimitri, a porter occupying the lowest rung in the hierarchy of the kitchen, who can empathize with him:

DIMITRI. ...You put a man in a plate room all day – dishes to clean, stinking bins to take away, floors to sweep – What else is for him to do? He want to fight. He got to show he is man some way. (18)

However, Morango, the owner of the restaurant who manifests a typical capitalistic mentality, is apathetic and oblivious to the needs of his workers. For him a man's situation is measurable only in terms of his productivity or money. His failure to comprehend the needs of his workers is evident in his lament at the end of the play,

MORANGO. I don't know what more to give a man. He works, he eats, I give him money. This is life, isn't it? I haven't made a mistake, have I? I live in the right world, don't I? ...What is there more? What is there more? What is there more? (18)

Morango is perplexed at the thought that something else beyond wages is also expected of him. Devoid of finer sensibilities such as pity, sympathy and humanity, he can view life and people only through the lens of wealth and in terms of profit. For this blind instrument of the system, money is power and the sole religion. His harangue at the end of the play in which he persistently demands to know, "Is there something I don't know? 'What is there more?'" serves to highlight the essential paradox of the play, and is Wesker's ironic take on the essential deficiency in the elite class that prevents them from establishing meaningful social relationships with other classes.

Dealing realistically with complex human issues, especially those of the subaltern class of wage earners, Wesker seems to be emulating Gorki, Chekov and O'Neill in *The Kitchen*. He lays bare their powerlessness to control their own lives or their work environment. In this context, he lends a voice to the muted dreams, unfulfilled desires and failed aspirations of the workers. Illuminating the areas of discord between the privileged and the marginalized, Wesker urges the two classes to look beyond economic terms. However, while championing the cause of the under dogs, Wesker is not led by any political ideology, but by his humanistic leanings which define much of his dramatic oeuvre.

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