

## Beatie Bryant's Quest for her Roots through Self Discovery and Expression: A study of Sir Arnold Wesker's "Roots"

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### Abstract

The Wesker Trilogy is critically acclaimed as one of the most ambitious project by a young playwright under the age of thirty years. The trilogy in its broader aspect reflects the situation of the working class community after the Second World War was over. *Roots* is the central play of the famous trilogy which deals with the personal aspect of the humanitarian society. The story revolves around the protagonist of the play and gives an account of a fortnight in Beatie's life. All her dreams shattering within a fortnight and her journey towards the path of self discovery become the central theme of the play. Beatie Bryant turns out to be the spoke person of the working class people and the play mainly focuses on the problems of working class in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Beatie finally succeeds in librating herself from the fixed ideologies of society and finds a voice and thought of her own. She establishes her identity and her power of expression by asking questions and not by involving in some revolutionary acts.

Keywords: Ambitious, Humanitarian society, Working class, Self-discovery

Sir Arnold Wesker was born in the East End, London in 1932. His parents were from Russo-Hungarian origin and they belonged to the working class community. He was a writer of international reputation who authored about 50 plays, 4 volumes of short stories, 2 volume of essays and a book on journalism, a children's book and an autobiography. Wesker was a famous dramatist of post-war British Theatre. He came into prominence in the era of 1950s with striking dramas about working class people. Wesker rose to fame with his famous series of three dramas which was later entitled *The Wesker Trilogy: Chicken Soup with Barley (1958), Roots (1959), I'm Talking about Jerusalem (1960)*. The trilogy was reviewed as an ambitious project for a playwright who was still under the age of thirty. The trilogy dealt with the different aspects of working class people, such as their family life, political ideologies, frustration, anger, despair and ignorance regarding the ongoing situation of the society. Wesker himself pointed out that the trilogy deals with different aspects of socialism- *Chicken Soup with Barley* "handles the communist aspect," *Roots* concerns itself with the personal aspect and *I'm talking about Jerusalem* "is a sort of study in a William Morris kind of socialism" (qtd in Ribalow, P.35).

This paper deals with the second play of the Wesker's Trilogy entitled *Roots*. The play *Roots* establishes Wesker as a socially committed writer who constantly deal with the philanthropic side of the society, its thoughts and beliefs. The play revolves around the protagonist named Beatie Bryant, "an ample, blonde, healthy-faced young women of twenty-two years." (The Wesker Trilogy, P. 87). The play is set in the Norfolk countryside depicting the unintellectual rural environment, the lack of communication and concern and selfishness. The characters do not have any serious discussion about life rather they are indulged in lazy gossips. The play deals with the various themes such as generation gap that leads to lack of

communication and understanding, class and cultural difference between the upper class and proletariants, rural V/s urban setting and the journey of an individual for self discovery. Here in the play, *Roots*, the only character who finds her voice, her true essence of living is Beatie Bryant, through the path of self discovery and finally articulates herself.

*Roots* takes into account only a fortnight in the life of Beatie, who is full of vitality and has been working in London for past three years and returns to her home. The visit of Beatie is a rare one which is to be followed by her fiancé Ronnie Kahn. As the play proceeds, we come to know that Beatie and Ronnie are courting each other in London. She tells her parents that both are to marry and he will be coming to Norfolk in two weeks' time to see them and to formalize their relationship. Hence an arrival is expected and this much awaited arrival of Ronnie Kahn forms the climax of the play. Another interesting aspect of the play is that Ronnie is not physically present in the play rather he is in his spirits and in the words of Beatie. She continuously quotes him as she is highly influenced by her fiancé. Ronnie introduced her to the sophisticated intellectual culture of London and tries to develop Beatie's interest in her surroundings through paintings and music and persuades to have a voice of her own. But Beatie belonging to the countryside has very simple taste and lifestyle. She is not able to cope up with the expectations of Ronnie. The very first difference between their mindsets is shown in an argument about comics. Beatie admits to Jenny and Jimmy that how Ronnie was annoyed on Beatie when he found her reading comics which he brought for his nephews. In Ronnie's words to Beatie. "Christ, woman, what can they give you that you can be so absorbed", (The Wesker Trilogy, P. 88). So in order to trick Ronnie, Beatie used to get a copy of '*Manchester Guardian*' and sit with that wide open and a comic behind. Quoting Ronnie, Beatie further adds – "Playing an instrument is fun, painting is fun, reading a book is fun, talking with friends is fun- but a comic? A comic? for young women of twenty-two? (The Wesker Trilogy, P- 88-89). These lines demonstrate the difference of two mindsets

regarding education, art and entertainment. Another aspect which Wesker deals with in the play *Roots* is the use of language and the shortcoming which Beatie deals with. Despite of living in London and doing a job, she is not able to take hold of her official matters and looks at Ronnie for his help. Ronnie indeed helps her in receiving unemployment benefits and argues for her sake to the higher officials. All these incidents are new for Beatie and the language appears foreign to her as she did not know how to talk. Here Wesker beautifully in words of Beatie writes about the short coming of language “An English girl born and bred and I couldn’t talk the language – except for to buy food and clothes” (The Wesker Trilogy P. 90). On the other hand Ronnie’s fluency with language is symbolized through the lines – “Language is Words, It’s bridges, so that you can get safely from one place to another” (The Wesker Trilogy, P. 90). Beatie every now and then quotes Ronnie and tries to teach her family members the idea of socialism which Ronnie advocates. However at some point of time even she is not able to understand him fully and pretends to have interest in the conversation with Ronnie. In this respect, Beatie admits to Jenny in these lines – “His a socialist and he used to say you couldn’t bring socialism to a country by making speeches, but perhaps you could pass it on to someone who was near you. So I pretended I was interested – but I didn’t understand much.” (The Wesker Trilogy, P. 95). This shows that she is blindly in love with Ronnie and do not bother to have a voice or mind of her own. Everything that matters to her is that Ronnie solemnizes this relationship and marries her. She even admits to Jenny – “it’ll be all right once we’re married. Once we’re married and I got babies I won’t need to be interested in half the things I got to be interested in now.” (The Wesker Trilogy P. 96).

In Act Two, Beatie is seen at her mother’s house. This place is quite far away from Mr. and Mrs. Beales house. Here again, the difference of mindset, choices and way of living is projected through the selection of songs. The scene is staged in which Beatie turns on the

radio and finds a classical song playing but Mrs. Bryant does not like it and turns off the radio. This act of Mrs. Bryant ignites anger of Beatie and she explosively vents out her irritation in these lines – “Mother! I could kill you when you do that. No wonder I don’t know anything about anything, I never heard nothing but dance music because you always turned off the classics. I never knowed anything about the news because you always switched off after the headlines. I never read any good books ’cos there was never any in the house”. (The Wesker Trilogy, 126-127). Mrs. Bryant in defensive and ignorant tone answers Beatie – “I fed you. I clothed you. I took you out to the sea. What more do you want. We’re only country folk you know. We get no big things here you know”. (The Wesker Trilogy, P. 127). Here Beatie in her words become the spoke person of the working class youth who after the world war has faced the same problem, the youth who is filled up with anger and frustration, the youth who has been highly affected by the aftermath of the World War I and World War II

The last act serves as the climax of the play. The whole family gathers at Mr. and Mrs. Bryant house for an evening tea dressed up in their lust clothes to welcome Ronnie. However, instead of Ronnie a letter from him arrives. Beatie jumps off to receive the letter but the content of the letter stuns her. She is in utter shock and is unable to move or talk. Later we come to know that Ronnie is not going to visit them and has called off the engagement. According to him their relationship has been a failure. In his letter to Beatie, Ronnie clearly confesses his impatience and failure towards Beatie – “My dear Beatie. It wouldn’t really work would it? My ideas about handing on a new kind of life are quite useless and romantic if I’m honest. If I were a healthy human being it might have been all right but most of us intellectuals are pretty sick and neurotic-as you have often observed and we couldn’t build a world even if we were given the reins of government not yet any-rate. I don’t blame you for being stubborn. I don’t blame you for ignoring every suggestion I ever

made I only blame myself for encouraging you to believe we could make a go of it and now to weeks of your not being here has given me the cowardly chance to think about it.” (The Wesker Trilogy, P. 142). He tells that he had devoted all his energies for past three years to make a change in Beatie, to make her an intellectual but all went in vain and he had failed. Words of Ronnie leave a severe impact on Beatie and for the failure of her relationship she accuses her family members, mostly her mother. To this Mrs. Bryant mocks at her, “The apple don’t fall far from the tree- that it don’t” (The Wesker Trilogy, P. 144). Beatie seeks for help and words of comfort from her family members but instead of receiving support of her family. She gets a tight slap from her mother. Mrs. Bryant unable to help her daughter sarcastically says- “Go on you say you know something we don’t so you do the talking. Talk – go on, talk gal” (The Wesker Trilogy, P. 145). At this moment of intense pressure and anger, Beatie bursts out. However we come to know that she does not parrot Ronnie anymore but find a voice of her own. She admits to her mother – “You’re right the apple don’t fall far from the tree do it? You’re right, I’m like you. Stubborn, empty, wi’ no tools for livin’. I got no roots in nothing”. (The Wesker Trilogy, P. 145). Through these lines we find that Beatie is on the way of discovering herself with the tool of self expression. She discovers that she has the ability to speak and think for herself in her own genuine words. A sudden steady stream of words and thoughts comes to Beatie and she liberates herself. “I’m not quoting no more” (The Wesker Trilogy, P. 148). The play ends with the quest of Beatie in finding her roots and finally succeeding in it. It is justified through a symbolic rebirth when she exclaims – “I’m beginning, on my own two feet – I’m beginning ...”. (The Wesker Trilogy, P. 148). However, Beatie’s character is the only one who went under a transformation and finds her true self while other character remains to be ignorant and insensitive as before.

To conclude, the play entitled “*Roots*” finally succeeds in justifying its title through the character of Beatie Bryant. The play is about the search for her roots. In fact, Arnold Hinchliffe in his book *British Theatre 1950-70*, has well stated: “It is on the effectiveness of Beatie Bryant that the play stands or falls. She is shocked by Ronnie’s defection into awareness and articulacy.” (Hinchliffe. P. 93). Furthermore the climax of the play was the physical arrival of Ronnie, however, which didn’t took place. But we witness the arrival of Beatie Bryant. She arrived in all the three acts of the play. At first she arrives at Mr. and Mrs. Beales place, then in the second act she arrives at her parents home and in the final act her victorious arrival is seen in the process of self-discovery. Hence, in the climax of the play at least one arrival is witnessed by the readers and they are left absorbed. Beatie at the end is elated and happy as she finds here identity but the rest of the family sits to eat and ignore her. “They will continue to live as before”. (The Wesker Trilogy, P. 148). Here Benedict Nightingale rightly observes her situation – “a perennial problem of adolescence : the newly awakened, increasingly critical consciousness in conflict with an apathetic, unchanging family” (Nightingale, P. 8).

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