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STUDY OF THE KITCHEN BY SIR ARNOLD WESKER

Unit Structure

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9.0 Objectives:

- To study the importance of the play *The Kitchen* in modern drama
- To examine the play *The Kitchen* as an anti-capitalist play
- To study *The Kitchen* as a critique of disenchantment of industrialization

9.1 Sir Arnold Wesker: An introduction

Arnold Wesker was born in 1932 in a working-class Jewish family of Russo-Hungarian descent. His parents were active communists hence no wonder that Arnold, too, turned to communism in his early life. Like the other youths of his time in England, Wesker, as well, became a social rebel and wanted to change the world. He believed that the marginalized section of the society had been mistreated by the government and society. Wesker did several odd jobs; he worked as a furniture maker's apprentice, kitchen porter, farm laborer, and a pastry cook. These jobs gave him a firsthand experience of working class life, which he later used in his plays. While working as a pastry cook in a hotel in Norwich in 1959, he conceived the idea of his first play *The Kitchen*. Later influenced by John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* (1956), Wesker found a cue to writing plays. He is best known for his trilogy – *Chicken Soup with Barley*, *Roots*, and *I'm Talking About Jerusalem* – (popularly known as 'Wesker Trilogy') which was published in 1959. His socialist leanings persuaded him to write about the social issues. Thus, one can observe that his working-class background, his political thoughts and the then social situation in England had shaped his writing career.

1950s and 60s was the time when the 'angry young men' had emerged in England. Dramatists such as Noel Coward, John Osborne and Shelagh Delaney focused upon the lower middle class and the disillusionment of the British youth after the Second World War. These writers showed overcrowded industrial suburbs and the lives of the impoverished lower middle class in their plays. They also experimented with the technique of drama, especially with the settings of their plays. The plays were often set in kitchens of the lower middle-class families, and hence these plays were called as 'kitchen sink drama'. These plays depict pessimistic characters who have lost every hope of social and economic upliftment.

9.2 A brief background of the English drama between 1950s and 60s:

The Second World War affected Britain badly. Britain had to end imperialism after WW II and thus it shrunk to a small country. The idea of Welfare state was brought in by the Labour Government in England which came to power after the WW-II. This led the access to the youths to higher education in the working class. But the newly educated class, however, could not find suitable jobs. Alan Carter in his book *John Osborne* (1973) sums up the social situation of the time as: "Many people were fed up, they were bored and had little opportunity for achievement. They were searching for a world they could believe in". (Carter 21). The playwrights of the time brought to the English stage, situations and characters from the industrial and the impoverished rural scenes. This gave an altogether different perspective from the drawing-room comedies of Noel Coward and Terrence Rattigen. As stated earlier, Wesker was influenced by Osborne's plays. In his interview to Simon Tussler he said, "When I saw it, I just recognized that things could be done in the theatre, and immediately went home and wrote *Chicken Soup*" (194). The playwrights of the time were portraying social reality of the time through their writings.

9.3 Introduction to *The Kitchen*:

The Kitchen was first staged at the Royal Court Theatre, London on 13 September 1959. In *The Kitchen* Wesker criticizes the monotonous jobs that the common people have to do. The mechanical, meaningless and repetitive jobs which were brought in by the industrialization led to several social problems. Under the tremendous working pressures, the workers became frustrated. They were not happy with their jobs, they were also paid little hence there was not much economic gain for them too. Wesker shows this with the example of a cook in a kitchen in a restaurant, but it implies that the modern capitalistic jobs in industries and factories are futile as they alienate man from society. Thus, Peter, the protagonist of the play, angrily asks, "What kind of life is that, in a kitchen! Is that a life, I ask you?" Work becomes a kind of enslavement and, as a result, the workers become isolated and depressed. The proverb 'every man is an island' is apt for the play as it shows characters who are



lonely, angry and unhappy with everything – with their master, work and coworkers. This is due to the oppressive routine works, unhygienic and unfriendly working conditions. In the “Notes for the Producer” Wesker explains:

There is the rush, there are the petty quarrels, grumbles, false prides and snobbery. Kitchen staff instinctively hate dining-room staff and all of them hate customer. He is the personal enemy.

These stage directions set the mood of the play.

9.4 Detailed Summary of the Play:

- **Dramatis personae**

Peter: He is the protagonist of the play. He is a young German, who has been working in the restaurant for three years. He is impulsive, passionate, short tempered and imaginative. He loves Monique, a waitress in the restaurant.

Kevin: Kevin is a young Irish cook. He is surprised to see the way people work at the restaurant. He is not happy with the working conditions there and is thinking about leaving the job. Since he is a good cook, he is sure that he will get a better opportunity somewhere. He is self-assured but conservative in his thinking.

Gaston: Gaston is a middle-aged man; he is in his forties. He is a Cypriot, is impulsive like Peter. This causes a fight between him and Peter.

Hans: Another German worker at the restaurant. Hans does not know English well. Peter translates for him and they speak German with one another. He loves Cynthia, a waitress but he is too shy to talk to her.

Paul: A young Jew who is in charge of the pastry cook with Raymond. He is calm and reflexive and is not affected by the rush in the restaurant.

Nicholas: Like Gaston, he, too, is a Cypriot. He is in charge of the Cold Buffet of the restaurant. He is a drunkard.

Monique: She is a waitress, very beautiful. She is married to Monty but has an illicit affair with Peter. Monique is impregnated by Peter and might be carrying his baby. Monique, though, loves Peter, does not want to leave her husband. Her husband provides her materialistic comforts, which she finds very important. She is not a romantic fool who would sacrifice the worldly pleasures for the sake of love.

Marango: He is the owner of the restaurant. He is an old man of seventy five and has a very sad face. He is calm and lives a routine life. He wanders around the kitchen at specific times of the day,



checking how things are going on. He is stern, unfriendly and does not treat the workers well even though they earn good money for him.

Setting of the play: The play is set in a large kitchen in a restaurant of Tivoli. The actions in the play take place in one day.

Plot of the play: The play presents a hectic day in the kitchen of a crowded restaurant. It places all the characters in their routine work. The play is divided into two acts: the first takes place at the lunch time, the second at dinner time. The two acts are separated by an interlude. The action of the play takes place in one day.

Act I: The first act begins at seven thirty in the morning. The workers of the first shift begin their work. It begins with a chaos with the nonstop comings and goings of the workers. In the beginning the playwright shows us a crowd of people on the stage – the chef, cooks, the butcher, waitresses and other workers doing their jobs frantically. Their work is accompanied by their incessant talking and shouting, interrupted with fights and quarrels. The earsplitting noises of pans, pots and cutlery add to the chaos and make the workplace more stressful. The workers struggle to accomplish their tasks. There is competition, jealousy and flirtation among workers. Thus, in the beginning of the act, the playwright is successful in showing the workers tensed lives and their challenging working conditions. The kitchen could be compared with a soup pot where all the ingredients are seething and are in a continual boil.

Interlude: The noises at the kitchen come to a halt in a break before dinner. In the interlude workers take their supper and make themselves ready for the hectic evening schedule. The peace and quietness could be seen at the kitchen for some time. Now, we could see a more humane picture of the workers; they freely talk to each other, they make jokes and talk about their future. Some workers have a friendly conversation and express their feelings and concerns more freely. The action of the play, thus, moves from the outside world to the inside. Through their conversation readers could understand that they are fed up with their tedious routine work. They have been exhausted, desperate and dissatisfied with their working conditions. They complain about the inhuman treatment given to them by the owner of the restaurant; they also talk about their exploitation by him. Thus, the true motive of the interlude is to give a chance to the working class to talk about their agonies, sorrows and difficulties.

In their free time they play a game in which they are supposed to tell the others about their dreams or expectations or about their future plans. Initially it seems difficult for them because due to their tough job most of them have forgotten their dreams. But slowly they open up and one can observe that some of them have queer fantasies. For example, Nicholas's fantasy is having a cool bottle of drink at hand anytime he desires. Kevin just falls asleep while others are playing



the game. But ironically Peter, who asks others about their future has no future plans. The dramatist, thus, shows that the workers have been so busy that they have forgotten their dreams; they have been so tired that they doze off whenever they get free time. In the modern capitalistic systems workers are not given enough time to take rest. All the workers wish to be from their present work, but they do not have a better option and hence they are stuck. They fantasize about the world abroad, a utopia where working conditions are better and are based on justice and humanity. The kitchen becomes a metaphor of a bigger world; it could also be seen as a symbol of exploitation and unending hard work.

In the interlude we notice that the workers are dissatisfied with their present condition but they only complain and do not take any effective action to improve it. They neither challenge the system nor rebel against the exploitative working conditions. It seems that they want to retain their jobs until they find the better option but they are not willing to quit it no matter how dissatisfied they are with it. The constant income leads them to work at the kitchen. Thus the feelings the workers have for the kitchen is a love-hate one. The subplot of Peter and Monique's relationship also highlights this love-hate relationship. They want to be in a relationship but at the same time are not happy with one another.

Act II: After the supper break the workers resume their jobs and they get prepared for a new rush of customers. Among several rapidly moving actions a tramp comes asking for food. He is shoved off initially but is given soup later in an old tin. Peter notices that the soup is stinking and offers the poor man two meat cutlets. Peter's charity is informed to Marango, who disapproves Peter's action. Peter and Monique have been in love with each other; Peter wants Monique to divorce her husband and remarry him. But Monique tells him she will never leave her husband and will not give birth to Peter's child. Upon Monique's confession, Peter loses his temper and starts breaking the utensils in the kitchen. He becomes so violent that in frenzy he breaks the gas lead putting everyone's life in danger. The restaurant is in mess; Peter has been subdued by fellow workers by force. Mango visits the kitchen and is frustrated to witness the chaos. He shouts at Peter angrily for what he has done and feels that it is exclusively sabotage on him. Marango's monologue ends the play. It upends all our expectations about the owner's attitude towards the workers. In his monologue Marango says that he has good intentions towards the workers but he has not been understood by his employees. He says that he has tried to provide the workers welfare and that he has been providing them meals and also paying them well. He is unable to comprehend Peter's ferocity which led to the destruction of the kitchen. This will cost a lot to the owner.

The capitalistic attitude of Marango is evident. He feels that one needs only food and money to survive; and survival is the ultimate



goal of mankind. He does not understand things like job satisfaction, ambition and one's social and economic growth is also important; one does not only live to earn money and to eat food, that would be just a vegetative life.

Peter's violent reaction towards the end of the play is because he is dissatisfied in his professional as well as personal life. He knows that he has little chance of getting a better job and when he finds out that Monique would not leave her husband and marry him, he goes mad.

9.5 Critical Interpretation of the Play:

The play is a critique of disenchantment of industrialization. One can observe that there is no warmth, love and friendliness among the workers; they are the least interested in each other's lives. When Winnie had miscarriage, no one stops working and ironically no one knew that she was pregnant! There is even a kind of animosity among the workers. When Kevin, another cook in the kitchen takes Peter's chopping board, Peter snatches it from him. He is not ready to help Kevin by any means. The workers in the kitchen are frustrated because firstly they do not enjoy their job, there is no job satisfaction and secondly, they feel trapped in the place; they do not see a way out of this place. Probably, they will not get a better job than this. Dimitri is a talented man. He has made a portable record player. It shows that he is good at making electronic gadgets but his talent goes waste as he has to work in the kitchen.

Another noticeable feature of the play is its short, crisp dialogues. The large numbers of characters are given short, crisp dialogues through which the action of the play moves fast. Characters often do not talk on one subject and they do not speak full sentences either. They keep on changing the topics of their talk and they do not seem to listen to one another. There is a lack of communication among the characters, which is a contemporary reality of working places. When Alferdo greets Max with 'Good morning!', Max just points at his work and suggests to mind his business instead of greeting him. When Hans's face gets burnt no one seems to be much affected as they all continue with their jobs. Frank discourages a waitress who wants to help Frank by saying, "He'll live. (To the crowd) All, right, it's all over, come on". The accident which could have been fatal is taken very casually by Frank.

The theme of alienation is dominant in the play. Man becomes alienated in the modern capitalistic world. The odd jobs, such as the one in the kitchen of the restaurant, do not give any joy to workers. They experience loss of dignity and freedom at their working places. The unfriendly atmosphere and the hot humming ovens at the kitchen make workers uncomfortable. Peter is so much frustrated that he axes the gas lines to bring the ovens to halt. Thus, Wesker points out that too much work pressure, unfriendly atmosphere and agonizing working places can lead to violence and destruction. Marengo, the owner of the restaurant never provided good



facilities to his workers. He was not concerned with the working conditions at his restaurant. He is unable to comprehend the reason of Peter's violent act. He says:

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?

Marango is of the view that man just needs food and money to live happily.

Their normal human attitude has been affected; they are not only bad tempered, reluctant towards each other but also ready to harm one another. The aspect of alienation in the modern world is touched by Paul. He says, "And the horror is this – that there's a wall, a big wall between me and millions of people like him." He implies that he is unable to connect himself with the rest of the world.

Wesker in "Notes for the Producer" himself gives the statement of the play. He says:

The world might have been a stage for Shakespeare, but to me it is a kitchen: where people come and go and cannot stay long enough to understand each other, and friendships, loves, and enmities are forgotten as quickly as they are made.

Through the play he criticizes the meaningless mechanical life in the contemporary industrial society. The chaotic rush in the kitchen symbolizes the hectic rush in modern industries and factories. There is no plot as such in the play; not much happens in the play. It is because the playwright focuses more on the characters rather than the action. We see the characters working in the kitchen. Along with their work in the kitchen the playwright also depicts their loves, jealousies, failures and personal affairs. Marango, the owner of the restaurant is criticized for his attitude towards the workers but an attack is directed to the machines too.

Peter is completely crushed towards the end of the play. When Monique hints at staying with her husband and suggests that she will not marry Peter, he gets utterly frustrated. He finds a vent for his anger when a waitress has just helped herself to her order while Peter was at work. He gets mad at her just for a trivial reason and smashes dishes and crockery to the floor. A. D. Chaudhari in his book "Contemporary British Drama" rightly comments that, "Peter, the central character, and all his associates, have no vision before them." They are dissatisfied with their work, their life, nervous about losing their jobs and eager to escape the drudgery. The workers and the master – Marango – both live a senseless life. Peter declares

He is not a man, he is a restaurant. He goes to market at five-thirty in the morning; returns here, reads the mail, goes up to the office. Half an hour after we come back he is here again, till nine-thirty, maybe ten at night.



Every day, morning to night. What kind of life is that, in a kitchen! Is that a life, I ask you?

Study of The Kitchen
by Sir Arnold Wesker

Thus Peter is against the repetitive, meaningless and unproductive way of the life; the life where there is no novelty and excitement. Here, one can observe that Peter is more sensitive than others. Peter is not like Gaston or Marango, who measure everything in terms of money. Peter is craving for a meaningful life. During the short break after the lunch-hour rush he asks his coworkers what they want from life. Thus, in a way the question is projected towards the audience / readers. Dimitri dreams of the independent life of a radio mechanic, Kevin wants to have a happy sleep, Hans is eager to earn more money, Raymond needs women, where as Peter and Paul crave for human understanding. He compares the life of fulfillment and the life of aimless drudgery. Peter's and Paul's attitude towards life could be compared to Marango's when Marango asks, "He works, he eats, I give him money. This is life, isn't it? What more do you want? What is there more, tell me?" Money is of the utmost important thing in life. But the playwright implies the importance of life over material possessions.

Peter is the mouthpiece of the playwright's socialistic attitudes. Peter angrily remarks:

We work here – eight hours a day, sweat our guts, and yet – it's nothing. We take nothing. Here – the kitchen, here – you. You and the kitchen. And the kitchen don't mean nothing to you and you don't mean to the kitchen nothing. . . The world is filled with kitchens only some they call offices and some they call factories.

This halting speech clearly states the author's thesis. The play revolves around the theme of betrayal, love, jealousy and anger and gives an account of a whole day about the lives of the kitchen workers. At last, the central motif of the play emerges out that how a positive attitude of mankind is destroyed by the industrialization of the society. The extreme work pressure changes the human side of a person into a brutal and machine-like with zero feelings and emotions left.

9.6 Questions:

1. Justify *The Kitchen* as a critique of disenchantment of industrialization.
2. Examine the characterization by Wesker in the play *The Kitchen*.
3. Discuss the alienation as the major theme of the play.
4. Examine *The Kitchen* as an anti-capitalist play.
5. How well has Wesker portrayed meaninglessness of life in the modern world in the play? Substantiate your answer with examples from the play.



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