

---

---

# LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 14:4 April 2014

ISSN 1930-2940

Managing Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.

Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D.

Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.

B. A. Sharada, Ph.D.

A. R. Fatihi, Ph.D.

Lakhan Gusain, Ph.D.

Jennifer Marie Bayer, Ph.D.

S. M. Ravichandran, Ph.D.

G. Baskaran, Ph.D.

L. Ramamoorthy, Ph.D.

C. Subburaman, Ph.D. (Economics)

Assistant Managing Editor: Swarna Thirumalai, M.A.

---

---

## ***Alienation in Wesker's Play *The Kitchen****

**Dr. Vandana Goyal, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.**

---



### **Abstract**

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 **14:3 April 2014**

Dr. Vandana Goyal, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Alienation in Wesker's Play *The Kitchen*

The literary works of 1950's have a distinct characteristic. They are seen as a protest against the situation that prevailed after World War-II, not only in England but outside England as well. The period is full of moral perplexity and uncertainty. The gap between the poor and the rich has been widened. In such a confused and chaotic time, writers came to the rescue of common men. Arnold Wesker is one of those writers who has made a significant contribution to the New Wave of English Drama. Most of Wesker's plays illustrate the social and cultural poverty of the working class. His earliest play *The Kitchen* (1959) is a documentary on the lives of the working class people. In this play, Wesker is criticizing the meaningless and mechanical life of the contemporary working class people. This paper is a theatrical representation of the experiences of alienation and frustrations of working class in the capitalist society.

**Keywords:** Alienation, Kitchen, Dehumanization, Society, Working Class



**Arnold Wesker**

Courtesy: <http://crudeapache.wordpress.com/2012/03/06/a-review-of-arnold-weskers-roots/>

The literary works of 1950's are seen as a protest against the situation that prevailed after World War-II, not only in England but outside England as well. The major playwrights of this age are Osborne, Wesker, Arden and Pinter. This playwright of fifties "feels himself inside the society he is writing about, the fears and frustrations of his

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 14:3 April 2014

Dr. Vandana Goyal, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Alienation in Wesker's Play *The Kitchen*

character are his own, or even if he does not share them he can sympathies with them.” (Bamber Gascoigne, *Twentieth-Century Drama*). To understand why these writers wrote such works, it is necessary to look back and to know the factors which are responsible for the present situation and scenario.

### **Age of Moral Perplexity and Uncertainty**

20<sup>th</sup> Century is a century of moral perplexity and uncertainty. The rise of the scientific spirit and rationalism led to a questioning of accepted social beliefs, conventions and traditions. The wholesale criticism of the existing order from different angles and points of view, often opposite and contradictory, has increased the perplexity of the common man and has been further enhanced by the two World Wars and also by the new developments in the field of psychology and politics. The gap between the poor and the rich widened. The common man discovered that they had been cheated, given false hopes, and found themselves trapped in the iron fame of the industrial society that has a distinct bias for class and hierarchy. So, in such confused and chaotic times, writers came to the rescue of common men. These writers raised a voice against the corrupt industrial society in post World War-II and after.

Arnold Wesker is also one of those writers who has made a significant contribution to the New Wave of English Drama. Most of Wesker’s plays illustrate the social and cultural poverty of the working class. His continuing preoccupation with this subject is not surprising when one considers his own life before he became a playwright. His spells of employment as carpenter’s mate, a furnisher’s apprentice, book seller’s assistant, kitchen porter, plumber’s mate, farm labourer and pastry cook gave him a first hand experience of the working class life.

### **The Kitchen: A Documentary of the Lives of Working Class**

Arnold Wesker’s earliest party *The Kitchen* (1959) is also a documentary on the lives of the working class people. In this play, Wesker is criticizing the meaningless and

mechanical life of the contemporary working class people. It is a theatrical representation of the experience of alienation and frustrations of working class in the capitalist society. By use of overwhelming metaphors and characterization, the play captures certain aspects of the problem which have been emphasized in the Marxian analysis of alienation. Marx traces forms of alienation under capitalism, to the nature of the working process, to the conditions of private ownership under which work cease to be the expression of the creative power of the worker. Analyzing alienation in terms of the relation of the worker to his work, to the product of his labour, to fellow workers and to the owner of the means of production, Marx explains the way in which the objects created by man acquire an independent power and rule over him. Work becomes a kind of enslavement and, as a consequence, the worker becomes unhappy and apathetic.

### **World is like a ‘Kitchen’**

The statement of the play has been made by the dramatist himself. “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 friendship, loves and enmities are forgotten as quickly as they are made.” (Arnold Wesker, *The Kitchen*). The theatrical environment in the kitchen is of a large London restaurant, conceived as the “microcosm” of the industrial capitalist society – oppressive, inhuman, mad, indifferent and omnipresent. Wesker who himself worked for four years in Kitchen as a cook, knows the milieu and recreates it with abundance of documentary details of kitchen routine. This kitchen is just like the “stokehole” of O’Neill’s play *The Hairy Ape*. Its area is limited and the persons who work here consider that life inside it is not different in anyway from life outside this area.

### **Impersonalism**

There are thirty odd characters in this play and their personalities seem to be the product of the kitchen itself. The characters in the kitchen appear superficial and impersonal. Every character is assigned some particular job. Their depiction is valid in the context of the environment in which they work, for it is the environment which has

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 14:3 April 2014

Dr. Vandana Goyal, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.  
Alienation in Wesker’s Play *The Kitchen*

made them superficial and impersonal. Their behaviour marked by casually sparked squabbles, frayed tempers and the inability to relate to one another is the manifest consequence of the physically oppressive routine and the all pervasive continuous noise of the ovens. There is a lack of warmth and communication gap in their relation with each other. They are least interested in each other's grieves or happiness. They work, work and work only. They are all dissatisfied with their work, their lives, nervous about losing their job and eager to escape the drudgery. Peter, the main protagonist, cries out in anguish. "What kind of life is that, in a kitchen! Is that a life, I ask you?" (p. 110)

All this busy routine has resulted in their alienated and monotonous lifestyle. It becomes evident when Peter remarks, "This-this mad house it's always here," (p. 124). Arrival of a new cook does not create any happiness of excitement in them. They are unmoved by Kevin's presence.

Paul (shouting): Is the new cook here? Alfredo  
(shrugging his shoulders): He didn't ask for me (p.  
104).

### **Lack of Communication and Dehumanization**

The reason for communication gap and lack of warmth in interpersonal relationships is that they are depersonalized. It is a place where men cannot pause to know each other because most of their time they have to pass inside the kitchen, working continuously for long hours. They do not even respond to each other's greetings like when Alfredo enters into the 'mad house' and wish good morning to Max, Max in turn reminds him, "The veal is there," (p. 104). The job is more important than the individuals who hold it. Few in the kitchen knew that Winnie was pregnant. When her miscarriage occurs, no one stops working. In face, she is removed so that work can continue. The incident when Hans's face is burnt is also taken casually by the staff. Even if somebody tries to be sympathetic, the idea is dismissed.

A waitress (calling after them): Put some of the  
yellow stuff on him.

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 14:3 April 2014

Dr. Vandana Goyal, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.  
Alienation in Wesker's Play *The Kitchen*

Frank: He'll live. (To the crowd) All right, it's all over, come on (p. 114).

This shows their dehumanization. Their acts are selfish. They hate helping each other. The new cook, Kevin, has very bad experience in the kitchen. He enquires about some dishes from Chef and Chef rudely reacts saying, "I do not know anything about it, it was my day off yesterday. See the second Chef," (p. 110). Again during heavy rush, Kevin needs a cutting board but Peter snatches away his cutting board from Kevin's hand. Kevin's outburst at this time shows their dehumanization:

Kevin (surprised at this change in Peter): Well, speak a little human life, will you, please? Peter: No time, no time (p. 122).

### **Alienation**

The workers in the kitchen are not only alienated from each other but also from their own selves, for they do not act as one expects people to act in such situations. Their normal human impulse appears to have been inoperative. Instead, they have bad tempers and are ready to fly at each other's throat on the minutest possible excuse or provocation. As the concept of alienation is something abstract and more psychological than objective and does not connote or denote anything exclusively, specifically and finally. But the fact remains that the causes of alienation may be different in different contexts but the effect is paralyzing the personality.

Peter, the central character, and all his associates have no vision before them. Their personalities have been moulded by the environment they live in. they are also burning from inside as the burning ovens of the kitchen. All the characters seem to be unaware of their own needs. They do not want to be a part of this mad house i.e. *The Kitchen*. But still they are here. Dimitri is a very talented guy. He has made a portable record player. But talent goes waste in this capitalist society. Even Peter, who is more determined than others to relate himself to others around him, joins the system. We see how at the peak of activity reached during lunch time service at the close of the first part, the kitchen sucks all personal responses into itself and how everything becomes part of

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 14:3 April 2014

Dr. Vandana Goyal, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.  
Alienation in Wesker's Play *The Kitchen*

the brutalizing routine. During interlude, they give a thought inside their hearts and speak out their real self. At this time, Wesker has shown dramatically the humanization of their relationships. But the important point is that work in the kitchen has stopped now. So, it is apparent that their work load is responsible for dehumanization of their feelings. Paul as usual articulates the feeling when talking to the dislikable Peter, he observes:

But now it's quite, the ovens are low, the work has stopped for a little and now I'm going to know you. I still think you are a pig – only now, not so much of a pig. So that's what I dream. I dream of a friend. You give me a rest. You give me silence. You take away this mad kitchen so I make friends, so I think – may be all the people I thought were pigs are not so much pigs (p. 57).

At least Peter tries. During the interlude he encourages others to sit with him and dream. The dream sequence is the frustrated effort of these people to life themselves beyond their environment, to express their social being and to share their sense of being with their fellowmen. Unable to respond to each other as human beings, they escape into the world of fantasy, the only world where their alienation is temporarily muted. In this world, Peter says: “No one is going to laugh, we love each other, we protect each other...” (p. 123).

The horror of alienation in such society is touched by Paul and the horror is that that “there is a wall, a big wall between me and millions of people like him,” (p. 127). Both of them, Peter and Paul, compare the kitchen with the modern world. The irony is that in such a capitalist society only persons like Alfredo can boast of to be in harmony with his work. He does not interfere in anybody's work nor does he like other's interference in his work. He does not question others. The only thing which fills up all the gaps on superficial level is money. Everyone consoles himself that atleast they are being paid for working in the mad house. Alfredo declares, “No, I work only for the money,” (p. 130).

Even love is paralyzed by money power in this capitalist society. There is always a feeling of insecurity in worker's hearts about their love. Peter and Monique are in love but still there is insecurity in their relationship. Monique enjoys her time-pass relationship. She always dismisses Peter's idea of taking divorce from her husband. In her unmindful talks, she mentions happily that her husband is buying a house for her.

Monique: Monty has promised we shall soon have  
our own house.

Peter (screaming): Monique! (p. 138).

Wesker depicts not only the alienated lives of the working class people and the environment in which they live but he goes further and explores how the power holders too are alienated. Marango, the 'boss', whom Alfredo hates is the typical bourgeois proprietor who has made his kitchen synonymous with his existence. His life is also full of monotony and sense of alienation. He is an old man without any emotional bondings. Peter refers to him as a "restaurant" (p.109). He is unwilling to understand the plight of the workers. Right through the play, we are kept reminded of the workers hatred for Marango the "boss" and of the traditional conflict between workers and the system. His reactions towards any mishappening in the kitchen are very mechanical and emotionless. When Hans's face is burnt, Marango comes to enquire about him. Chef remarks behind him:

Chef (to Frank): Much he cares. It interrupts the  
kitchen so he worries (p. 114).

Marango's use of words like "Sabotage" shows his cunning materialistic attitude. All the cooks use different words to describe Marango's personality. Peter refers to him as "a bastard man" (p. 109). Kevin, the new cook mocks Marango's behaviour.

Kevin: In this air it goes, sudden and his face gets  
worried as though today were the last day and he  
had to be a closing for good and he was taking a last  
sad glance at everything going on (p. 132).

So, that's how we come to know about Marango's capitalistic attitude and its effects upon his workers from the workers of the kitchen itself.

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 14:3 April 2014

Dr. Vandana Goyal, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Alienation in Wesker's Play *The Kitchen*



## Conclusion

The whole point of the play is that if a man's work is base, as it is under the capitalist system, he becomes alienated from his universal social being. The tension he experiences in his work derives from the inner conflict between what he wants to be and what he has become because of what he is doing. Peter tries to infuse into his work a sense of joy; he tries to become himself and to encourage others to do likewise. But the unfriendly atmosphere of the kitchen, with its constant humming of the burning ovens, like their burning hearts, reminds him of the total loss of dignity and freedom. In sheer frustration, he axes the gas lines, bringing the ovens to a halt, trying to assert his sense of dignity.

This incident is of great dramatic importance. It is a violent physical gesture which was repressed by Marango's capitalist system for long. His violent act should have aroused some feeling of sympathy to the heart of capitalist boss, Marango. But nothing changes. Marango as expected, however, can only respond:

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? (pp. 142-143).

And the question that is raised that what is that "something more" needs to be answered. "Something more" does not lie merely in tidying up this particular kitchen so as to provide "Creative Cookery" (Glenda Leeming and Simor Trussler, *The Plays of Arnold Wesker*). Finally, the kitchen stands for the industrial capitalist system and the problem of the cooks is the problem of the whole working class in the system. In *The Kitchen*, Arnold Wesker critically analyses the causes and the effects of alienation on the working class people. The effects of alienation have left them totally dehumanized and emotionless.

## References

Bamber Gascoigne, *Twentieth-Century Drama* (London: Hutchinson & Co. Ltd., 1962).

Arnold Wesker, *The Kitchen* (Harmonds Worth: Penguin Books, 1960).

Further citations from this edition are incorporated in the text with page numbers within the parenthesis in this paper.

Glenda Leeming and Simor Trussler, *The Plays of Arnold Wesker: An Assessment* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1971).

=====

Dr. Vandana Goyal, M.A, M.Phil., Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor  
Department of English  
Government Post Graduate College  
Hisar 125001  
Haryana  
India  
[vandanagoyal16@gmail.com](mailto:vandanagoyal16@gmail.com)