

Locating the female
in selected plays of
john osborne and
arnold wesker



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The Post War British theatre, dominated by its galaxy of angry young men, had its host of women as well. But, these women have often received quite a lukewarm response from the critics. The plays of John Osborne and Arnold Wesker, for instance, were made synonymous with a Jimmy Porter or a Ronny Kahn. Naturally, characters such as Helena, Sarah and their ilk got little or no critical attention. In today's changed world, however, releasing marginal and muted voices has become both important and customary.

However, a brief overview of critical work dedicated to Post War British drama in general and the plays of Osborne and Wesker in particular clearly indicate the importance and relevance of analyzing the role and function of the women characters in the plays of these two playwrights. In the proposed thesis, I will initially define the critical terms that will inform the study. In addition, I propose to give a brief overview of the research already done in the area of my study showing thereby the rationale for my project.

I propose to discuss representative plays of the playwrights to show how both Osborne and Wesker, each in his own unique way, has presented women as wives, mothers, mistresses, and daughters. They have also presented women rebelling against male domination and daring to remain women in a defiant manner. One of the very first plays to be discussed in the thesis will be John Osborne's 1956 play *Look Back in Anger*. Generally considered a watershed in the 20th century English Theatre, the play has received huge critical acclaim.

A major part of such critical attention, however, has solely been concentrated on the character of the Angry Young hero Jimmy Porter, forgetting quite conveniently his wife, Alison who is also a victim of the same

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dilemmas which assail Jimmy and his generation. While Jimmy's resentment against the prevalent socio-political scenario can fairly be seen in his frequent outbursts, Alison's angst goes unnoticed. The play also features Helena Charles who dares to pit her wits against Jimmy's and hold her own, braving his virulence. *Time Present* (1973) is the play in which Osborne portrays women as mistresses. The play focuses on the life of the young and beautiful Pamela as she is confronted with her roommate Constance. A self-proclaimed 'high Tory', Pamela is torn among time past, time present and time future. Deeply troubled with the kind of life she leads; Pamela desperately clings to a past that can take her nowhere. The more she resists the pulls of the future, the more she gets embroiled in its web.

The play shows how Pamela is finally able to extricate herself from the vicelike grip of temporality and transience. Osborne's play *Hedda Gabler* (1972) presents in and through the enigmatic character of its heroine, what the critics have often called, a 'female Hamlet'. Much unlike the indecisive heroine of Henrik Ibsen, Osborne's notorious *Hedda Gabler* is an assertive as well as aggressive individualist who lives off her own fantasies. Living life on her own terms she virtually fights a crusade against patriarchal bigotry for the other Osborne women as it were.

A contemporary of Osborne, Arnold Wesker's debut play *Chicken Soup with Barley* was produced in the same year as *Look Back in Anger*. The play traces the life of Sarah, the wife Harry Kahn. However, quite unlike Osborne's Alison who silently tolerates the mercurial temper of her husband, Sarah is the female version of Jimmy Porter whose traumatic awareness of the

strange disease of modern man makes her impatient and extremely angry with all most everything possible.

Significantly, Sarah's anger is not so much directed at her friends or family members, it is rather a way of expressing herself, a form of her protest against a world that denies women not only basic rights but also basic dignity. The play also deals with Sarah as a mother as she is confronted with her 'intellectual' son Ronny and her 'idealistic' daughter Ada. Just like their father Harry both Ronny and Ada miserably fail to understand the real cause of their mother's anger, and instead of soothing her tormented soul disturb and hurt her to an extremity.

The second play of the Wesker Trilogy, *Roots* (1958) presents its female protagonist Beatie Bryant as a daughter. Desperately in love with the intellectual and urban Ronny, Beatie returns to her Norfolk house only to teach her family members how to behave in front of her sophisticated lover. However, the more she tries to teach her family the ways of the London world the more she realizes her own follies — that she is fast losing her own identity and is actually living life on Ronny's terms, becoming thereby a mere puppet in his hands.

The play ends with Ronny's letter to Beatie declaring his inability to visit her family. The letter makes Beatie realize not only her ill-fated dependence on Ronny but also her real self as a potentially self-sufficient individual. Wesker's one woman play *The Mistress* (1988) presents the female protagonist Samantha in her tailoring shop, designing new clothes, talking to her three off stage employees while waiting for a phone call from the person she is in love with.

The play proceeds through a series of imagined phone calls to which Samantha fails to respond and several interrupted conversations that she really engages in. These conversations which are more of monologues than dialogues reveal the real Samantha with her hopes and fears, anxieties and apprehensions. What I really aim at is to show the treatment of women by these two playwrights and also highlight how the traits like weakness, hypertension, promiscuity, anger, and affection — exhibited by these female characters not only reflect life but also seek to reify it in some ways.