Wesker and the Woman in Socio-political strife

Arnold Wesker wrote a number of plays but he is widely known as the author of the Triology - *Chicken Soup with Barley*(1958), *Roots*(1959) and *I'm Talking about Jerusalem*(1960). Set between 1936 and 1959, these three plays trace the history of the Kahns – a Jewish working class family from the East End of London. It is the story of an immigrant family trying to establish itself in their East End home and in the process traces its disintegration over a 20-year period and how their communist ideals collapse in the world that is changing around them.

Though the plays primarily trace the social, political and cultural beliefs of the Kahns, it is interesting to view them also on the basis of personal relationship and particularly on male-female relationship as this relationship occupies an integral part in almost all plays of Arnold Wesker. This relationship is present in *Chicken Soup with Barley* between Harry and Sarah, takes on a different hue in *Roots* between Roonie and Beatie and is again obvious in *I'm talking about Jerusalem* between Ada and Dave. It is present in some of Wesker’s other plays as well.

Wesker was Osborne’s contemporary and *Chicken Soup with Barley* was performed when Arnold was twenty-six just as Osborne had
been when his first play was staged. Both Arnold Wesker and John Osborne were key contributors to 'The Royal Stage Company' which had George Devine as its proprietor. Both the plays focused on the working middle class.

Like *Look Back in Anger*, the *Triology* too is largely autobiographical. All the major characters are recreations from Wesker’s own life. His own father was a Jewish tailor like Harry and his mother a communist, like Sarah. His wife was a Norfolk girl like Beatie of *Roots* and had left Norfolk to work as a waitress. *I am talking of Jerusalem* recaptures the experience of his sister and brother-in-law and their experiment to return to nature. However in contrast to Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger*, here the family is complete with woman, man and children.

*Chicken Soup with Barley* is a three-act play that starts in 1936 with the Kahn family preparing to take to the streets to counter a planned anti-Jewish march organized by the British Union of Fascists. The family is excited as they join the socialists, communists and Labour Party members and have to elude the police force as well. A notable exception in all this enthusiasm is the faint-hearted Harry, who would rather read a book and have a cup of tea than face confrontation. By act II (1946-47) Harry and his wife Sarah, have moved to Hackney and are facing a tough time with Harry out of work and their offsprings- Ada and Ronnie- away to sort out their own lives. The play concludes in 1956 after the Soviet invasion of
Hungary. Harry has had two strokes and can hardly move. Sarah is the only one who is still a party member and fighting for the working class.

Though primarily *Chicken Soup with Barley* (1958) talks of political struggle, it can be analyzed to see how much space is given to the woman in this ambience of struggle and fight. Sarah Kahn, the wife and the mother, is at the helm of affairs. She is the very axis, around whom the whole play revolves and stands in direct contrast to Alison by being exuberantly active and throbs with energy. In the stage directions, she is the first whom the playwright describes, “a small fiery woman,” her “movements indicate great energy and vitality.”

Whereas Alison’s voice was “drowned in the robust orchestration of the other two men,” here it is Sarah’s voice that is heard above the others, both by its intensity and by its tone. She is more articulate than her husband. Sarah has stepped out of the boundaries of the home and has a loud and confident voice for her opinions. In fact, it is she who does most of the talking especially when she is alone with her husband. Sarah reminds one of Jimmy Porter. She is expressive, articulate, feisty and full of passion. She wants action and has beliefs, convictions and enthusiasm. Like him, living is not just synonymous with eating, working and sleeping.

Here the traditional roles of man and woman have been clearly reversed. Harry Kahn, the husband is thirty-five, two years
Sarah’s junior and an “anti-thesis of Sarah”, “amiable but weak”(p.13)

Whereas Sarah is an enthusiastic participant, Harry has only a secondary position. As the curtain rises, it is Sarah, who holds the stage, getting all the limelight and focus. She is no doubt a central character and goes around fussing about everything, but then also takes upon her shoulders every responsibility of the family.

Sarah has a voice and this is a direct result of her stepping out of the house. This can be traced to the expectation embedded deep within the psyche, that only man shall make major decisions. This results from the inherent conceptual difference between the value of stepping out of the house and the value of keeping a house. Because Sarah has stepped out of the house, she has also acquired a voice, can express opinions and take decisions. Harry in contrast is more passive. He replies only when questioned and that too reluctantly and only after a lot of pestering. Sarah more and more like a master can order around:

SARAH: Come and make some tea. Ada will be here soon.
HARRY: Leave me alone, Sarah.
SARAH: Make some tea when I ask you! (II,i,p.37)

At times she becomes the female Jimmy, indulging in continuous nagging. Whether it is asking Harry about the time of the march, or if has had tea at
Lottie’s, one sees a nagging woman coercing her husband to answer. Like her, the language she uses too has the power to shock. “Swine”, “Weakling” and “Coward” are the adjectives she uses for her husband. Then there is also the ebullition, when she throws the saucer at Harry. The husband repeatedly begs to be left alone. One starts wondering if it is really as the stage directions suggest, "a well-meaning but maddening attempt to point out to a weak man his weaknesses" (p.14)

Glenda Leming believed that Sarah’s character though based on Wesker’s own mother, has not been recreated the way he intended. Because of her dominance in the play her very positiveness can be ‘unsympathetic’ and she refers to the stage directions to imply it. For Wesker this is a two edged quality.

"Sarah could have been a patient, long suffering woman who loved all the time and apologized for him and excused him, but she didn't. She fought him.”

In an interview Wesker clarified that though this is a strength, but it is also a failing.

One is tempted to view Harry as the wronged man, though he is otherwise. He is a shirker, an escapist, a procrastinator and an idler all rolled in one. Harry’s lethargy and Sarah’s ineffective attempts to make him a participant in the ongoing political struggle has been skillfully intertwined in the fabric of the play. His wife knows him as a shirker and
therefore is rightfully irritated for having to put up with him. All she wants is that he should do something. Thus Sarah’s nagging is not just an attempt to irritate. She has her reasons to behave the way she does.

Harry does not even fit in the traditional role of a husband. He does not shoulder the responsibilities of the family. Instead he is a dreamer. If left alone, he would like to shut himself up in his world of books. As soon as he enters home, he picks up a book and this happens time and again in the play. Taking up a book is not because of his undying love for books, but rather an escapist’s device that helps him abstain from participating in the action, when he doesn’t want to. He is a constant liar and would not like to own-up especially when he knows he has done something wrong and can be held responsible. “Oh leave off, Sarah” and “Leave me alone” are the phrases that come handy and are used to escape responsibility for his actions. He is ‘artful’ and Sarah, his wife knows him well. She tells him:

“Aren’t you artful, then? You think because you sit there pretending to read that I won’t say anything? That’s what you’d like that I should just come in and carry on and not say anything?”(p.34).

He is unstable as well. Either he himself keeps changing his jobs or else gets fired from one job to another- he is the ‘first one to be fired and the last one to find work’(p.36). In act II when the industry is booming with
work, he manages to be chronically out of work. This of course means an additional burden on Sarah.

Sarah’s life is a life throbbing with activity and vitality and in contrast Harry’s is merely an existence. And worse still, it becomes more of an existence and less of living as the play progresses. He vegetates through life. In act I, one can see Sarah not only actively participating in politics, but demanding the participation of her husband as well. Left to himself Harry would have been content to laze in front of the fire with his book. In scene II of the same act, one comes to know when everyone was actively and enthusiastically participating in the demonstration, Harry was hiding at his mother’s place.

In the second act, one gets a glimpse of Harry slothing on the sofa in contrast to Sarah who is as ‘energetic as ever’ (p.36). He has been sacked from his job. However he is in no hurry to find another. In the next scene their physical appearances are also contrasted. Harry now walks ‘slowly and stooped’ (p.47). He seems to have ‘given up the fight’ (p.47) whatever little he had been putting up. In the words of his son Ronnie, “his life is a total failure”. And by the time the scene ends he has had his second stroke.
In the third Act, Harry’s life has become a total existence. The second stroke has left him totally paralytic. He is now absolutely unfit for work. The metamorphosis to a complete physical wreck is now complete. Sarah too has transformed. In the first two acts her anger is characterized more by physical actions, whereas by the third act this gets reduced to mere words. But the cause in this case is not hard to find. She has seen years of suffering and it is this that has made her more introspective. Also by the third act, Harry has become a constant liability on Sarah. The latter now becomes more of a mother than a wife, looks after him catering to all his needs to the extent of cleaning his bowels as well. But it is the absence of his will to live that is most disturbing:

It’s ach a nebish Harry now... he won’t do anything to help himself. I don’t know, other men get ill but they fight. Harry’s never fought... There were three men like this in the flats, all had strokes... They used to sit outside together and talk for hours on end and smoke. Sit and talk and smoke. That was their life. Then one of them decided he wanted to live, so he gets up and finds himself a job... But the other one he wanted to die... last week he died... But Harry was not like either of them. He didn’t want to die but he doesn’t seem to care about living. (III.i.p.60)

And the last scene completes this transformation from living to vegetating. While a card game is on and Sarah is participating, Harry sits by the fire,
gazing into it, quite oblivious of what is going on. The only words that he utters in the whole of the scene just express his total alienation, "I don't know the woman downstairs yet." (III.i.p.68). The contrast between the husband and the wife is hence very well brought out.

Thus *Chicken Soup with Barley* surely gives an important place to its woman who speaks loud enough to be heard. Monty sees her as a 'fighter' and Harry wonders if there is another one like her. Though the latter words might have been said with cynical contempt, they nevertheless reveal a different kind of woman. Sarah is the 'New Woman' woken up from her sound sleep that she had been sleeping since ages.

She is up with a new energy and a vitality bubbling within her. She is one of those women who are not content to remain within the confines of their hearths, who are not willing to accept what is passed to them by their husband and who do not want to be always at the receiving ends. She would rather move out, look at the world with her own eyes and participate in its on goings. Randolph Bourne defines the New Women thus:

They are all social workers, decidedly emancipated and advanced, and so thoroughly healthy and zestful... They shock you constantly... They have an amazing combination of wisdom, and youthfulness, of humor and ability, and
innocence and self-reliance which absolutely belies everything..."

Sarah fits the definition almost perfectly.

An active participant in the political struggle, Sarah waits for no one when it comes to participation in the demonstration that has come ahead of schedule. One sees the wife rushing off with a rolling pin, thrusting a red flag and a hammer to her husband. The husband tries hard to keep pace with her: “Hey Sarah, wait for me- Sarah! Hey, wait for me!” (p.24). She is a perfect picture of the 'New Woman,' not pleased always to be led. She is not shy of leading when the occasion so demands. In the very first scene, it is Sarah whom the playwright chooses to voice the “keynote of Political commitment”. More important Sarah is practical as well. When Harry simply cannot comprehend what’s wrong in holding two meetings instead of one, Sarah is quick to give the commonsense reply that “if nothing else, it costs more” (p.17)

Sarah has donned the mantle of a political activist, but she has not given up her role of a loving and caring mother. She combines beautifully and harmoniously the feminine values of love and care, with active political action and her whole hearted commitment to its ideals. Stepping into the hitherto considered male forte of politics, she has not compromised on her feminine role. The chicken soup is prepared with all the care, attention and love: it is kept simmering for the whole day. Food
equates with communication. The eponymous chicken soup becomes a symbol for caring within a community.

"When Ada had diphtheria [---] it was Mrs Bernstein’s soup who saved her. Ada still has that taste in her mouth - chicken soup with barley. She says it is a friendly taste."

She is genuinely concerned and alarmed, when she hears that Hymie is hurt. She comes back exhausted from the demonstration, but her motherly concern for her children makes her rush almost immediately to fetch them home. It is she who has helped the family wade through the crises. She fought alone many a times, as when she had to rush the seriously ill Ada with Harry deliberately remaining absent from home.

Sarah incorporates the feminist slogan “Personal is political”. One of the theories of feminism says that woman’s place in the family system is the source from which other inequalities derive. Followers of the theory believe that marriage was invented exclusively to gratify man’s selfish needs and wants. Mrs. Stanton for example, had insisted that she and her friends were not against marriage as such “only against the present form that makes man master and woman slave. The only revolution that we would inaugurate is to make woman a self-supporting, dignified, independent, equal partner with man in the state, the church and home.”

Thus a woman’s contribution to the decision-making process, correlated directly to her value as measured by the outside world.
One of the consequences of woman stepping out of the shackles of the home, is to lessen the dominance of the male by breaking his monopoly on the outside world and giving his spouse some of the authority derived from taking part in the external world. Robert Blood writes:

"A working wife's husband listens to her more. She expresses herself and has more opinions. Instead of looking up into her husband's eyes and worshipping him, she levels with him... Thus her power increases and relatively speaking the husband's falls."

This concept is nicely exemplified in Sarah who has a say both inside and outside her home.

Sarah finely combines the twin roles that of a housewife's and mother with that of a political activist's. Extra-vital, full of energy, an active participant in politics, she is still a good mother and a good wife. Her attitude towards and her efficiency at both the roles can be very well contrasted with Cissie, her sister-in-law. Cissie too, is a political activist and a good worker of the party. But then she is precise in her manner "with a dry sense of humour" (p.27) and "cold and calculated with not a bit of warmth"(p.20). Sarah's criticism of Cissie hence looks justified:

I hate her!... Not a bit of warmth, not a bit... Everything cold and calculated. People like that cannot teach love and
brotherhood... Love comes now you have to start with love. How can you talk about socialism otherwise? (I.ii. pp.28-29)

But all this has not come free. Combining the two roles makes greater demands from the New Woman. She is all the more burdened coping up with both the roles. The apparent liberation hence, has been bought at a great cost.

Though Sarah is given centrality, yet communication and interaction between the husband and the wife is conspicuous by its absence. Harry talks and interacts only when Sarah is not around. On first glance it might seem that Sarah is the domineering wife and Harry the hen-pecked husband, but in reality it is not so. Rather it is Sarah who craves to talk to Harry. She begs pleadingly, “Why must you always smoke? Talk with me. Talk Harry.” (p.45) Here is a woman’s desperate exigency for sharing. Ironically while Sarah is expressing her need Harry has his first stroke, which further removes any possibility of interaction:

Harry: Sarah! [he stops chokes and then stares wildly around him] Mamma, Mamma...

(II.i.p.45)
The stroke now leaves him all the more aloof and alienated. It widens the already present rift between the spouses. His call for “mamma” symbolizes that what he needs now is not a partner with whom he can share his life with, but a mother who shall look after him, serve him and care for him.

There is a potent sense of insecurity in Sarah. All the outward liberation has not freed her from emotional dependence. When Harry has his first stroke, Sarah is left with nothing but her political faith and hope for Ronnie’s future. A devoted mother and a housewife that she was, she had faith in her own family. But with even that breaking, there comes a sense of insecurity. Michelene Wandor sees the disintegration of the family as inevitable.

"It is as if the family already carries the seeds of its own disintegration in the 'unnatural' reversal of gender roles". Imaginatively it is made to appear that a woman can only be strong if the man is weak and vice versa so that "a theme that also rings in the play is the nature of manhood and the definition of male identity". The lament thus figures:

My daughter lives two hundred miles away from me and my husband is a sick man. That’s my family. Well it’s a family, I suppose.”

(p.53)
The loneliness of a woman, who is also a mother and a wife, is expressed when she tells Ronnie “I do not mind not having money, we can always eat, you know that I cannot bear to be on my own.” (p. 69). Harry seems to be marginalized, but a second look at the play speaks otherwise. What apparently looks to be marginalization is not actually so. Harry no doubt remains silent, but this does not necessarily mean that he is not given a chance to speak. On the contrary, his silence is symbolic of a stubbornness not to interact with his wife. It is an aloofness that questions the righteousness of the actions of the other person, and puts a question mark on the other person’s beliefs and convictions.

The play ends with the assertion that one must care for others and that is the only way of spiritual salvation and because this assertion comes from a woman, for the moment one almost tends to take in that Sarah’s super-human regenerative strength might save the otherwise doomed family. This remains a paradox because when it comes to the passing of values to the next generation, Harry who is a failure in all aspects, is the one chosen by the playwright to do so and the son Ronnie, rather than the daughter Ada, the one to take them over. Patriarchy thus is prevalent. It is apparent when Harry talks with Ronnie when Sarah is offstage, speaking out what seems to be his philosophy: “You cannot alter people Ronnie. You can only give them some love and hope they’ll take it.” (p. 56).
As the play begins to wind up, it conforms more and more to this patriarchal set-up. Ronnie who was an enthusiastic follower and admirer of his mother now finally turns to his father, though the latter has nothing to offer save negative values. He sees his own image projected in his father "I watch you and I see myself and I’m terrified."(II.ii.p.56) Even more suggestive are the words, “I wish I had not shouted at him as I used to” (p.72). His words thus question the legitimacy of all his mother’s convictions. A total rejection of the mother and the alignment with the father has thus taken place.

In the play one finds another free thinking woman in Sarah’s daughter, Ada. In the beginning Ada whole heartedly participates in the political on goings. She is however the first one to be disillusioned. Questioning all the values held dear by Sarah, she decides to quit. She asserts “I’m not afraid of being on my own”(p.45). Ironically what appears to be her own decision, is not actually hers but Dave’s, who has had a personal experience of disillusionment. When Ada leaves, Sarah cannot comprehend why she has left her. But not ready to be disillusioned, she consoles herself with the assurance that she has Ronnie with her, “At least I’ve got you around to help me solve problems.”(p.45). Hence Ronnie is the one on whom she has the maximum faith and totally relies on. He is often referred to as “my Ronnie”.

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Act III is set ten years later. Sarah is tired, but is eagerly waiting for her son. She is left all alone as Prince, Hymie and Cissie leave and Harry goes off to sleep. Ronnie finally comes, but is no longer the “enthusiastic Ronnie” (p.69) Even he is completely disillusioned by now. “I’m sick” (p.69) he tells his mother. In the final light Sarah's whole stance is questioned. Her whole struggle appears wasted and every drop of heroism drained out of it. And then it is no one else but her son on whom she had been banking so much, who questions her and accuses her:

“I stand here and a thousand different voices are murdering my mind. Do you know, I couldn’t wait to come home and accuse you.” (p.71)

In spite of all this, Sarah still clings to the old faith with a blind optimism and conviction. One starts doubting her credibility, especially when Ronnie questions her ‘I don’t suppose you’ve bothered to read what happened in Hungary’ (p.71) and then again “What’s happened to us? Were we cheated or did we cheat ourselves?” (p.72) And it is painful to be hit where it hurts the most:

You’ve never been right about anything. You wanted everybody to be happy but you wanted them to be happy your way... The family you always wanted has disintegrated, and the great ideal you always cherished has exploded in front of your eyes. But you won’t face it.
You just refuse to face it. I do not know how you do it but you do—
you just do [louder] you're a pathological case Mother— do you know that? (III,ii.pp.72-73)

Sarah still argues for the values that she holds dear. She still has strength to put her case bravely “You want me to cry again,” She asks. “We should all sit down and cry... If the electrician who comes to mend my fuse blows it instead, so I should stop having electricity?” She argues. She still talks of “light and love,” and desperately tries to argue her case, saying that she is a simple woman. Referring to this 'simple' label Wesker himself believed that though politically Sarah is simple, emotionally she is not. She is a much more complex person emotionally because she has “strong values” In a bid to convince the son, the mother enumerates all her past struggles in front of Ronnie. She tells him of all the fights she had to fight alone because her husband simply refused to help. She recalls the incident when she was pregnant and Ada had diphtheria. Harry at such a moment of crisis had walked out of the house and there was not a single penny at home. He was later seen to be eating beef sandwiches, whereas his wife and daughter were struggling for life. But Sarah emerges more and more a pathetic character. She says she had been fighting against Harry because “he does not care”:

Sarah: I fought everybody who did not care. All the authorities, the shopkeepers. Even today, those stinking assistance officers I could
buy them with my little finger. Even now I am still fighting them...
And you want to be like them.... Like your father? I’ll fight you then.
Ronnie: And lose again.  (III,ii.p.75)

Sadly like Ronnie avers, however, it is a losing battle that she had been fighting.

Sarah’s position is not all that central as it looks in the beginning. No doubt she is more vocal but her talk is rarely paid attention to. She is hardly ever taken seriously. Her fight is seen to be a fight of an ignorant fool, who does not even know what she is fighting for. “She does not know” (p.62) is an accusation continually leveled against her. Monty avers:

For her the world is black and white. If you’re not white, you must be black. She cannot see shades in character... Do you think she ever read a book on political economy in her life? Bless her! Someone told her Socialism was happiness, so she joined the party.
(III,i.p.62)

Her ignorance is mocked at. She is ridiculed because according to them, she is a defaulter as she is not supposed to have read
anything. They refuse to recognize the fact that she had hardly any time on her hands, coping up with various roles—looking after an imbecile husband, caring for the kids, looking after the home and being politically active. She is a simple person and yet not so simple as Monty. It is Monty who has swung from "communism to political agnosticism" as he is unable to cope with betrayals and disillusionment. It is he who has made a choice in black and white terms. Sarah on the other hand has been fighting on two fronts: one against the system and another on the individual level:

Now the people have forgotten. I sometimes think they're not worth fighting for, because they forget so easily… You think it doesn't hurt me—the news about Hungary? You think I know what happened and what didn't happen? Do any of us know? Who do I know who to trust now—God, who are our friends now…?

(p.173)

Sarah's outburst proves that hers is not a blind struggle. She is a conscious fighter, well aware of the alternatives or the lack of them. Her value of human beings is balanced by her disillusion with them; her confidence is qualified by mistrust. But she nonetheless makes the decision to go on fighting against all her doubts. She might be a simple minded person, but here the choice that she is making is not a simple one. "It is existential in nature and much more complex than that made by either Monty or Ronnie"."
Tragically after doing all that, she gets no thanks neither as a mother nor as a wife. On the contrary, her concern and her care becomes a laughing matter. Her anxiety when she hears that Hymie is hurt is only ridiculed, especially by Hymie himself “If there is one thing, Sarah loves, it’s someone who’s ill to fuss over.’ (p.25) Her motherly instincts and her concern to see that the family is well fed is also not spared. She insists that Ronnie should have a piece of cake that she had baked especially for him when he returns from Paris, but she is categorically told “not to fuss” (p.70). And Hymie laughs at her back:

No sooner you finished one cup that you got another...God forbid you, you should ever say you’re not hungry. She starts singing that song ‘As man is only human he must eat before he can think’”(p.30)

And when all of them join in to sing the song “As man is only human...”, Sarah’s loneliness and isolation only gets heightened. But as this occurs quite early in the play, it shows that it is not only Sarah’s final stand that is criticized, but that she has been isolated all through. The process of disillusionment that started with the second act completes itself in the third. Her life now revolves around Harry who is completely immobilized, filling the insurance certificates and coping up with the humdrum existence.
Sarah does fascinate one, but one is left with the feeling that she loves humanity at the expanse of those near her. At no stage does she neglect the physical needs and the demands of her own family and yet she is made to be seen as divorced from charity so that somehow her final isolation and loneliness stands justified. Never the less one remembers Sarah, for she is the only positive character in the play. She fights against all odds in spite of her completely shattered personal life. All this does give her some dignity and a tragic grandeur. And this muddle headed, stubborn, working class woman does touch a chord somewhere.

The second play of the triology *Roots* (1959) again has a woman on its centre stage. The heroine, Beatie Bryant is engaged to Ronnie Kahn, who has already appeared in *Chicken Soup with Barley* as Sarah’s son. Ronnie is conspicuous by his absence here. Beatie comes home, all full of Ronnie, who is expected to join her soon. She stays first with her married sister Jenny, and then with her parents. As in *Chicken Soup with Barley* here too, the sense of family is quite strong, though the Bryants are at loggerheads at each other. Beatie, like Roonie has been instrumental in cracking the monolithic family structure but unlike Roonie she is not weary and rather basks in the glory of light and self realization towards the end. It is because of her that the play ends with a positive note.
In terms of plot, nothing much happens except that when the whole family has gathered to welcome Ronnie, he doesn't turn up. Instead a letter arrives stating he has given the engagement and the relationship a second thought. This no doubt shocks Beatie but then also proves as a catalyst for her to reanalyze herself. The title itself is quite suggestive. As Christopher Innes pointed out in "Arnold Wesker: Utopian Realism" that the play talks of "agricultural laborers and peasants, yet they are culturally so dispossessed that they seem to be without roots". The woman here liberates herself and she does so by mastering language. She begins by merely parroting her intellectual lover, but in the process finds her own voice.

Right from the time the play opens one realises that this is indeed female territory. It opens with "a rather ramshackle house in Norfolk where there is no water laid on, nor electricity nor gas" and very "few amenities". A woman Jenny is putting her child to bed. She is humming to herself. Very soon the male (her husband) enters writhing in pain and breaks this peace.

Beatie arrives and announces that Roonie, the man she has been going out with, would be following her soon and that they plan to get married. She has returned home, but the conflict between the two ways of life- one that she had left behind and the one Roonie has taught her to lead-
becomes apparent quite early in the argument about comics. As soon as she picks up a comic she is immediately reminded of Ronnic’s reprimand:

“‘Christ woman, what can they give you that you can be so absorbed?’ So you know what I used to do? I used to get a copy of the Manchester Guardian and sit with that wide open- and a comic behind.”

Jimmy: Manchester Guardian Blimey Joe- he don’ believe in havin’ much fun then?

Beatie: That’s what I used to tell him-‘fun’ he say ‘ Playing an instrument is fun, painting is fun, reading a book is fun, talking with friends is fun, but a comic? A comic? For a young woman of twenty-two? (p.89)

This actually sets up the tone for the things to come. Physically Ronnie is absent throughout the play, yet he overpowers Beatie and her way of thinking and in this way she is overshadowed by his towering presence in her life. This device of keeping the oft- talked- of character offstage serves a very important role. In Look Back in Anger Jimmy's presence could not be ignored even when he was not physically present, partially by the loud trumpet one heard and partially because he was the central character and very important in terms of plot. Similarly Roonie is present even in his absence. In fact he is more important in Roots than in the other plays of the Triology and his presence is "recreated through Beatie partly by the
way she quotes and mimics him but mainly through what she shows us of the influence he has on her. She cannot forget his presence even for a moment.

Wesker tried earnestly to depict the growth of a simple peasant girl to the point of self-realization. She does no heroic acts to reach the state, rather she discovers her potentials by discovering her own voice. Christopher Innes believes Beatie's transformation is even greater than the contrast between the first and last stages of Ibsen's feminist prototype in *A Doll's House*.

"The implication is clearly that Beatie's conversation will have as wide-ranging social significance as the classic slamming of the door by Ibsen's heroine." However although Nora's reveals her "inner turmoil" and forecasts her rebellion against convention it is performed as a set piece to demonstrate her marital subjugation. By contrast, Beatie's pleas come "straight from the heart".

The span covered is merely a fortnight in her life in contrast to *Chicken Soup with Barley* that covers a life span of twenty years. Beatie has been so thoroughly subjected to Ronnie's ideas about life and socialism and almost about everything under the sun, that her own voice has been lost in the process. Carol Gilligan in the essay "Getting Civilized" maintains that
"...girls and women in their efforts to make and keep their relationships take large part of themselves out of the relationship. In a research it was found that women often keep out of relationships those parts of themselves which they most want to bring into relationships - their voice, their creativity, their brilliance and their vitality."  

This is, thus, in part a protective move designed to preserve from invalidation or attack those parts of themselves women feel are most essential to preserve which they most love and value. In this case, Beatie would have made a very interesting case study. Another stalling discovery made was that girls describe the relational impasse that forces dissociation: that if they speak they will lose the relationship. Consequently some compromise between voice and relationship is struck. Underlying this effort is a profound optimism that constitutes hope in the face of despair - a belief that someday things will change for the better. Beatie has undergone a similar compromise.  

In reality the life in London has done very little to change her opinions, though she behaves otherwise. Therefore when she comes home she wants to believe that she has changed for the better and wants her family to respond accordingly. But the life in London has actually just managed to refine her tastes. The ideas of Ronnie too have had little influence on her and she parrots Ronnie not because she believes in him,
but rather because she thinks by doing so she can influence him and win over a husband.

*Roots* is a play that talks extensively on language and its power. It shows candidly how a hold on language can result in power. Ronnie has the power as his hold on language is complete. As far as Beatie is concerned, she is a mere outsider. Language does not belong to her. She is always at her wits' end as far as language is concerned. She is like her mother Mrs. Byrant who has no answer to the question “How do words affect you? Do you find them beautiful?” and she naively answers “Them’s as good as any” When continually assailed by the daughter with questions like “I mean what do they do to you? How do the words affect you? Are you moved? Do you find them beautiful?... Do they make you feel better”, she has no answer except that “it’s the tune I like. Words never mean anything.”

The daughter tries to teach her mother, but discovers to her horror that these concepts are completely foreign to her as it is to the family. She is unsuccessful also because she herself is not very clear. She admits that she had the same questions as her mother when she first met Roonie. For example she remembers asking what makes a pop song third rate. And Roonie’s answer had failed to satisfy her fully. “I don’t know what he talks about something about registers, something about commercial world blunting our responses.” (p.115). Like Jimmy of *Look Back in Anger*
Roonie it seems has so much to say “‘Give yourself time woman,’ he says, ‘Time! You can’t learn how to live overnight. I don’t even know and half the world don’t even know but we got to try. Try co’s we’re still suffering from the shock of two world wars and we don’t know it. Talk and look and listen and think and ask questions”, and this poor Norfolk girl knows neither how to ask questions nor how to talk.

Beatie can only parrot Ronnie’s ideas and when the set phrases and clichés fail her, she accuses her mother, as she finds in her a perfect dumping ground. The accusations leveled at her are many. She accuses her mother for her lack of refined taste and alleges she herself could not acquire sophisticated taste because she was never given an opportunity to be one. The radio was switched off as soon as the classics began and that she could never read anything as there were no books in the house. Mrs. Bryant is zapped at the accusations and hardly knows how to react to such criticism from her own daughter. "What's gone into you now gal?" The mother—criticism does not end there and continues. She hates her mother for lacking "majesty" and for "shutting out the world". The poor peasant woman does not have much in way of an explanation: "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 'ent got not big things here you know."(p.127).
Beatie gears up the whole family and prepares them physically and mentally to welcome Ronnie. She wants everyone to be at their best when he arrives:

"I don't want any of you to let me down when Ronnie comes. I want him to see we're proper. I'll buy you another bowl so's you don't wash your hand in and I'll get some more tea cloths so's you 'ont use the towels and no swearin..."

which is where the language again comes in. Beatie wants a reformation on the language because Ronnie would be here. It is another matter however that Ronnie himself swears as well. "He swears all right, only I don't want him to hear you swear." Beatie tries hard to make everything perfect for Roonie's arrival. Mrs. Bryant can't help commenting: "Blust you'd think it were the bloody Prince of Egypt comin" (p.131)

Ronnie is the best thing that has happened to Beatie and she doesn't want to take chances and let him go. For her, it was love at first sight. She loved Ronnie when she first set eyes on him at the Dell Hotel where he was working in the kitchen. It was more or less an one sided affair, with Beatie chasing Ronnie with compliments and presents till he finally gave up to her. Though he never really admitted that he loved her, for a simpleton like Beatie even the silent acknowledgement was enough. Beatie pretended that she was interested in all the political talk that Roonie indulged in, precisely because she like all traditional women she thinks she
would be acceptable to the male if she is able to adapt his standards and norms.

When everything is set, the whole family gathers to welcome Roonie. Not able to contain her excitement, Beatie gets so worked up that she now has a "quote for everything". She quotes him to such an extent that she effaces her personality completely. She is no longer Beatie but has Roonie's mask on. She climbs a chair, thus raising herself on a pedestal and avers:

"If wanting the best thing in life means being a snob, then glory hallelujah I'm a snob. But I'm not a snob Beatie, I just believe in human dignity and tolerance and cooperation and equality and..." (p.141).

Beatie then makes the family play a game with the hope that it would set them thinking. Putting forth a story of a young girl she asks them to judge which of the five characters is morally the most guilty - Archie, the man whom the girl loves who is on the other side of the river and who does not love her but takes advantage of her, a wise man who advises her to do what she thinks is the best, a ferryman who takes her across the river on the condition that she strips, or Tom the fourth man, who has always said he loved her but now refuses to do anything with her. This moral dilemma is too much for the family to fathom and they even
refuse to think about it. Mrs. Bryant is rather more concerned about the tea getting cold. So Beatie tells then what Roonie thinks.

"He say the gal is responsible only for makin' the decision to strip off and go across and that she do because she's in love. After that she's the victim of two phoney men - one who don't love her but take advantage of her and one who say he love her but don't love her enough to help her, and that the man who say he love her but don't do nothin' to help her is most responsible because he were the last one she could turn to."

The conclusion that she spells out for the dilemma is actually not hers. She cannot think for herself as an overdose of Ronnie's ideas have dulled her logics and yet she does not miss out in pointing out to others the dangers of not thinking. "Everyone must argue and think or they will stagnate and rot and rot will spread."

It is immediately after this that a message comes from Ronnie saying he has decided not to come and that the relationship is over. The letter shocks her. "She cannot move. She stares around speechlessly at everyone." (p.142). Then she tries to find out what went wrong where:

"He always wanted me to help him but I never could. Once he tried to teach me to type but soon ever I made a mistake I'd give up. I'd give up every time! I couldn't bear making mistakes." (p.143)

and then:
"He used to suggest I start to copy real object on to my painting instead of only abstracts and I never took heed." (p.143)

and the guilt continues:

"He gimme a book sometimes and I never bothered to read it." (p.143).

Like a traditional girl Beatie searches for faults within herself for the relationship that had turned sour. She thinks it is perhaps because she lacked somewhere that the relationship failed.

Shocked and lost, Beatie, like the girl in the story she just narrated, appeals for support from her family: "Your daughter's been ditched. It's your problem as well, ain't it? I'm part of your family, aren't I? Well, help me then!... Talk to me - for God's sake, someone talk to me." But no one has much sympathy for her. She is left high and dry. They seem sick and tired of her. Just because she has dared to be different from them, she is not much sympathized with. Mrs. Bryant feels that she had done what she could - prepared food for Roonie, would have treated him as her son if he had come, and had got the whole family together to greet him. This according to her has been enough. She would now rather go ahead with the tea. Her father does not know and is not bothered.

And then it is here that the transformation from 'chrysalis to butterfly' takes place. This change though startling and unexpected is
dramatically satisfying and convincing. Carol Gilligan in Contemporary Playwrights says:

"This metamorphosis of a personality as it were, is an act of romantic inspiration which could well be compared with Beatie's dance to the rhythm of Bizet's L Arlesienne Suite at the end of the second act"13.

No amount of tutoring from Roonie could have transformed Beatie to such an extent. It is because the transformation is now from within. She realizes the supreme truth that she wants to be 'alive' and acknowledges that living is "asking questions all the time, all the time" She wants to find a reason for living "We don't fight for anything, we're so mentally lazy we might as well be dead." (p.147).

So by the time the play draws to a close, Beatie has finally discovered her own voice, a voice that does not merely parrot Ronnie. So though at the end of the play the woman still stands alone, distanced and unjustified by her own family, this time however she has her own voice. "D'you hear that? D'you hear it? Did you listen to me? I'm talking. I'm talking Jenny, Frankie, Mother. I'm not quoting no more" (p.148). This articulation has not changed much though. Beatie has rediscovered herself, yet no one is very impressed. "Mrs. Bryant gets up to sit at a table grumbling to herself "Oh hell, I had enough of her - let her talk a while she'll soon get fed up." (p.148)
Like Sarah of *Chicken Soup with Barley*, Beatie stands alone at the end. "Listen to me someone", she cries desperately. "God in heaven Roonie! It does work, it's happening to me, I can feel it's happened, I'm beginning, on my own two feet…" (p.148). But the final triumphant statement comes from the stage directions: *As Beatie stands alone, articulate at last, the curtain falls.*

This play as Michelene Wandor sees it, continues the theme of female articulacy (i.e Sarah), but presents it in a different light at a different time. Here we have a young (gentile) woman, who takes charge of her own voice:

"Articulacy is passed on from Jewish mother (Sarah), via Jewish son (Roonie) to gentile woman (Beatie). Beatie's family cannot provide support she needs at the time of crises. and in any case she has already defected, acquiring a new voice: Ronnie's. Her own voice, therefore, must necessarily separate itself both from her natural family and her acquired ideology".  

Beatie has brought articulacy home to her roots and away from where she acquired it (London and Ronnie) and even though without much recognition she knows she has traveled a great distance in terms of growth and yet she is alone in this non-articulate world of Norfolk.
The third play I am talking of Jerusalem like Chicken Soup with Barley charts a process of disillusionment but this time on a private scale. It focusses on Ada, Sarah’s daughter and her husband Dave who moves from London to Norfolk in an attempt to build a socialist life for themselves. Dave works as a carpenter for the colonel but is soon sacked and then he tries to make a living by making furniture by hand. The experiment however fails and the curtain is drawn as they pack up to leave, in contrast to the first scene where we saw them unpack.

In the Act I, it is Sarah and Roonie who are there with Ada and Dave. This is another female centered scene. Sarah is there buttering bread and has brought with her some bottled chicken soup like a concerned mother, keeping up with her image from Chicken Soup with Barley. This is Ada’s and Dave’s utopia that has neither the comforts of electricity nor smooth roads, running water or a lavatory. Ronnie stands on a box conducting the gramophone and then starts shouting slogans like “Down with Capitalism! Long live the workers Revolution! ... And long live Ronnie Kahn too!”(.158). He is completely fascinated by the idea that no one objects to his slogan shouting and no one argues. One can say anything, jump about, spin in the air, do somersaults or bang the earth. He finds all this very wonderful.

Here is the beautiful delineation of the slogan “Personal is Political”. Dave’s concept of socialism is a William-Morris life style
“based on craft where work and family are one”\textsuperscript{17}. His ideals are in tune with Sarah’s but she is upset as the mother in her dominates and she feels sad as her children have moved away from her “I brought up two nice children and I want to see them round me--- But all right, so you want to go away, so you want to build a life of your own---“ (p.160) is her lament. Adding to her agony comes the comment from Ronnie “Aren’t you proud that your children are the first to pick up the ruins?” (p.157). Then in a scene reminiscent of \textit{Chicken Soup with Barley} Sarah is laughed at when naively she is impressed by Ronnie’s recitation of poetry and wants that he should get it published, little realizing that he is just quoting. Then as a humanist as she is, Sarah cannot figure out how socialism can work in an environment bereft of people. She can neither figure out nor justify why Dave and Ada have to leave for Norfolk. Dave’s reasoning that mass production saps a person out and that “morning after morning have cold hatred in their eyes brutalized” fail to satisfy her. Again the fear of loneliness of a mother is highlighted when she believes that Dave has taken Ada away from her as he hates her:

Sarah: And Dave doesn’t like me- you know that?
I don’t know why it should be like that he doesn’t like me. I don’t think I’ve ever done anything to hurt him (PAUSE). Perhaps that’s why he’s taking you away, because he doesn’t like me. Who knows!
(I.i. p.167)
and then again:

Ach! Children! You bring them up, you teach them this, you teach them that, you do what you think is right and still its no good. They grow up and they grow away and you’re left with---with---

(p.167)

She gropes with words as she realizes that she’s left with absolutely nothing but a paralytic husband and her children moving away. This breaking away of the family hurts the mother the most.

Here again there is an emphasis on language. In Act I we find that both the women are hard of hearing, thus cutting down the degree of communication possible between them. Then there is Ada who chooses to hum rather than answer her mother and this naturally upsets Saraii, for whom communication has always been vital. “What you humming for?” She wonders, “Humming! All of a sudden she does this humming when I talk to her. A new madness. Stop it Ada. Stop it! Silly girl.” (p.167) And in Act II it is Ada who talks of language after she returns visiting her sick father who has had his second stroke. Ada now laments she had never actually told her father how much she loves him “Useless bloody things words are. Ronnie and his bridges! Words are bridges, he wrote, to get from one place to another. Wait till he’s older and he learns about silences-they span worlds--- What bridges? Bridges?” (p. ) She remembers the time during the war when she was all alone with Sarah. “Mummy’d sit
in the chair, straight up and fall asleep. And every time she did that and I looked at her face it was so sweet, so undesirably sweet - that I’d cry. There! Each time she fell asleep I’d cry. But yet I find it difficult to talk to her! So there. Explain it! Use words and explain that to me.”

In fact all the women characters of *I am talking of Jerusalem* complain of lack of communication. In the second act it is Esther Ada’s aunt, who again finds this lack of communication glaring. She believes that Dave has changed. Nostalgically she recollects how her mother believed in not only loving her children but also showing it. She would hum while cooking, feeding and dressing them up. She would coo even as she scolded them. The advice that the aunt gives to Dave is thus straightforward “You want to give us beautiful things? Talk to us. You think Cissie and I fight? You’re wrong silly boy. She talks to me.” (p.205) This desperate need of a woman to talk and thus share is incomprehensible to Dave however. He retorts back, “I talked enough! You bloody Kahns you! You all talk. Sarah, Ronnie all of you.” (p.205)

In the third act there is an interesting twist to the play as it introduces a new figure in the drama. Libby, an old time friend of Dave arrives. He is not Jewish but an ex RAF and is cynical about this back to nature move of Dave and Ada. He, like Sarah, also accuses them of being individualists, something even Sarah had done to little effect. Besides these ideas he also brings others that startle one. It brings to mind Jimmy
Porter misogynist stance as for example when he makes his famous speech of a woman dirtying you up “A Woman dirties you up as well, you know. She and the world – they change you, they bruise you, they dirty you up -- -" His invectives are not yet over and he further goes on to describe his ex wife whom he believes like all women wanted possessions:

The man provides a home- bang! She’s got another possession. Her furniture, her saucepans, her kitchen – bang, bang, bang! She got another possession. Her furniture, her saucepans, her kitchen- bang, bang, bang! Then she has a baby- bang again--- And this is the way she grows. She grows and she grows and she grows and she takes from a man all the things she once loved him for – so that no one else can have them--- I think I hate women because they have no vision.”(p.182)

According to Michelene Wandor “Although Libby is an outsider to the Jewish family, he is of course from the dominant, gentile culture and these ideas in themselves carry an implied threat both to the traditional Jewish family with a woman as the strong centre and the more emancipated version in the Kahn household”16. Libby’s diatribe against women startles one to take notice. Like Jimmy Porter he laments that his wife did nothing to remind him that she was alive, “She might glance at a
newspaper or do a bit of knitting, but nothing else- nothing that might remind me she was alive”(183)

The play ends with Dave and Ada’s failure. Dave is thrown out of the workshop and his idea of utopia doesn’t work. The last scene shows them packing up to return. And Ronnie reverberates the familial devotion as he still cares for Harry’s physical needs in a rare demonstration of male closeness and the optimism of his last shout is prevalent “We must be bloody mad to cry.”

The Wesker Triology thus takes an epic sweep and entwines political theory with the personal doing justice to both. It also traces the forces of disintegration in the movement as well as in the humans involved in it, but it has been successful in creating two very unforgettable characters: Sarah and Beatie. Sarah gains a certain tragic height in her absolute refusal to accept defeat and Beatie is the village peasant girl who finally finds her own voice. They are characters one would not be able to forget in a hurry.
Notes

1. Arnold Wesker, The Wesker Triology, (London: Penguin Books, 1959), 13. All subsequent quotations have been taken from the above edition and have been incorporated in the text.


17. Ibid., 55.

18. Ibid., 55.