

## The Legacy of Communist Idealism Contested in Chicken Soup with Barley by Arnold Wesker: Political Imperative upon the Personal and Subverted Binary Opposites

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**Abstract:** A dramatic dismantling will surely show that Arnold Wesker's early plays represent the most amiable contestation of the New Left and the new conditions with the surprising yet desired success of the Labour. In early post-war years, Britons anachronistically hold the myth of the long Edwardian summer and thus reconnect with peace after the Great Wars. Unfortunately, though, the repressed memories of Wars haunt the writings and the aura of the age. That's why in Wesker's accounts, especially in his early corpus, Wars work double shift reminding us the hopes of the new generation and their disillusionment after the failure of the Labour. With this background in mind, our study tries to enlarge the theme of communist idealism and disappointment contested in Wesker's Chicken Soup with Barley. In this play, an angry young man through and through and a representative playwright of the first wave in post-war British drama, Arnold Wesker poignantly shows how politics works as an imperative upon the private and the personal and it is also the sexual politics that Wesker contests and subverts. These two issues further serve for his handling of ethnicity (Anglo-Jewry), class (proletariat) and gender (binary opposition).

**Key Words:** Arnold Wesker, communist idealism, subverted binary opposites, sexual politics, Anglo-Jewry, proletariat

### Arnold Wesker'in Chicken Soup With Barley (Arpalı Tavuk Çorbası) Oyununda Komünist İdealizm Mirası: Birey Üzerindeki Siyasi Zorunluluk ve Bozulan İkili Karşıtlıklar

**Özet:** Dramatik bir çalışma Arnold Wesker'in ilk oyunlarının, İşçi Partisi'nin beklenen fakat şaşırtıcı başarısıyla gelen yeni dünya düzeni ve Yeni Sol hareketinin en hafif ve yumuşak tanıklığını gösterecektir. Savaş sonrası dönemin ilk yıllarında Britanyalılar anakroniktik bir şekilde uzun Edward yazları hayalini kurmuş ve bu yanlışlıkla yeniden barışa kavuşmuştur. Buna rağmen, ne yazık ki bastırılan savaş hatıraları bir hayalet gibi dönemin yazınında ve atmosferinde etkisini gösterir. Bu yüzden ki Wesker'in özellikle ilk oyunlarında savaş, yeni neslin hem ülkücülüğünü hem de hayal kırıklığını anımsatır bir şekilde iki boyutuyla var olmuştur. Bu bilgiler ışığında çalışmamız Arnold Wesker'in Chicken Soup with Barley (Şehriyeli Tavuk Çorbası) oyununda komünist ülkücülük ve hayal kırıklığı konularını genişletmeye çalışıyor. Bu oyunda, savaş sonrası Britanya tiyatrosunun tipik oyun yazarlarından her anlamda kızgın bir genç olan Arnold Wesker acı bir şekilde politik olanın bireysel ve kişisel olan üzerinde nasıl şekillendirici bir etkisi olduğunu gösterir. Ayrıca değiştirdiği ve karşısında mücadele verdiği şey aynı zamanda cinsiyet politikasıdır da. Bu iki sorun daha sonra onun etnisite (İngiliz-Yahudiliği), sınıf (emekçiler) ve cinsiyet (ikili zıtlıklar) konularını ele alışı da etkiler.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Arnold Wesker, komünist ülkücülük, bozulmuş ikili zıtlıklar, cinsiyet politikaları, İngiliz-Yahudiliği, işçi sınıfı

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Of all the contemporary and canonised novelists, Milan Kundera stands distinctively apart with his setting of the migratory world of diaspora and exile which present the discursive elements of migration and homeless form (Frank, 2008: 79 -127). Kundera is popularly labelled as an existentialist using the language of that *ism* quite often and focusing on the individual existence of his characters (Sturdivant, 2003: 27 -31; Banerjee 6) Yet, the questions he poses go beyond handling the theme of existence at personal levels, and it is easy to see, at any time, his deep-rootedness in social and political affairs of his time (Banerjee, 1990: 6 -12; Kovačević, 2008: 81). The time is of international immigration with émigrés who form ethnic minorities in foreign countries and of clashing political and ideological diversities: the rise of Communism, Nationalism, Cold War, questions of democracy and the Velvet Revolution.

Beginning with World Wars, 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed racial and political utopias under the rule of totalitarian regimes and these utopias further ended in the creation of the image of émigré which finally formed, in the long-run, the basic dilemma of national and personal identity. In World War discourse, nationalism and national identities which evolved out of the French Revolution became the ideologies of modern states, and the meaning of personal identities was later connected to national identities (Kramer, 2001a). In this social and political context, Kundera added a national dimension to the existential image of the stranger –the Other, and selected out individual examples from the masses. Parenthetically to say, the very concept of *mass* seems to condition his corpus before 1989 (Kovačević, 2008: 82). The result is the national and the masses on one side and the individual on the other, which is thus suppressed and oppressed. That's why in Kundera's narrative the image of the individual is an excision of the national, and a historical basis always suffuses through all his narrative.

Kundera framed the problem of personal and national identity in migration and memory paradigms and, being so much influential, he was critically and academically studied in migrant and post-communist literatures. He himself is the human epitome of the post-war identity crisis writing bilingually in Czech and French and being an exile, and his writings challenge dauntingly posing questions of politics. His life and his idea(l)s are challenging, and so are his writings. The most recent example comes from his last novel, *Ignorance* (2000), in which he claims that the British society enjoyed the privilege of having no problematic encounter within international politics after the great wars:

Like blows from an ax, important dates cut deep gashes into Europe's twentieth century. The First World War, in 1914; the second; then the third— the longest one, known as “the Cold”—ending in 1989 with the disappearance of Communism. Beyond these important dates that apply to Europe as a whole, dates of secondary importance define the fates of particular nations: the year 1936, with the civil war in Spain; 1956, with Russia's invasion of Hungary; 1948, when the Yugoslavs rose up against Stalin; and 1991, when they set about slaughtering one another. The Scandinavians, the Dutch, the English are privileged to have had no

important dates since 1945, which has allowed them to live a delightfully null half century. (2002: 9)

Recognising his reputation as a literary revolutionist and importance as a political enthusiast, Kundera's claim should be examined carefully, for he, too, articulates what the situation is for the British Empire in the *new* world: for the most part, the absence on the international scene. What he saw as privilege was, in fact, what stood at the backstage of new war problems. Not surprisingly, the genesis of the dramatic angry-young-man-thought emerged in the aftermath of war, and the causes of anger and frustration can be associated with those of the Enlightenment. It is some kind of a synthesis, in Hegelian terms, with the Enlightenment and the further chaos leading to war and anger. Later, there comes another chaos following it and another synthesis ad infinitum.

With the Enlightenment, the form and the method of knowledge changed totally. Instead of divine revelation, science became the model of knowledge for human beings, society and nature. Scientific confidence argued for radical empiricism, and further, it created the image of a god that failed: *God is dead*. Nature, reason and progress were three key terms of this process and institutions were rebuilt in a new sense of change (Kramer, 2001b). Here, the World Wars, the extended results of the Enlightenment, caused the destruction of the new institutions; it was the time of the institutions (governments) that failed. Intellectually and philosophically blooming, yet in political circles, the full possibilities of the Enlightenment ended in frustration, violence, dystopia and "collective homicide" (2011: 929) as Fred S. Kleiner names World Wars.

This kind of frustration explains why the educated post-war youth got torn between their hopes and fears for the future and their anger to the *establishment*. The right word to describe their situation is disillusionment. They had many reasons to be angry. As Dan Rebellato says, "it is not surprising that Jimmy Porter's generation see a lack of brave causes in the contemporary world" (1999: 14). At the outset, World Wars had been welcomed with great enthusiasm in Europe. But, the British Empire was fading in power and wars did not fulfil the expectations. The results were "the 1931 sterling crisis, government's failure to stop anti fascist action, both at home and abroad ... the high unemployment, widespread poverty of the thirties" (Rebellato, 1999: 12). For these reasons, anger was located entirely in politics in post-war Britain and contested.

Anger also refigured dramatic literary reactions. With the critical success and "revolution" (Taylor, 1974: 14) of *Look Back in Anger*, the flavour of drama changed totally. In this new pattern, the angry young man, educated but captured by disillusionment, poured annoyance over war, politics, economy and authority. In simple terms, they were distressed with the uncertainties of the new world. Yet, "*Look Back in Anger* was a foreshock signalling the big quake still to come" (Sutherland, 2008). This new theatre entirely of playwrights under forty has two distinguishing features. Firstly, these dramatists did not have any standard or any leader; "with the great success of *Look Back in Anger* one would have expected a host of imitations to follow, but, in fact, there has never been

any school of Osborne”, says Taylor (1974: 11). Secondly, they had working class origins. Taylor argues that the second fact about these writers is “stranger in the context of British dramatic history” (1974: 12). Up to this movement, the stage was preserved by middle-class writers writing for middle class audiences. But “now things are different” (Taylor, 1974: 12). The new wave “which can encompass, say, *Roots*, *The Caretaker*, *A Taste of Honey*, *The Sport of My Mad Mother*, *What Shall We Tell Caroline?*, *Progress to the Park*, *One Way Pendulum*” created a reversal of pattern (Taylor, 1974: 12). This time it was “not a celebration of country house, cocktail glass, or cigarette holder, which are metonyms used to suture a particular construction of mid-century British theatre” (Rebellato, 1999: 7). Arnold Wesker explains this situation as:

We were all of us somehow absorbing the same kind of atmosphere: the war had been a formative part of our lives, followed by the hope of 1945, and the general decline from then on. So that we were the generation at the end of that decline, desperately wanting to find something, being tired of the pessimism and the mediocrity, and all the energy that was spent on being anti-Soviet and anti-Communist. (cited in Leeming, 1983: 9)

Like the other dramatists of the new wave, the theatre was Wesker’s medium; he was anxious “to promote his ideas in the real world as well as in the theatre” (Leeming, 1983: 11). Yet, Leeming states that Wesker “had a very conscious sense of being part of a new wave, more perhaps than the other dramatists” (1983: 9). Apart from the other writers of the new movement Wesker did not see the new wave as “just another phase”; for him “the so called working-class drama was not purely theatrical, but an expression of a social force” (Leeming, 1983: 9). He was “an active supporter of the campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and spent a month in Drake Hall open prison for participating in a civil disobedience in 1961” (Leeming, 1983: 9). He took great part in the Centre Forty-two project, the aim of which was “to take culture to the masses” (Leeming, 1983: 9). “His ideal of the artist as a coherent whole man” (Leeming, 1983: 11) is best understood in Taylor’s critique of him as “it has always been difficult to judge Arnold Wesker simply as a playwright” (Taylor, 1974: 147).

Wesker’s case was to “move from talking to doing” (1983: 11) Leeming suggests, and his artistic works has a shared ground of understanding with his social activities. Similarly, talking about the image of the ideal artist Wesker says: “What must I do now? Is it enough to write them and help them on to a stage? How must I conduct the rest of my life? Have holidays in the South of France, amuse my friends at parties, rear children, vote, give talks on theatrical history? What can those works have meant to me if that is all I do once they are written?” (cited in Leeming, 1983: 11).

As for his artistic concerns, Taylor says, “Wesker is the perfect example of the new working-class dramatist” (1974: 148). Son of a Jewish tailor, he comes from the East End,

and he does not have a proper education. He leaves school at sixteen and “works at many jobs, including carpenter’s mate, bookseller’s assistant and plumber’s mate” (Leeming, 1983: viii). As Taylor says, he seems “in the first place a highly unlikely candidate for literary distinction” (1983: 148). Yet, he is “considered one of the key figures in 20<sup>th</sup> century drama, is the author of 44 plays, 4 volumes of short stories, 2 volumes of essays, an autobiography, a book on journalism, a children’s book, extensive journalism, poetry and other assorted writings. His plays have been translated into 18 languages and performed worldwide” (“Arnold Wesker”).

In an interview with Harriett Gilbert from the BBC World Service, Wesker claims that he does not write political plays, and that he writes plays about human beings who are animated by ideas. On the contrary, “he is usually associated with the first wave of British theatre” (Dornan, 1998: 137). The group includes playwrights slightly affected by the political style of Bertolt Brecht, particularly Harold Pinter, John Arden, Margaretta D’Arcy, Edward Bond, David Mercer and John Osborne. As in the case of his generation of playwrights, politics is the principal motive of his writing. Though, his further aim in writing plays “is a cultural revolution in which high art would be made available to working class audiences and to others who questioned the politics of such a program, drawing attention to elitism and paternalism of its assumption that working-class communities suffer from cultural deprivations” (Dornan, 1998: 137). Wesker presents alternatives to the pessimism and disillusionment of his generation and, in his plays, he gives contested accounts of the history of the (new) left.

In fact, his personal arguments are simple in the sense that, for example, his very idea in writing *The Trilogy* is to summarize the situation of the working class then (Taylor, 1974: 147). Thus, his plays are set in domestic and familial discourse; his writing is historico-realistic, the language is simple and the characters bear autobiographical echoes. For that reason, more than the other new wave dramatists, it is hard to consider Wesker’s plays apart from his personal tone of voice and to judge them apart from his political views. Within the practical limitations of a piece of drama, Wesker puts “bits and pieces of” himself “in different characters” (Leeming, 1983: 1). The plays, his mouthpieces, drew on his personal experiences in terms of politics and family, and this is absolutely clear in *The Trilogy*; as Wilcher says the “apprentice works” (1991: 24).

Most often quoted, Wesker says that he wrote *Chicken Soup with Barley* (the first play of *The Trilogy* -1957) after seeing Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger*. The play covers twenty three years in the life of the Jewish Kahn family from the working-class: Sarah 37; Harry 35; Ronnie 4; and Ada 14. It begins with the anti-fascist communist blockade by the Jews against the Black Shirts in 1936 (Wilcher, 1991: 32). In the beginning, the Kahn family live in the basement in the East End of London and they are politically active communists except for Harry, the father. There is always a clash of identities between Sarah and Harry concerning politics and gender roles. Sarah is a dominant active woman during the play and Harry is defined as weak and as “the antithesis of Sarah” (1975: 13). Within twenty

three years time, Sarah always remains the articulate one strictly adhered to communist principles, Harry has two strokes, Ronnie goes to Paris and becomes a cook there and Ada marries Dave and settles in Norfolk in order to escape capitalism in a Morrisian utopian socialism (Ribalow, 1965: 52). Their lifestyles are closely shaped by political realities and the play ends with Sarah's isolation with the rare visits by old communist friends who did not have socialist ideals anymore and Ronnie and Ada's loss of faith in communism.

Wesker brings politics onto the stage, and explains the disillusionment of the angry young man through generational differences with the parents and kids motif. In the play, family is the place of generational conflict, and the conflict is primarily political. On the other hand, covering the years from 1936 to 1956, the play shows the long-term effects of the politics upon the personal. With its critical ending, *Chicken Soup with Barley* shows how two constructions were deconstructed: gender (and family) and politics. Politically, the legacy of communist idealism is questioned under the sub-theme of biologically and socially gendered identities:

It [*Chicken Soup with Barley*] works on two levels which arguably do not quite correspond, and may even be mutually exclusive in what the author is trying to convey on each. Personally, the play seems to be about recurrent patterns of behaviour from generation to generation: socially it is about the working classes' loss of sense of purpose with the arrival of a socialist government and the Welfare State, the disappearance of all the big, clear-cut issues of the inter-war years. The conflict is obvious: on the personal level its progression is circular, on the social level it appears to move in a straight line. (Taylor, 1974: 149)

The irruption and recurrence of politics are dominantly employed in the play. As it opens, Wesker begins to work on the two levels of the play. Thus, unlike his contemporaries "Wesker homes in a more completely extended family: mother, father and children" (Wandor, 2001: 49). The opening dialogue of the play begins with a familial issue and moves towards politics:

Sarah: (*from the kitchen*) You took the children to Lottie's?

Harry: (*Taking up book to read*) I took them.

Sarah: They didn't mind?

Harry: No, they didn't mind.

Sarah: Is Hymie coming?

Harry: I don't know.

Sarah: (*to herself*) Nothing he knows! (*to Harry*) You didn't ask him? He didn't say? He knows about the demonstration, doesn't he?

Harry: I don't know whether he knows or he doesn't know. I didn't

discuss it with him – I took the kids, that’s all. Hey, Sarah. You should read Upton Sinclair’s book about the meat-canning industry – it’s an eye-opener...

Sarah: Books! Nothing else interests him, only books. Did you see anything outside? What’s happening? (1975: 13)

Also, the historical location of the play and the selection of characters from the working class are highly important to fully understand Wesker’s message. In fact, the *real* politics overlap with the *fictional* politics of the text. With an important date for the workers, the opening scene gives the picture of an East End Jewish family from the working-class in 1930s:

October 4<sup>th</sup>, 1936.

*The basement of Kahn’s house in the East End London. The room is warm and lived in. A fire is burning. One door, at the back and left of the room, leads to a bedroom. A window, left looks up to the street. To the right is another door which leads to a kitchen, which is seen. At rear of the stage are the stairs leading up into the street.*

*Sarah Kahn is in the kitchen washing up, humming to herself.* (1975: 13)

October 4<sup>th</sup> 1936 is a time “of increasing anti-Semitism in Europe and England” (Wandor, 2001: 49). The Kahn family is of Jewish origin and the first act narrates a demonstration held by the Jews “to block the Fascist Blackshirt march through their streets” (Leeming, 1983: 36). Wesker works meticulously on stage directions which give chronological information about the living conditions of the working-class. The play has three acts each with two scenes and each scene either opens at or ends with a politically important date in the lives of the (Jewish) workers.

Act II Scene I opens at June 1946 with the stage direction “the war has come and gone”. It follows as “*The scene is now changed. The Kahns have moved to an L.C.C. block of flat in Hackney – the 1930s kind with railings. The working class is a little more respectable now, they have not long since voted in a Labour Government*” (1975: 36). Within ten years, the Kahn family moves from the basement to an L.C.C. block of flat. The physical rise from a below state to a higher one with the symbolic use of moving from the basement to the flat clearly shows that something good happened in the life of the working-class, as Wesker says in the play, they are “a little more respectable now”.

In like manner, Act III Scene II ends with December 1956; the year of the Hungarian Revolution. The British Empire was *silent* during the Hungarian Revolution, and this is one of the reasons lying behind the angry-young-man thought. The date refers to the disillusionment of the communist partisans with the Hungarian Revolution and the Labour Party’s political failures which create a sense of defeat, thus anger. In the beginning of the

play, as Jimmy Porter from *Look Back in Anger* summarises it, there still was a cause left to fight for. When the play moves towards the end, it is understood that there is no good cause left to fight for:

Ronnie: (Suddenly) I don't suppose you've bothered to read what happened in Hungary.

Sarah: Hungary?

Ronnie: Look at me, Mother. Talk to me. Take me by the hand and show me who was right and who was wrong. Point them out. Do it *for* me. 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.

Sarah: Accuse me?

Ronnie: You didn't tell me there were any doubts.

Sarah: What doubts? What are you talking about?

Ronnie: Everything is broken up and you can't see it. (1975: 71)

Ronnie returns from Paris with his loss of faith in communism and confronts his "still communist" (1975: 73) mother. The *silence* of the Empire finds articulation in Ronnie, and Ronnie fights Sarah; the image of establishment for him. The dialogue follows an extreme tension between the mother and son, and Ronnie tells Sarah, "You're a pathological case, Mother -- do you know that? You are still a communist!" (1975: 73). Sarah's answer is fairly striking:

Sarah: All right! So I'm still a communist! Shoot me then. I'm a communist! I've always been one – since the time when all the world was a communist. You know that? When you were a baby and there was unemployment and everybody was thinking so – all the world was a communist. But it's different now. Now the people have forgotten. I sometimes think they're not worth fighting for because they forget so easily. You give them a few shillings in the bank and they can buy a television so they think it's all over, there's nothing more to be got, they don't have to think any more! Is that what you want? A world where people don't think anymore? Is that what you want me to be satisfied with – a television set? Look at him! My son! He wants to die! (1975: 73)

In the interview with Harriett Gilbert, Wesker says that he wrote the entire play only for this monologue which manifests a strict communist idealism and anger. To show Ronnie's disillusionment and Sarah's adherence to communist disciplines, Wesker goes back twenty years and shows the way from the brightest days of the Empire to the arena of political conflicts. Rethinking it in its first production, it is easy to see that



*Chicken Soup with Barley* looks backward from present (1957) to past, and it is a historical and sociological account of the political issues of inter-war years:

*Chicken Soup with Barley*, about the disintegration of a politically-conscious family, could have been written about the last days of that family; but no, I had to begin at the beginning, when the son was only a child of four, and take the play through twenty years... And so you see this obsession with digging back as far as possible to beginnings, in order to explain the present. And all the time I'm worried in case a clue had been missed (Wesker cited. in Leeming, 1983: 36).

Wesker is realistic perhaps "naturalistic" (Wilcher, 1991: 35) in that the play is full of *real* politics; anti-fascist communism, anti-Semitism, the living conditions of the working classes and the Hungarian Revolution. Thus, he is critical and the historical narration of the play grants him the *device* to display the full results of politics upon the individual. In doing so, he creates a dramatic miniature of society with all its realities: war, disillusionment, disintegration and with new uncertainties concerning gender and identity. It is no doubt that the play deals with concepts of collective nature such as communism-socialism, or family and the family as a motif is usually explained via eating. In Wesker's sense, kitchen is the metonym for family. "Kitchen" alone is used for thirty-four times in the text. There are many scenes in which characters eat around a table, or tea is served to the guests, or kitchen is the set:

*Sarah Kahn is in the kitchen washing up.* (1975: 12)

Sarah: I'll go and make some tea now. (1975: 28)

Sarah: Ada? Ada? You here? Go inside, Daddy'll make some tea. Supper will soon be ready. (*Appears cheerfully from the kitchen with all signs of a cook about her. Kisses Ada.*) Got a nice supper. (1975: 37)

Ronnie: Not back from work yet. Just in time for a cuppa. (*Goes off to make one.*)

Cissie: He still has that job, then?

Ronnie: (*from the kitchen*) can't hear you. (1975: 46)

Hence, the title of the play is about eating and later in the play Ronnie becomes a cook. Kitchen and food are Wesker's recurring motifs. Many of his plays engage with food, or are titled with meals: *The Kitchen* and *Chips with Everything*. Similarly, his recent novel is titled as *Honey* (2005). His obsession with the family-kitchen motif may stem from his care for communication and interaction between human beings which is possible during eating together. He says, "Food is essential to human activity. When you invite people as guests, you touch them through food. And in the preparation of food there is a kind of ceremony, isn't there?" (cited in Leeming, 1983: 7). On the other hand, the mother-food-home-kitchen motif can be tied to Wesker's Jewish origins. Family is considered to be very important for the Jews; for that reason the image of the family eating (happily)

around a table recurs in the play. As Hannah Arendt explains in her groundbreaking book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Jews are always associated with the image of family:

... for reasons which had nothing to do with the Jewish question, race problems came to the foreground of the political scene, the Jews at once fitted all ideologies and doctrines which defined a people by blood ties and family characteristics.

Yet another, less accidental, fact accounts for this image of the Jewish people. In the preservation of the Jewish people the family had played a far greater role than in any western political or social body except the nobility. Family ties were among the most potent and stubborn elements with which the Jewish people resisted assimilation and dissolution. Just as declining European nobility strengthened its marriage and house laws, so Western Jewry became all the more family-conscious in the centuries of their spiritual and religious dissolution. Without the old hope for Messianic redemption and the firm ground of traditional folkways, Western Jewry became over-conscious of the fact that their survival had been achieved in an alien and often hostile environment. They began to look upon the inner family circle as a kind of last fortress and to behave toward members of their own group as though they were members of a big family. In other words, the anti-Semitic picture of the Jewish people as a family closely knit by blood ties had something in common with the Jew's own picture of themselves. (1976: 27)

On the surface, the play covers problems of politics and the disintegration of the family, yet the dominant theme pivots around the individual experiences of the characters. Wesker cares for his fictional individuals alone and gives a slice from their lives. Like Kundera, he selects out individuals from the masses. His viewpoint moves from the arena of collective identities to individual ones. The play begins with a demonstration by the workers; there are ten characters. However, in the ending scene, only Sarah and Ronnie are there. The opening scene is some kind of the early communist call to action "Working man of all countries, unite!" (Marx and Engels, 2008: 53). Communist partisans are eager to act in one for their case; they unite in the aim of a demonstration. The last scene, however, focuses on individuals. Here, there are no such units as workers and family anymore. Further, action subsides into, or is filled with passivity, paralyses and inarticulacy. Harry is totally paralysed and Ronnie, who was once quite articulate, cannot talk: "*Ronnie unclasps her and moves away. He tries to say something – to explain. He raises his arms and some jumbled words come from his lips*) Ronnie: I – I can't, not now, it's too big, not yet – it's too big to care for it, I – I..." (1975: 75).

Wesker's starting point is politics, but he handles it in personal-individual ways. That is why he gives the story of Sarah Kahn's determination and power as a woman and mother, the weakness of Harry Kahn as a man and father, Ronnie Kahn's disillusionment as an

angry young man, or Ada's and Dave's personal utopia and socialism. Political vision and issues of individual identities are embedded in the play. Further, Wesker slightly engages with some radical issues of his time such as Feminism and gender relations. He moves to mythology and classical Psychoanalysis with the oedipal undertone in the relationship between Sarah Kahn and his son Ronnie. Surprisingly, the ending scene includes a connotation to the Sleeping Beauty:

*Sarah helps Harry shuffle away to bed, and then settles down in the armchair to read. But she is tired now and lets the paper fall, and dozes. Ronnie appears on the balcony with his cases. He gently opens the door and lets himself in. He tiptoes over to Sarah and stands looking at her. It is no longer an enthusiastic Ronnie. She opens her eyes and after a second of looking at him she jumps into his arms. (1975: 69)*

The scene is obviously open to psychoanalytic interpretation with oedipal-sexual echoes. Ronnie has a problematic relationship with his mother; Sarah is always the dominant and the articulate one with Harry, and also with him. It is clear that, Wesker creates the biblical strong-woman image with Sarah (her biblical name also hints at this). He does this perhaps unconsciously because of his Jewish origins. Yet, closer examination points out that Sarah is rather articulate and she is often occupied with eating or cooking. These two apparent images of her may indicate a hidden reality about her psychology; oral libidinal pleasure. Similarly, in the last scene Sarah insistently tries to feed Ronnie and he rejects it ultimately. On the other hand, Sarah's articulacy and pressure upon men creates a postmodern image of the dominatrix. Indirectly, she damages the man around her; Harry on the physical and visible level and Ronnie on the psychological and hidden level. Sarah's visible damage and violence to men account for her sadomasochism. On the sexual level, the damaged male motif with castration echoes reminds the Lady Macbeth Syndrome, a recurring theme in post-war British drama (Wandor 2001: 67). Sarah tries to control the lives of *her* men and her motherhood/womanhood brings sexual-violent echoes to the heart of the play. Her counterparts are always damaged males and they are antitheses of her; she is strong, they are weak; she is articulate, they are silent; she is active and energetic, they are passive, or even paralysed. Similarly, Sarah works, but Harry does not. He even steals her money. On a more critical level, Wesker works within the classical and patriarchal binary opposition and may be argued to subvert it with such counter images which is hopefully feminist and progressive.

As indicated, the progression of the conflict of the play is circular. Thus, the play ends as it begins. It begins with a political conflict between a couple and ends with a political conflict between mother and son. Once again, cries of political repression and identity problems are heard from the members of family. In a story of political idealism, Wesker reflects a world shaped by political actions. The reader witnesses how the lifestyles of the characters undergo change with changing politics, and the reason for the epic overview of the play is thus understood. As the play resolves to the end, a lot of things change in

politics and the Kahn family disintegrate physically. Disintegration finally culminates in the disillusionment of the characters. The key phrase here is disillusionment for the movement of politics “from the secure anti-fascist Communism of the 1930s to the bewildered and disaffected leftism of late 1950s” is symbolically conveyed in the frame of the physical dissolution the family went through (Wandor, 2001: 55).

*Chicken Soup with Barley* is a powerful play in post-war British drama enabling different spheres of critical reading, possibly because it captures universal issues such as familial problems, gender and identity crises and political vision. In fact, it is simply the story of what happened when, as Kundera says, the Britain enjoyed the privilege of having no problematic event within international politics since World Wars. As the title suggests, *Chicken Soup with Barley* has a domestic sense. This time the domestic includes the national and the universal question the play addresses in the post-war scene is the dilemma of caring for the *other* as Ada Kahn screams: “Care! Care! What right have we to care? How can we care for a world outside ourselves when the world inside is in disorder? Care!” (1975: 43). Kundera was partly right in his argument. How could the Empire care for a world outside herself when the world inside is in disorder?

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