

To Speak or Not to Speak: The Silence and the Fear of Social Alienation in Arnold Wesker's *Annie Wobbler*

Mamata Sengupta

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Islampur College, West Bengal, India

Abstract

In the hierarchized space of society, individuals are always expected to fit in and perform certain roles in order to be accepted and accommodated into it. Any questioning of the dominant ideology and deviation from the socially prescribed rules immediately brings the deviant individual under a social scanner, and every measure is taken to eliminate or silence such disruptive presence. Patriarchy, being a supremacist discourse, attempts to promote and perpetuate its hold on society as much through promoting narratives of male superiority and worthiness as through constructing a false discourse of female inferiority, ineligibility and lack. Needless to say, the most significant impact of this manipulated knowledge can be seen in the historical expulsion of women from the territories of speech and free expression. This paper re-reads the British playwright Arnold Wesker's 1981 play *Annie Wobbler* with a view to highlighting how the female protagonist of the play breaks free from the shackles of a "normative" existence and reclaims her identity by voicing forth the silenced tales of her forbidden and potentially disruptive experiences. I have also tried to underline the various hazards of such a deviant act and how the female protagonist ultimately succeeds in subverting the patriarchal narratives of normalcy and respectability.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Silence, Society, Speech, Tale, Telling

"In the tale, in the telling, we are all one blood. Take the tale in your teeth, then, and bite till the blood runs, hoping it's not poison; and we will all come to the end together, and even to the beginning: living, as we do, in the middle."

— Ursula K. LeGuin

Women's access to speech and self-expression has always been a matter of intense controversy in all patriarchal establishments. In fact, it is the strong patriarchal bias regarding women's putative "lack" of skills and merits as opposed to the immeasurably superior qualities and achievements of the males which has at once excluded women from the exclusively "male" domain of free expression and confined them inside the four walls of the house so as to eliminate any/all possibilities of resistance or subversion. Coming out of this silenced existence and telling her stories, therefore, is never an easy task for a woman; for the very act of such a telling is always fraught with the difficulties of finding a voice, articulating the long forbidden and, perhaps, forgotten narratives, and finally reaching out to an audience who can listen to, understand and empathize with her, and also, can carry the tale forward.

The image of the female as a passive, silenced, and useful commodity created and preserved for male comfort and concupiscence deeply troubled Arnold Wesker. A self-confessed observer of the "disharmony of something missing" in women's lives, Wesker always tried to bring on stage strong, resilient women who dare to tell their tales and try to reach out to an audience that can both understand the tale and empathize with the teller (xv). In this paper, I shall try to re-read Wesker's play *Annie Wobbler* (1981) with a view to highlighting the process and problems of a

woman's reclamation of her voice. I shall also try to show how the three alter egos of the female protagonist – the college girl Anna, the housemaid Annie Wobbler, and the middle-aged writer Annabella Wharton – struggle to overcome the silenced existence which their family and society had thrust upon them, and ultimately succeed in voicing the thousand muted cries that were so long lying buried in their respective pasts.

Annie Wobbler was first broadcast under the title *Annie, Anna, Annabella* in German on February 3, 1983, by Sddeutscher Rundfunk. The English premier of the play took place a few months later on July 5, 1983 at Birmingham Repertory Theatre Studio with the playwright himself as the director. This one-woman play seeks to tell the tale of the eponymous heroine's life through her own telling. Annie Wobbler, thus, appears in the play not only as the teller and the tale but also as the telling through which she is analeptically born into the plot.

The play *Annie Wobbler* is divided into three distinct parts: each presenting the female protagonist presumably as a new character that Glenda Leeming has called, “three wobbly egos defiantly asserting themselves” (44). The play begins in the spring of 1939. We are introduced to the aged “part time cleaning woman” Annie Wobbler, in all black and green with an old hat concealing her bald head. The second part of the play presents Anna (no mention of her surname) as a witty and sophisticated college girl in “black underwear, black stockings and suspender belts” with a mass of “flaming red hair” on her head, preparing for her first date (*AW* 15-16). The third and final section of the play depicts the middle-aged Annabella Wharton, a celebrated novelist, elegantly dressed, rehearsing with herself before an interview (*AW* 24).

Regarding the portrayal of these characters, Reade W. Dornan has pointed out that “Wesker recognizes something of himself in every phase of *Annie Wobbler*” – the “patient and generous” Annie, the “energetic and passionate” Anna and the writer Annabella who “hates going through the motions of answering obvious and repetitive questions” (127). So, we may safely say that it is something of the playwright as teller that rubs off onto these women as tellers; for, as Dornan has herself informed the author in an email, “a number of his [Wesker's] women characters were probably not based on women he knew (although some certainly were) but were thinly veiled versions of himself” (Personal Email).

In the first part of the play, Annie is seen busy scrubbing the kitchen and talking almost incessantly to her “Madam” and to God (*AW* 3). While this may easily be interpreted as a successful attempt to reach out to the society as represented by the Madam (the aristocratic authority) standing right “offstage” and God (the religious authority) residing in a “crevice of the ceiling,” the playwright's observation of “who are not there” immediately undercuts any such presumption (*AW* 3). Annie begins her telling with a reference to what she has often been told:

Annie: They tell me I smell. I don't smell nothing madam. But then no one don't know nothing about themselves, do they? Lessun they look in a mirror. [*Idea*] I'll look in one, shall I? Got one here. [*Rummages among her numerous skirts*]

Somewhere.

[*Withdraws a chipped handbag mirror*].

Long time since I looked in a mirror. Don't tell you much, 'cept you're growing old. That's all I see. I see this face but I don't know anything about it, 'cept it's growing old. (*AW* 4)

That society accuses the “part time cleaning woman” Annie of foul smell is more than significant; for not only does it hint at the persistent view of the menial worker as foul and dirty (something to be avoided or abhorred) but also betray an attempt to conceal the importance of that cleaning woman who, in spite of her dirtiness and foul smell, cleans and sanitizes that categorizing and censoring society.

Annie's bold rejoinder “I don't smell nothing madam” contains her strong rejection of the societal judgement (“smelly”) heaped on her consciousness as well as a prologue to her telling against such (in)justices. Her comment, “no one don't know nothing about themselves, do they? Lessun [unless] they look in a mirror” opens up another interpretative possibility. That only a mirror can reveal the truth about a person's smells (the distinctive enveloping or characterizing quality of an individual) is ironic; for not only does a mirror reflect the reality but it may refract or contort it as well. Annie's subsequent act of taking up a mirror to look at her “self” here becomes doubly instructive. On the one hand, it indicates her desire to look at “herself” for inspection and embellishment. On the other hand, it may also signify an attempt at looking at her “self” for analysis and evaluation. In fact, looking at one's own self through the medium of a mirror not only helps the individual visualize what he/she is but also enables him/her to detach his/her own self from the self as projected on the surface of the mirror so as to effect a proper assessment of the self as “image” and the self as “reality.”

That Annie finds “nothing” in her reflection on the mirror except “it's growing old” is as much due to the fact that there is a visible mark of time on the mirrored face that happens to belong to her as it is because there is “nothing” to look at – time has robbed her of everything: her faith, beauty, vitality, youth, happiness, and her potential. Annie now can only exist as an old hag, a part-time maid for cleaning and scrubbing others' houses of dirt and spoil but can never have or wish to have a house of her own.

Soon Annie shifts her attention from her horrifying self-reality to wish a very “good morning” to her mirrored image:

Annie: “Mornin', Annie Wobbler,” I say, “mornin'.” Me talking to myself that is. . . . Funny feelings looking at yourself and not knowing what you see. So, I don't do it much. Old! What did I do to deserve that? Don't understand nothing, me. (Pause) I don't smell. (Sniffs) I mean that's not a smell, madam, that's me. (*AW* 4)

Annie's “talking” to herself is as much directed at her “self” as it is meant for the two society-supplements – Madam and God. That Annie can hardly recognize her mirror image points to her inability to correlate between her self-reality and self- image for, placed under the dazzling lights of societal gaze, as symbolized by the offstage Madam and the omniscient God, the mirror instead of reflecting the oppressed female only refracts her image as per norm and expectations with the result that it can only provoke laughter and ridicule among the spectators.

That Annie “does not do it” (looking in the mirror) very often at once highlights her refusal to submit her body to the societal gaze as an object of its inspection or ridicule as it hints at her rejection of the very institution of society as a judging/punishing authority. Her claim, “I don’t smell,” as a natural corollary to this rejection, embodies Annie’s sharp repudiation of the initial judgment “They tell me I smell.” Her following statement, “I mean that’s not a smell, madam, that’s me,” then, is Annie’s proud proclamation of her self-identity instead of a perceived sense and then, therefore, a misconstrued sensory response.

The next time Annie speaks, she tells the audience – both the “intra” and the “extra”-textual ones – about the magnanimity of her offstage Madam:

Annie: (*To God*) Madam said I could help myself. (*To Madam*) You’re very kind, madam. (*To God*) “I trust you, Annie,” she said. ... She tell me “We’ll give you sixpence or some bread and tea. Whichever’s around.” Fair enough. (*AW* 5-6)

Quite significantly, such wholesome praise is occasioned not so much by the Madam’s benevolence as by Annie’s professional compulsion of pleasing her employer if not with labor then at least with language. The mere reference to the word “kind” evokes in Annie’s mind a clear picture of her own past. In a virtual retelling of her life story, she now describes a day when a policeman asked her about her family:

Annie: I think my father was a Frenchy. Mother, father, sisters, brothers. I had ’em all. Dead and gone. ’Cept this sister. Now she had money. Don’t know where from – used to think some of it should have come my way – she never helped me is all I know. ... All I know is she ’ad a baby so I couldn’t stay with her and that was that! (*AW* 8)

This is a highly significant moment in Annie Wobbler’s life when the teller in her is finally able to tell her tales. Her passionate retelling of her own story breaks the shackles of silence and suppression, and evokes memories which are potentially disturbing as much for herself as for any sensitive audience.

Annie’s tale concerns a saga of loss – her expulsion from her own house, her years of suffering and servitude, and most importantly, the rejection of her by the entire society. Unfortunately, this remembrance of things past cannot reach the ears of an empathetic audience; for both the members of Annie’s audience – the Madam and God – are either absent or impassive. That the tale fails to reach out to the audience is due not only to the fact that it does not impress the Madam and God but also because it fails to interest them; for coming as they do from the upper strata of society – one the employer and the other the almighty – they can hardly have any interest in the tale of an old servant’s life. While this absence of the audience or their refusal to respond to Annie’s tale invalidates the telling, it also frustrates the teller.

It is this ineffectuality of the age old “part time cleaning woman” Annie to impress her audience with the sad account of her life that ultimately leads to her replacement as a teller in the second part of the play with the young and attractive Anna who is still in her twenties and in search

of both an audience and a lover-admirer. Unlike the old Annie who could only offer labor and praise to please the society in order to make it listen to her voice, Anna with her raw beauty and voluptuous body can easily cajole society into listening to her tales.

The second part of the play captures Anna standing before a full size mirror putting make up on her face and chalking out plans to win over her date:

Anna: What is there about you?

...

What is there about you?

It can't be your degree in French because he's got one in classics. It must be your breasts.

[*She pulls down straps, saucily, and ambles with sedate dignity back and forth*]

"She walks in beauty, like the night ..."
[*Halts, deflates*] And it would need to be night.

What is there about you? (*AW* 16)

Though a young and educated woman, Anna's repetitive query "What is there about you?" reminds one of Annie's looking into the mirror to find out what is so "smelly" about her. Much like Annie, Anna's target audience too is not so much her self as mirrored as it is society at large. But, where Annie's glance at the mirror is potentially self-deprecating, Anna's gaze is predominantly quizzical. Standing before the glassy surface of the mirror, the image that Anna scrutinizes is more the reflection of Anna as the patriarchal society wants her to be – feminine, seductive, and accessible (even if not easily), than Anna as she essentially is – commodified, vulnerable and ephemeral. As Mel Gussow so rightly points out:

The second, modern Anna is not yet an emancipated woman, forced to submerge her Cambridge education in order to play the subordinate role demanded by men. Torn by an apparently contradictory existence, she says, philosophically, that she has "brains and black underwear," but, sadly, it is the latter that becomes her mark of identity. (par. 4)

Anna's conviction that it must be her "breasts" which have to attract her boyfriend and her subsequent act of pulling down the straps of her brassier to let the mirror reflect her bosom not only hints at her deliberate act of offering her body as an object of male concupiscence but also points to her attempts at using the same body to fulfill her lacks and needs. In this context, we may profitably refer to Kamala Das's poem "The Looking Glass" for a similar proposition:

... Gift him all,
Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of
Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,
The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your
Endless female hungers. (25)

Significantly, Anna desires to use her female body as a tool to manipulate patriarchy, and her apparently unconditional surrender to the hegemonic male becomes her means for constructing a

female counter-hegemony. It at once underlines the female's potentially subversive ploy of paying the paternalistic culture back in its own coin and marks that watershed in a silenced woman's history when she finally gains control over her body and being, and thereby becomes able to deal with the patriarchal society on her own terms. Besides, it also points to Anna's desperate attempts at making the society listen to her stories – an endeavor in which the previous teller Annie had failed (*AW* 16).

Anna is soon to realize that no matter how beautiful or attractive she may look, her boyfriend with his characteristic superiority complex and studied aversion for female intelligence will never let her tell her mind, and instead, her body will become the locus of his attention and activity. Anna is thus compelled to rethink her decision of going to the date or change her plans to safeguard both her telling and telling rights. The intelligent woman in Anna easily sees through the grave drawbacks in her date who is at once a pedantic and a bore, and yet she decides to go with him because:

Anna: ... he's your [Anna's] first date since becoming a BA first-class honours and your cultural references shine like diamonds and you've broken the stranglehold of those century-old genes of crass ineptitude and supplication and you've unknown muscles to flex and a lot of intimidating to make up for and he's just the size and texture your teeth need sharpening upon. (*AW* 23)

Needless to say, Anna's stated ability of having broken "the stranglehold of those century-old genes of crass ineptitude and supplication" places her on a level with women pioneers like Henrik Ibsen's Nora and Rebecca West who can "flex" (wield) "muscles" (powers) that are "unknown" to society as well as "make up" for "a lot of intimidating."

If in her first avatar as Annie, the Wesker Woman has tried to please the society by serving it with physical labor and praise, then, as Anna, she has offered her body to cajole it. However, the patriarchal society refuses to pay any attention to the tales of these women in either case. Whereas the Annie of the first section ultimately finds herself alone in the kitchen with neither the Madam nor God looking at her or listening to her stories, and therefore has to become silent, Anna of the second part herself understands the patriarchy's unwillingness to listen and thereby supplements her telling through other means or at any rate camouflages the same. Thus, failing in both of her endeavors to find an audience in the society, the Wesker Woman now decides to resume her search for a last time and takes up the persona of the middle-aged novelist Annabella Wharton.

Annabella Wharton is a forty year old celebrated novelist whose fourth novel has become "a phenomenal success" (*AW* 24). The play captures her preparing for an interview, listening to some pre-recorded questions, and trying to formulate appropriate answers for them:

Voice-Over: Miss Wharton, this is your fourth novel and unlike others it's a phenomenal success. Installments in the *Sunday Times*, translated into fourteen languages, the film rights sold for a quarter of a million dollars, the subject of controversy in the heavyweight literary journals. Annabella Wharton, what does it feel like being Annabella Wharton today? (*AW* 25)

Having been thwarted in all her attempts at reaching out to an empathetic audience, the Wesker Woman here, quite interestingly, takes up the persona of a writer – the archetypal storyteller. Such a guise is obviously a liberating one; for not only does it liberate Annabella from a stifling silence, but also provides her with an agency to tell her stories – writing. Moreover, the fact that she has been hugely read fulfils the promise of an audience through the presence of the readers. However, the mere fact that even after writing such a successful novel, Annabella is so anxious for the interview and is actually trying to frame the “right” answers to project herself in the right light shows that something is still left unsaid, that Annabella still has a story to tell. The entire third section of the play *Annie Wobbler* comprises different versions of Annabella’s replies to a single set question beginning with “what does it feel like being Annabella Wharton today?” And her efforts to find the right answers also hints at the inadequacy of language as a medium of communication. Her provisional answers during the entire process of the revision construct self-conflicting realities:

Voice-Over: Am I right in thinking you’ve been married once?

Annabella: Good Lor, no! Couldn’t conceive of a man who’d want to share my scatty life.
(*AW* 30)

Annabella: Three times, actually. ... (*AW* 38)

Annabella: Once! To a man who was drawn by the heat but left ... (*AW* 44)

And again:

Voice-Over: Do you have any children?

Annabella: I don’t think so. (*AW* 31)

Annabella: At least four. (*AW* 38)

Annabella: A son. (*AW* 44)

These widely differing statements not only signal Annabella’s utter inarticulateness as a teller, but also indicate that point in her own life when the divide between her private and public selves – Annabella Wharton the novelist and Annabella Wharton the individual – collapse, when the novelist in her merges completely with the person, and her private life becomes an object of revisions and alternative versions.

The stories that Annabella Wharton tells about herself come in the form of some kind stream of consciousness writing that breaks all the boundaries of linguistic probability. Her near obsessive references to Dr. Johnson and other literary artists may foreground an endeavor to sound intellectual and erudite, while her inability to remember their sayings reflects her lack of sound literary knowledge.

The penultimate recorded question initially yields inconsistent answers. However, near the end of the play, it is able to incite the Wesker Woman to express in and through the medium of telling the real cause of her worries:

Voice-Over: You have no fears?

Annabella: Oh good Lor. Yes. Everything frightens me. The morning, the doorbell, the telephone, interviewers, fish-on-the-bone, the post, Doctor Johnson ... (*AW* 31)

Annabella: Not now. None! (*AW* 38)

Annabella: Of being afflicted with a sense of futility. Of violence and certitudes. Of failing my son. Of being disliked ... mediocre. (*Pause*) Somewhere within us is a body waiting to give up, don't you think? (*AW* 44)

That Annabella is scared of “the morning, the doorbell, the telephone, interviewers” points to her fears of the unknown. Her fear of “being afflicted with a sense of futility” is actually another projection of her fear of alienation – of “failing” her son, of being disliked, and left alone.

Finally, Annabella's statement, “Somewhere within us is a body waiting to give up,” points out for one last time her intuitive understanding of a Hamlet-like suicidal tendency. The question that ends both the preparations for the interview and the play, “Do you feel you have an endless flow of materials?” in all of the revisions yield a similar non-answer (*AW* 31-32, 44); for everything that Annabella had to say have already come to an end with her self-annihilating statement, “Somewhere within us is a body waiting to give up, don't you think? (*AW* 44).

According to Morris Ginsberg, society takes its origin from the collaborative effort of individuals who are “united by those relations or modes of behaviour which, unite them or mark them off from others who do not enter into these relations or who differ from them in behavior” (40). It is, therefore, a hierarchical organization wherein individuals not only share common cultural backgrounds or beliefs but also visualize themselves both completely and compulsorily as a single unified and distinctive entity. Needless to say, such an identification with a singular value system is both disturbing and dangerous. As Robert Morrison MacIver and Charles Hunt Page have rightly said, “society is a system of usages and procedures of authority and mutual aid of many groupings and divisions of control of human behaviour and liberties” (28-29). This is why society is often perceived to be a highly constrictive framework of predetermined rules and norms to which an individual must conform in order to be accommodated into its zone of safety and security. As seen in *Annie Wobbler*, individuals may raise the banner of protest or the voice of demands, but their actions and utterances often go unnoticed, unheard, and even unacknowledged in our patriarchal society. However, as Ernest Hemingway has taught us, “But man is not made for defeat. ... A man can be destroyed but not defeated” (89). The failure of the family or of the society to meet the demands of an adequate audience of course shatters and bloodies the Wesker Woman. But the show, as they say, must go on. So, tales are to be told not only to bury the past of shame, silence, and pain but also to alert others of the pitfalls and tree stumps lying ahead. And it is this urge and compulsion to break the silence that ultimately saves Wesker's *Annie Wobbler* from crumbling into a series of erasures. Every time Annie breaks down under the tremendous pressure of the society she belongs to and her story falls apart into myriad fragments, every time she is re-born with a new tale as another Anna or Annabella, she shows, just like a female Code Hero, “what a [wo]man can do and what a [wo]man endures” (55).

Works Cited

- Das, Kamala. "The Looking Glass." *The Descendants*. Writer's Workshop, 1967.
- Dornan, Reade W. *Arnold Wesker Revisited*. Twayne, 1994.
- . "Comments on a Dissertation Topic." Email to Mamata Sengupta. September 5, 2010.
- Ginsberg, Morris. *Sociology*. Oxford UP, 1961.
- Gussow, Mel. "Stage: 'Annie Wobbler.'" *New York Times*. November 12, 1986. www.nytimes.com/1986/11/12/theater/stage-annie-wobbler.html.
- Hemingway, Ernest Miller. *The Old Man and the Sea*. Harper Collins, 1994.
- Leeming, Glenda, editor. *Wesker on File*. Methuen, 1985.
- MacIver, Robert Morrison, and Charles Hunt Page. *Society: An Introductory Analysis*. Macmillan, 1962.
- Wesker, Arnold. *Annie Wobbler*. In *Plays 2: One Woman Plays*. Methuen, 2001, 3-44.
- . "Introduction." In *Plays 2: One Woman Plays*. Methuen, 2001, ix-xv.