

BERTOLT BRECHT'S *MOTHER COURAGE AND HER CHILDREN*: A CRITICAL NARRATIVE ON CAPITALISM AND WAR

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ABSTRACT

*Championing the list of the writers who are known for their anti-war stance, Bertolt Brecht gives voice to some pathetic issues stemming from the war. Through his microscopic vision, he catches the socio-economic predicament of the people in general and those who are downtrodden in particular. During the phase of the war, these people are driven out of their ghettos and made to face atrocities by those at the helm of the power. Such people out of their helplessness believe their position as preordained in the conflict-hit zones and therefore, accept whatever is forced upon them. The oppression aimed at these has remained as one of the serious challenges to the humanity. Brecht becomes the representative of such people by voicing his concern on their behalf. His *Mother Courage and Her children* (1939) is one such play that voices his resistance and even moves further and cross-examines the futility of the war from the multiple angles. By juxtaposing the comic and serious and by taking recourse to songs the play brings forth the bizarre reality that remained largely unaddressed.*

*The current paper seeks to examine the capitalistic perspective of the wars through the predicament of the titular character *Mother Courage* and her dumb daughter *Katrin* who are the worst hit war victims. The paper also aims at exposing the grotesque, damaging and horrible economic motives of war under the shape of various ideological differences.*

Keywords: *Anti-war, bizarre, conflict, downtrodden, resistance.*

One of the pioneers of the epic theatre, Bertolt Brecht through his great artistic creations, sheds light on some bizarre issues of the societies. The art of his theatre is a symbolic one i.e. to knock at the reasoning of the audiences. The play *Mother Courage and her Children* in this connection is no exception. The play sees the war from a capitalistic prism and thereby motivates the audience for the response. Both the paradigms capitalism and the war need to be properly investigated in order to help the societies strive for a radical change: a change that would save the common masses from the exploitation. The capitalist design to survive, at the behest of the others, always saw victims in the shape of innocents. Set before the time when the signs of the Second World War were already lurking, Brecht's play *Mother Courage and her Children* seem to persuade the audience to say no to the war. The play has been showered with the praises all over not only for its thematic content and

novel technicalities but also for its relevance for all the societies. What adds more grace to the play are the songs that bring it more close to the modern audiences who value the style of Brecht greatly.

As the play opens we meet a recruiting Sergeant who is looking for the people whom he will enlist for the war. Brecht makes him his mouthpiece and highlights the human comedy of war in an ironic manner. Finding people indifferent towards war the Sergeant begins to valorise war for it enhances one's identity. He puts it:

Peace-that's just a mess; takes a war to make order. Peace-time, the human runs wild. People and cattle get bugged about, who cares? Everyone eats just as he feels inclined, a hunk of cheese on top of his nice white bread, and a slice of fat on top of the cheese. How many young blokes and good horses in that town there, nobody knows; they never thought of counting. I been in places isn't seen a war for nigh seventy years: folks hadn't got names to them, couldn't tell one another apart. Takes a war to get proper nominal rolls and inventories-shoes in bundles and corn in bags, and man in beast properly numbered and carted off cause it stands to reason: no order no war.(1-2)

The Sergeant's observation highlights the absurdity of the masses. It is put forth that the individuals can proclaim their existence only by war. This unravels the fact that the capitalist society thrives on the notion of war. The Sergeant is in search of soldiers whom he can feed to war and thereby not only fulfil the designs of the warlords but also show his own commitment to the exploitation initiated by others. By exposing such mentality of the masses Brecht satirises the general notion of a war-hungry society prior to the Second World War.

The entry of the central character of the play Mother Courage whom we always find on the move adds more to what the Sergeant already related. Her entry is marked by the song which is nothing but a commercial gesture aimed at attracting more and more customers. She sings:

Courage has rum with which to lace it
And boil their bodies and souls through.
Their musket primed, their stomach hallow-
Captains, your men don't look so well
So feed them up and let them follow. (2-3)

The song is also an epitome of the dependence of her family on war. She makes business in war and hopes that war continues, hardly reckoning that it will victimize her own family in the long run. Besides her children like Kattrin, Eilif and Swiss are begotten from the multiple sex partners from different nationalities which depict the helplessness of the people during war and the sexual degradation as result of it. On a deeper level, Brecht pokes fun at the war that pressurizes the masses socially, economically and also by draining them of the morality. Mother courage can be labelled as an extreme form of degraded character for she knows that war feeds on the soldiers from all over yet she hopes that war continues. This implies that her main contention is business and nothing more. She is enmeshed into the business and the war so much that she takes too much time in haggling with the catholic soldiers thereby loses his son to death. Richard Schechner labels Mother Courage's vision as an "illusion", that bad times will be good for the business without reckoning the fact that the raw material for the war will be her own family (qtd. in Ryan 81).

Brecht voices the Marxist ideology from the religious perspective in the character of hypocritical and lecherous Chaplain. Chaplain becomes the true incarnation of the religion which according to Marx acts as an opium that occludes the evils propagated by the men at affairs. Chaplain observes, "To fall in battle is a blessing" something undertaken to please the God (22). In fact, he says that through the mere stroke of preaching he can evoke a regiment to switch over to a battle. This implies that rather than being the necessity wars are forced to gratify those at command. How such people use religion as a means of exploitation is best summed by Chaplain when he says to Mother Courage that his persuasive rhetoric can blow the mind of the people. Through the portrayal of Chaplain Brecht displays the machinations of the religious preachers who sow the false seeds of heroism among people thereby drive them into wars, hardly reckoning the other side of the coin that there is death. In fact, the Chaplains habit of sleeping under the wagon of Mother Courage symbolises the religious impulse of war. Claire Gleitman rightly puts it, "the sub-text or underside of the commerce . . . is religion" (163).

The presentation of the war as a business industry in the play is something to be examined more carefully. It is an enterprise in which give and take takes place. Every character in the brief span of the play indulges in this enterprise. However, it is more aptly discernable from the central character Mother Courage whom Brecht makes his chief spokesman in this connection. Although the war acted as a source of income for her it also robbed her of her sons and the daughter. She lost her Eilif, her Swiss and even her Kattrin to it and she does curse the war for a time being. But once the images of these are obliterated of her mind, she resumes her business and wishes that war continues.

The contradiction that Brecht voices through the character of Mother Courage is that of ruin and courage. Even when her Kattrin dies she continues her business all alone bearing the burden of the wagon. The duality of the notions that Brecht puts forth in the play is worth examining. The warlords perpetuate war in order to gratify their evil designs and fulfil their bellies even if it is at the cost of the lives of the innocents. On the other hand, common figures like the Mother Courage see war as a means of survival. The real picture of the war is best presented by Brecht in the metaphor of sea. Just like the waters keep on flowing into the sea in the same way human lives keep on flowing into the sea of war making it more gruesome without considering the fact that the more you feed the more it demands, adding to the overall devastation.

The only character who emerges as a perfect picture of innocence and oppression is the daughter of the Mother courage Kattrin. War robs her of each and everything including her tongue. Through the portrayal of this dumb creature, Brecht raises a million dollar issue that in spite of the selfishness of the people the selfless act of love is still possible. Despite her silence and dumbness in the play, she becomes the most eloquent character at the end who thwarts the catholic evil design of impending children massacre by making noise and thus rescuing the townspeople. She kept on beating the drum to wake the villagers of the slumber. Her action saves the town but this cost her own life when she is shot by the enemies. Herbert Blau sums up this situation in a scathing manner: Degraded and demoralised by the black marketry of the war, the people of the play express their consciously rationalised submission with a remarkable vigour. What we have is the caustically robust power of

ineffectuality. The stones begin to talk in one of the projections declares, even before the mute daughter provides the climactic irony of the people with the drum that the war puts into her hand. (4)

The "destitute wondering" of Mother Courage and the Katrin drag us towards the basic issue of existence where we find everyone doing his errands (Immanuel and Chandra⁶). We know Mother Courage as an archetypal mother figure had to live despite the absence of her sons or of the daughter, for mother remains the governing unit of a family. The war may have snatched her of sons and the daughter but she shows how to survive in such situations. Her wagon is her life and by sticking to it, she embodies a universal mother figure who combats all the hardships and charts out a future course of action accordingly.

CONCLUSION

Brecht succeeds in putting his vision forward to the readers. The play engages the audience into a journey to a war-hungry world thereby stimulates their thinking which has been disrupted by the ideology concocted by those at power. It is the capitalist doctrine that shatters the smoothness of the families and subverts the objectives of the religion thereby blocks the reasoning of the masses from making the rational decisions on their own. What makes this play ahistorical is its castigating the economic enterprise of war. Leaving the play open-ended since the narrative doesn't voice the end of the war, itself sums up the fact the situation of the world today is in no way different from that of the past. If Herbert Blau takes "drama as an impulse of suffering" then Brecht's *Mother Courage and her Children* passes this criterion more pathetically (1). The world is still haunted by the oppression stemming from the capitalism and the wars due to which the rich are getting richer and poor poorer.

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