



Re (Presentation) As Resistance in Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children*

K M Shahnaz

Corresponding Author: K M Shahnaz

ABSTRACT: Brecht's play "*Mother Courage and Her Children*" is a fine example of resistance narrative and is modeled on epic theatre, where he makes use of alienation techniques to voice his dissent against Capitalism, War, Religion (especially preachers of religion), and the atrocities against women. He makes use of placards, songs etc in the play to create an anti-illusive effect. His unconventional treatment of mode and content only reinforces his protest against the monstrosities of a Capitalist society. Again, instead of presenting a conventional hero (tragic hero), he makes use of a heroine whom he never tried to portray as tragic.

KEYWORDS: Alienation effects, Brecht, epic theatre, resistance narrative, war narrative

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Bertolt Brecht, the German writer, became very popular in the later part of the 20th century, for he proposed an alternative to Stanislavsky-oriented realism that dominated acting and the idea of a "well-made play" which dominated playwriting. He was influenced by German Expressionism and his preoccupation with Marxism, and the idea that, man and society can be intellectually analyzed had led to the development or formulation of his 'Epic theatre'. Brecht had believed that, theatre should appeal to the reason of the audience and not their emotions. At the same time he did not keep emotions away from the scope of his theatrical exercise. His attempt was to churn the audience's emotions through intellectual stimulation. He focused on making it didactic. He argued that, in the realistic theatre of illusion, the audience was left emotionally drained, with the complete eclipse of all critical thinking and questioning. Thus, to encourage his audience to have a critical approach, he developed his 'verfremdung's effect', which makes use of anti-illusive techniques to make his audience realize that they are in a theatre and watching a play, rather than the reality.

Brecht's play *Mother Courage and Her Children* which was first staged in 1939 is an example of a resistance narrative and is modeled on epic theatre, where he makes use of alienation techniques to show his resistance against Capitalism, War, Religion (especially preachers of religion), and the atrocities against women. He makes use of placards, songs etc in the play to create an anti-illusive effect. Thus, through his unconventional use of mode and content he voices his dissent against the atrocities of a Capitalist society. Again, instead of making use of a conventional hero (or a tragic hero), he makes use of a heroine whom he never tried to portray as tragic.

The major agenda of Brecht in *Mother Courage* is obviously to depict the hateful implications of war. For this he tries to draw a parallel between the Second World War and the Thirty Years War (a war between Catholics and Protestants from 1618 to 1648). In addition to portraying the ravaging aspects of the war, his intention was to establish a relation between Capitalism and war. A capitalist society, in order to survive, perpetuates war and the victims are always the 'little or small people' of the society. In the beginning itself, Brecht portrays the idea of war and peace in an ironic manner. In the first scene of the play, when the Sergeant and the Recruiter look for soldiers to fight in the war, they are not able to find any. Thus, the Sergeant praises the time of war by pointing out that, during wartime, there is an order in the society. He says, "...Peace-that's just a mess; takes a war to restore order. Peacetime, the human race runs wild..." (Brecht 727).

Brecht ironically suggests that, it is only during war time that people (especially the ordinary people) attain their individuality in a capitalist society. Individuals become consumptive just like cattle, during war period. Charles R. Lyons rightly points out: "War is a value in the Sergeant's attitude because it simplifies exploitation in its effective use of people and property..." (Charles 91) thus, modern war produces a race of humans who start believing in fatalism and meekly accept the atrocities as if it is the result of an anonymous fate. Thus, indirectly, Brecht criticizes those people who had failed to raise their voice against the perpetrators

of war and as a result, the super powers become the war lords, who decide the course of war and lives of people. Brecht makes use of his characters to speak up against war and also to link war and religion.

When the play begins, an anti-war sentiment prevails among the characters. Mother Courage is not ready to let go of her son Eiliff and does not allow him to join the army, for she knows that the life of a soldier is dreadful. She says to the Sergeant, "Nowt doing, Sergeant. Yours is no trade for my kids" (Brecht 728). Here, Mother Courage portrays the reluctance of a mother to protect her son from the hateful implications of war. However, Eiliff leaves to join the war, and later on Mother Courage loses all her children one by one. The virtues of her children- Eiliff and his bravery Swiss Cheese and his honesty, Kattrin and her generosity- are not rewarded. Instead their virtues somehow become tragic flaws and lead them to their tragic end. The tragic life of Swiss Cheese is compared to Socrates in the play, who also had to suffer because of his honesty. This can be considered as an attempt at alienation by Brecht. During the time of war, the generous and soft hearted Kattrin Haupt gets raped and disfigured. Chattergy says about her character as, "from the very beginning we learn of her kindness which her mother regards as a dangerous quality." And when she gets raped, Mother Courage exclaims, "she's half wrecked already, won't get a husband now..." (Brecht 743).

Thus war destroys those people who wish to serve humanity. It separates a mother from her children. Mother Courage loses all her children and she says, "...War, be damned" (Brecht 743). A war always causes destruction, devastation and disaster. It ruins a village, a town, a country or even the very earth we live on. A war causes famine and starvation. And hunger makes one commit any crime or illegal activity. It is clear when Mother Courage says to the Cook, "...in Pomerania villagers are supposed to have started eating the younger kids, and nuns have been caught sticking folk up" (Brecht 747). The Cook observes the inhuman activities and makes a remark, "...World's dying out" (Brecht 747). Every war destroys the life of common people and makes them lose their wealth, family etc.

The play is based on the War of Religion or the Thirty Years War, which was fought between the Catholics and Protestants. And as the war progresses, the religious issue become less and less important and the political and militaristic issues start gaining ground. Brecht criticizes the role of religion in war through the character of Chaplain. While criticizing religion, Brecht makes use of Marx's dictum 'all criticism starts from the criticism of war'. Religion is like an art of making men drunk in ecstasy and thus diverts their attention from the evils which are heaped upon them. And Marx had said that Religion is the opium of people. The Chaplain says, "...to fall in battle is a blessing, not an inconvenience and why? It is a war of faith. None of your common wars but a special one, fought for the faith and therefore pleasing to God" (Brecht 733).

In contrast to Chaplain's opinion, the cook remarks that this war is just like any other war which results in betrayal, plunder and rape. And how faith or religion acts like opium of the people can be seen in Chaplain's dialogue, "...God has given me the gift of speech. I can preach so you'll lose all sense of sight and hearing." (Brecht 742). Brecht immediately contradicts this statement with the materialistic approach of Anna Fierling aka Mother Courage when she says, "I don't wish to lose my sense of sight and hearing. Where'd that leave me?" (Brecht 742). Here Brecht alienates the audience by disrupting the rhetoric of ornate speeches and this in turn makes the audience awaken from their trance like adherence to fiction. Brecht's criticism is not really against religion, but rather the preachers of the religion. Towards the end of the play, when the peasant family prays, instead of taking an action to save their family in town, it symbolizes the incapacity of religion to find a practical solution for any critical instance in human life. And instead of protecting mankind, people find it dangerous to be part of a particular faith; whether it is a protestant or catholic. We find the Chaplain saying, "But my faith makes it particularly dangerous for me." (Brecht 734) We find the Chaplain changing his robes depending on who leads in the war (Protestants or Catholics).

In a capitalist society the war becomes a means for making profits. Carl von Clausewitz in his work *On War* states that "War... is a continuation of politics by different means" (7). Brecht alters this statement: "War is a continuation of business by other means" (qtd. In Thomson 128). Brecht considers war as a metaphor for exploitation of small people by the people of higher order. War gives the authority to men to exploit other men. Yet, the principle of profit extends from powerful people to little Mother Courage. In the play, Mother Courage is a character who is dedicated to war and is a typical business woman. The Chaplain calls her the 'hyena of the battlefield'. She only cares about making profits and not about establishing peace in the society. She only wants peace every now and then, so that she can stock up her cart. She feels miserable when she comes to know that peace is established. She says, "Peace will wring my neck. I went and took Chaplain's advice, laid in fresh stocks only the other day..." (Brecht 744) Towards the end of the play she loses all her children and is left all alone in the world. Even then she acts a typical businesswoman, whose mind is rooted in profits. She says, "Hope I can pull cart all right by myself... Got to get back in business again." (Brecht 751)

The women characters of the play equally suffer in the play because of capitalism and war. Mother Courage loses her children to war and destruction. Her daughter Kattrin gets raped and disfigured. Moreover the dumbness of Kattrin is a result of an atrocity done against her. A soldier had plunged something into her mouth as a kid, which made her lose her ability of speech. In the play Mother Courage tries too hard to protect her

daughter from all oppressions, but in the end she fails when her daughter gets raped. She gives Katrin the red boots of Yvette (a prostitute in the play) which symbolizes that Katrin would not get a husband now and it is better that she takes up prostitution. Moreover, Katrin is a character who symbolizes motherly affections and instincts, and Brecht likens her to mother earth. The rape and disfigurement of Katrin is in fact the exploitation of the Natural World itself.

Yvette Pottier is a prostitute in the play who gets cheated by her lover, the Cook. She can be considered as the symbol of all those women who are ravaged and become homeless as a result of war and its plunder. Thus, to survive and to support themselves, they are forced to take up professions like prostitution which is considered immoral by the society.

It is Katrin the 'mute' character who finally voices dissent. She needs no rhetoric of words. It is her action that speaks and this exactly what Brecht tries to convey through his groundbreaking theatrical exercise. He persuades the audience to raise their voices against the ill effects of a capitalist society that institutes class divides. As Patrick O'Neill, the Brechtian critic points out Brecht intends "nearly everyone onstage must recognize that what attracts *Mother Courage* is the purely commercial character of the war"(Patrick,139.) The basis of his philosophy was based in communism. Esslin says that Brecht "loyally supported the Communist cause and did all he could to put himself and his great talents at its service. There can be no doubt that he was ready, for its sake, to sink into the mire and to embrace more than one butcher" (Esslin 150). Brecht believed in certain idealism in human social structure which should be free from any kind of mutual hatred and animosity. And if a society frees itself from the clutches of the war lords or the Capitalist powers, then a human society would emerge which will have absolute humanism and altruism.

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K M Shahnaz "Re (Presentation) As Resistance in Brecht's Mother Courage and Her Children"
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