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Mother Courage: Re(Interpreting) in Brecht's *Mother Courage*

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ABSTRACT

Mother Courage is not only a war play. It presents its characters as a living individual; with their feelings, sentiments, alienation etc. Mother Courage the protagonist of this play, stands out as a strong character. She is in contrast with the Greek tragic heroes and appears before the audience as a living character. The play besides highlighting the devastation caused by a prolonged war, brings forth the dubious character of the protagonist. My emphasis in the paper shall be to present forth the character of Mother Courage with reference to modern world. How she behaves as a modern individual with no concern for relations and more association with the materialistic aggrandizement.

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Bertolt was an innovator in the writings of dramas. He had well defined views about the writings of plays and also about their presentations on the stage. This play is the most famous play of the 20th century attempted by the German dramatist and poet Brecht. *Mother Courage* play has a historical background as the action of the play is largely determined by the course of a historical war. This historical war looms large in the play-overshadows everything in the story-affects the protagonist and other characters profoundly. The most prominent character in the play is a woman whose name is Anna Fierling and who is generally known as Mother Courage.

“It's Mother Courage with her wagon

Full of the finest boots they make”(Sc 1).

The title character, Mother Courage, travels across war-weary Europe selling alcohol, food, clothing, and supplies to soldiers on both sides. As she struggles to improve her floundering business, Mother Courage loses her adult children, one after another. The name of the protagonist is symbolic of the courage displayed by her amidst violence and death of all the three children. In the opening of the drama, when asked by Sergeant , Anna explains the reason for her being called as mother courage;

“ Courage is the name they gave me because I was scared of going broke...”(Sc 1)

Mother Courage ,Bertolt Brecht's protagonist is a morally divided being. We condemn this character even as we approve her. She is too complex to be merely admired or blamed. The play though primarily portrays the fertility of war and more so the destructiveness caused by war and merciless slaughter of innocent people and soldiers. But at the deeper level, we may find the continuous tussle in the character of the protagonist between her motherly feelings and the courage displayed by her in front of hostile world. Brecht's play is quite contrary

to ancient Greek tragedies wherein heroes are far above from the average. Janelle and Joseph write critically about the mercenary nature of mother courage:

“Moreover, both Brecht’s play and his production allow Courage this intensely human moment in order to illustrate for the audience the basic social contradiction out of which the character is built. Courage is both businesswoman and mother. Or rather, she tries to be both, the social realities of the total war from which she tries to profit as businesswoman prevent her from fulfilling her responsibilities as mother”(303)

Anna Fierling endures for a long time, traveling with nothing except a supply wagon pulled along by her adult children: Eilif, Swiss Cheese, and Kattrin. Throughout the play, though she does show concern for her children, she seems more interested in profit and financial security, rather than the safety and well-being of her offspring. She has a love/hate relationship with war. She loves war because of its potential economic benefits. She hates war because of its destructive, unpredictable nature. She has the nature of a gambler, always trying to guess just how long the war will last so that she can take a risk and buy more supplies to sell. She fails dreadfully as a parent whenever she is focused on her business. When she fails to keep track of her eldest son, Eilif, he joins the army. When Mother Courage has to save the life of her second son (Swiss Cheese), she offers a low payment in exchange for his freedom; her stinginess results in his execution. Eilif is also executed, and although his death is not a direct result of her choices, she misses her only chance to visit with him because she is at the market working her business instead of at church, where Eilif expects her to be. Near the play's conclusion, Mother Courage is again absent when her daughter Kattrin martyrs herself in order to save innocent townspeople.

Despite losing all of her children by the end of the play, it is arguable that Mother Courage never learns anything, thus never experiences an epiphany or transformation. As a character, mother courage is consistently dangling between her words and actions. She claims to care for her children and despite her attempts

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to protect them, her actions result in their deaths and reveal her powerful financial motivations.

“The new Mother Courage was even more determined to profit from war. Brecht wrote that ‘to help performances’, nearly everyone onstage must recognize that what attracts Mother Courage is ‘the purely commercial character of the war’”(Patrick,139)

Despite her attempts to prevent Eilif from being recruited to the army, she is distracted by a sale and he is taken to the army. Her elder son Eilif has been condemned to death for having attacked a peasant family and depriving them their cattle. Remorseless, mother courage continues with her wagon and remaining two children.

Her second son, Swiss Cheese is made “Paymaster of the Second Finnish....”(Sc 2). Swiss cheese is captured by a catholic sergeant on a charge of having hidden the cash box of his regiment and having thus deprived the catholic conquerors of his booty. He explains his grim situation to his mother over a meal:

“ That’s three days I have been sitting around with nothing to do, and sergeant’s always been kind to me but any moment now he’’ start asking where’s Swiss Cheese with the pay box”(sc 3).

He is then executed because neither the cashbox has been recovered by the catholic sergeant nor the catholic sergeant has been given any bribe for releasing Swiss Cheese. Mother Courage’s inhumane and selfish nature is again exposed when she does not acknowledge the dead body of her son. She denies knowing her other son Swiss Cheese to save her own life; not an act of courage at all. Mother Courage is driven by the desire to profit from the war. She desires for the continuance of the war because she earns her livelihood through it. She continues with her business of running a canteen catering to the soldiers who have to fight in the war. In the opening scene mother courage sings a song which announces her

trade as a canteen woman. The song highlights and brings forth the duality in the nature of mother courage. She offers food and drink to the soldiers in an effort to promote her sales and increase her income. Her insatiable desire for wealth arouses disgust and contempt in the readers and undermines her heroism.

Mother Courage has been presented as a shrewd and practical businesswoman. In managing her canteen business, she is all the time worrying about the rise and fall in prices. In scene 2 she bargains about the price of a chicken which she wants to sell to the Swedish commander's cook. This incident explores her inhumane and greedy nature as she feels happy because of the shortage of food caused by the continuing war. She wants to make maximum money out of the shortage of food caused by war.

When the war stopped because of the sudden death of King Gustavus, she laments as now she shall suffer a heavy loss due to decline in prices. Though Mother Courage is well aware of the destructiveness accompanied with war and brutal killing of soldiers and innocents yet for her survival she advocates for its continuance. Her character evokes a feeling of disdain in the minds of the readers. She cries out:

“ Peace'll wring my neck. I went and took Chaplain's advice, laid in fresh stocks only t'other day. And now they're going to demobalize and I'll be left sitting on my wares”(Sc8).

Her nature becomes more repulsive when she refuses to give away her costly shirts to be torn into bandages for the wounded Protestants of the city which had been attacked and plundered by the catholic forces of General Tilly. Here we find her lacking completely in human feelings. When the chaplain insists on getting the shirts from her, she says to him:

“ I can't give you any. With all I have to pay out, taxes, duties, bribes.....” and “ Don't waste my precious linen” (Sc 5).

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When Katrin threatens her mother for her uncompassionate behaviour, she snubs her daughter, calling her a lunatic.

She has been termed as “hyenas of the battlefield” in the play (Sc 8). Throughout the play we witness the dreadful nature of mother courage. She overjoices when war resumes:

“ Cooky, peacetime's over. War's been on again three days now. Heard news before selling me stuff, thank God.”(Sc 8).As the war shows no signs of ending, Mother Courage sends Katrin into the town to buy some additional merchandise from a general store to meet the requirements of the soldiers. On her way back, Katrin is attacked by a drunken soldier and she comes home with a wound on her forehead close to one of her eyes. Katrin's dumbness and this ugly scar further diminish her chances of getting married and dishearten Mother Courage. The physical afflictions of Katrin are the consequences of war and bear testimony to the brutality of war.

Towards the end of the play, only Katrin is left with her mother, assisting her in all kinds of odd jobs. But she too meets a tragic end when she learns that catholic forces are secretly advancing towards the protestant town of Halle in order to launch a surprise attack and slaughter the protestant inhabitants. Katrin climbs up to the roof of the farm house and begins to beat a drum in order to sound an alarm to warn the town people of the impending attack. She is shot by catholic lieutenant and gets killed.

The play presents vehemently the evils of war and the enormous destruction which war causes. Brecht wrote this play to warn the European nations against starting another world war. Through this play, he wanted to remind the common people about the destruction which wars in the past had caused. The events in this play have been depicted in such a manner that we are filled up hatred of war and with a havoc of it, besides disgust with war. The dialogue at various occasions presents the demerits of war and this also arouses anti war feelings in us.

As Mother Courage follows the soldiers from region to region and from city to city, she is a witness to miseries of plague, famine and slaughter to the population as the war progressed and she followed the armies, selling her goods. The population is burned, plundered, tortured and murdered brutally. But Mother Courage is unfettered by the massive destruction and death caused by war and continues her business mercilessly. Courage is the embodiment of inimical modern individuals who are more affiliated with commodities, money and the marketplace with no strong hold on relationships, emotions and feelings.

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