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Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children*: An Anti War Drama

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ABSTRACT

Drawn into the First World War scenario by its inhuman onslaught upon the whole of the European social order including England, Brecht becomes the champion of the postwar writers agglomerate in particular to speak for the suffering and the downtrodden masses in terms of their economic inequality which the war had aggravated. The Marxian ideal became Brecht's socio political guide book and he was fully convicted that bourgeoisie's rule and the atrocities perpetrated by them on the ignorant masses was systematic, needed a new direction to upset the devious intentions of the rich. For him, one had to wage a class war to extricate the masses from the web of the ruling class. Modern war with all its destructiveness finds a dumb race of human beings for meekly accepting it as though it is an anonymous fate that had overtaken them. Indirectly Brecht blames the people who had failed to speak up against the perpetrators of war, in consequence the super powers have become war lords who decided the course of war and lives of the people. Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her children* has been accepted universally as one of the significant plays in the last quarter of the 20th century. Though a few critics considered the

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play for its optimistic ending, a social document, in the west people treated the play as a traditional tragedy. For Brecht, the play contains the problem of the age.

Key Words: Downtrodden, Marxian ideal, modern war, super powers, war lords.

Highly motivated by the Marxian ideology and disturbed by the prevailing situation in Europe during and after the war, Brecht was convinced that unless a radical change took place in the society in terms of social and economic criteria, the condition would continue to suffer without any direction either to be possessive or to revolt against the thralldom pattern in the continent. For the betterment if any social structure requires, a wide publicity of the Marxian ideals which could be better propagated through the medium of writing which has been a powerful weapon. It can mould public opinion and for any social change, the first and the foremost thing would be to mobilize the public which should make them assimilate a new idea so that they can be awakened to a new social order for its emergence.

Brecht's *Mother Courage and her children* has been accepted universally as one of the significant plays in the last quarter of the 20th century. Though a few critics considered the play for its optimistic ending, a social document, in the west people treated the play as a traditional tragedy. For Brecht, the play contains the problem of the age. In the later part of the 20th century, people had no personal convictions and drifted like shoals of fish into invisible nets in which they enmeshed themselves not knowing how to extricate themselves from the intriguing problems they encountered. Their suffering was mute but absurd. By and large, people were inarticulate and their fatalism gave them a stoical appearance. Nevertheless, the endurance of the people when they were inflicted by unwanted wars could be equated to animal endurance which is unfocussed and unexpressed. This social sedation implied a lack of emotional purgation. Modern war with all its destructiveness finds a dumb race of human beings for meekly accepting it as though it is an anonymous fate that had overtaken them. Indirectly Brecht blames the people

who had failed to speak up against the perpetrators of war; in consequence the super powers have become war lords who decided the course of war and lives of the people.

Around 1926, Brecht had involved in the Marxist studies and he was convinced that the Marxist analysis of society was scientific and in 1929, the rise of Nazism in Germany led him into a more committed communist position. The political situation in Germany became so zealous, Nazis advancement in the country made communist minded people like Brecht to leave Germany on 28th February 1933 and he moved around European capital like Vienna, Paris, London and Masco. He stayed for sometime in Denmark. In the summer of 1939, when war became inevitable and Europe grew more and more unsafe, Brecht moved to Finland, eventually escaping to America across the Soviet Union 1941. During the period of his exile, Brecht wrote *The life of Galilio* (1938) *Mother Courage and her Children* (1939) and *The Good Woman of Setzuan* (1940). These plays were premiered in the Zurich schauspiellaus. Though these plays are all loaded with social criticism, they reveal Brecht's humanism and every individual is depicted with socially complicated situations with the aim of undertaking a kind of scientific social enquiry. Individual conduct is seen as closely enmeshed in a particular social and historical context. These plays are open ended, making the audience to draw their own conclusions and affect social change.

Brecht rejected the traditional European theatre because it tended to take the given reality as something inevitable to which people must reconcile. He wanted to dispense with the mystery and ritual element in drama, believing that the theatre included emotional participation by the method of suggestion and emotional manipulation, but they are not conducive to social transformation according to Brecht's theory of drama. He wanted a critically detached audience who should be alert and at the same time relaxed. He wanted to show that man is not as a consistent or integrated whole but as a contradictory and changing, as someone whose coherence could be achieved through introductions and 'jumps'. His main concern was not individual psychology but social gestus which was distinguished from 'gesture'. It is an attitude or a single aspect of an attitude. 'Expressible in words or actions', according to John Willett. (Ronald 42). The principle aim of Brecht's epic theatre was the inducement of a socially critical and enquiring response; the idea of distancing formed its very core. 'Historisizing' was another Brechtian concept closely related to distancing. Adopting the Marxist view of history, he was of the view

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that there was development, progress and a process of social evolution in which men participate, the historical relativity of events in the play had to be made comprehensible to the audience.

According to John Willett and Ralph Manheim the play *Mother Courage and Her Children* was written during his exile in Sweden between 21st September and 7th November 1939. Brecht was disturbed about the turn of events in Europe during the war years and at initial stage of the war, some form of peace seemed still possible. But that became elusive and at one stage peace became an illusion. Brecht's attitude towards the war is anti heroic. From Brecht's Marxist viewpoint, *Mother Courage* is a representative of the petite bourgeoisie. The *Mother courage* is an antiwar play which had a topical urgency in its time and has subsequently acquired universal human appeal.

Within the ambit of the war in which victories and defeats matter only so far as they affect the daily struggle for survival of little people; the focus is on the fortunes of a family, on mother courage and her three children. The separate nationalities of the three children, who have each been brought up in time and space, and their ideology, Brecht also connects war and business by making his protagonist, a canteen woman who sells provisions to the armies. For mother courage and her family, the wagon is both their home and their means of livelihood.

The action of the play is based on the war which has caused havoc on many innocent families in a tragic way. *Mother courage* centres round a family which intends to preserve her family and bring them through war. *Mother courage* actually destroys her family and learns nothing from the travails of the situations which she encounters. According to Eric Bentley, *Mother Courage* has a tripartite structure. [Eric 97]. The action is divided into three sections, at the end of each of which one of the mother courage's children is executed. They become the victims of war which is inevitable. Brecht leaves the audience to form their own conclusions as the play unfolds. His dialectical vision which holds together complementary opposites in ironic tension, the audience in its turn is encouraged to practice 'complex seeing'. The fundamental conception of the play, its overall design, characterization, action and structural devices like the

juxtaposition of scenes and insertion of songs and also its attitude to life and values, is determined by this vision. Brecht's intention is to invite the spectator to form his own judgment in the social milieu which he portrays in the play. The introductory scene opens up with the things which are about to begin. The long drawn out war is making a fresh start, with the segment and recruiting officer on the look out and for cannon fodder. The inverted values of the military became ironically apparent. Peace is discouraged as wasteful disorder and war eulogized for its discipline and organization, ironically the military organization in the long run can produce only civilian dislocation is underplayed. The whole thematic concern of the scene alerts the audience to pay critical attention. Mother Courage arrives with her dumb daughter in the canteen wagon, drawn by her two sons, to join the new war.

She views this as a new business enterprise and her fear of war pushed to the back and the impending business propositions comes to the fore. The conflict between her mother love and keenness in establishing a business venture suggests the tragic potential of the play. When she confronts the professionals of war, she hopes to protect her family by her own professional acts with comic evasiness and game of fortune telling with black crosses all to prevent her sons from being recruited. Within the overall scheme of the play, it provides a frame of suspense and irony. Despite her cleverness, she is overcome by the men of war, who locate as her vulnerable point, the profit motive of a trades woman.

In the subsequent scene we see Mother Courage bargaining with the commander's cook over the sale of a capon. During the battle of wits between the professionals, a sudden turn of situation occurs when the commander brings Eilif and wants to feast him as a hero. Mother Courage takes fresh advantage of the situation but refuses to relinquish her shrewd business sense even in the joy of discovering her own son as a honored guest.

In the warfront the ruthlessness of the commander and establishment of values are reported. "Curse the war" at the end of the scene VI, Mother Courage remarks. The emptiness of a war of religion becomes apparent from the contemptuous treatment meted out of chaplain. The praise of Eilif for stealing cattle seems a routine formality, concealing the ulterior motive of exploiting his bravery for risky military adventure. This provokes Mother Courage to voice her cynicism regarding the 'great values' and impels her to slap Eilif for his daring act. Though Mother

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courage and Eilif mutually congratulate each other complacently on profiting from the war, an undercurrent of danger is recorded.

Mother Courage copes with familiar war situations, taking care of every item and promptly switching over to the enemy camp. The Chaplain's religious volte-face exposes the meaninglessness of a war of religion which we witness in the third scene. When Swiss cheese is arrested and loses his life, Mother Courage seems positively guilty; the audience is also made to realize her tragic predicament. Her silent agony, and her mental strength in denying her son's dead body, gives Mother Courage a heroic stature. Mother Courage's hard heartedness appears unnatural and perverse. The notable point here is that having sacrificed her son to the wagon, she becomes a distorted human creature. However, Mother Courage is also known for her tilt towards materialism because at one stage she thinks that she can make more money in her enterprise if war lasts for some more time. In the recurrent pattern of the play, Mother Courage loses another son when she is away on a business trip. But unaware of Eilif's death and nourishes her illusions about him till the end. The tragic irony is all the more becomes intense when she returns joyfully to announce that war has already broken out and promptly moves to her own side (Swedish camp) Eilif was just unlucky enough to have been executed during a short peace.

On the whole, sixteen years of war has brought nothing but death and destruction to people. Mother Courage and her daughter represent destitute wandering like 'damned souls'. In the climax we witness that the town of hall is threatened with an ambush. Katrin is alone in the wagon, while Mother Courage is once again away in town on a business errand, the soldiers break in during the night, the peasants, well versed in war time contingencies, react in routine gestures of self-defence promptly capitulate and resort ritual prayer.

Against the apathy of the peasants, Katrin's alertness attracts attention. Her intelligence, courage and determination appear incredible. The drums she had, become an instrument to warn the town's people. Neither the promise of sparing her mother nor the battering at the wagon can stop her drumming. She takes the threat to her life as a final challenge. Urged on by pity for the

children and fear for herself, streaming with tears, she rises above her mother's teaching by refusing to capitulate. Katrin displays the kind of courage which contrasts sharply with her mother's. Eventually she becomes a martyr. She performs the life saving human miracle at the cost of her own life.

In the end Mother Courage is seen in the archetypal image of the mother, bending over and singing a lullaby to her child. She refuses to accept the fact that she has lost her daughter. Sentimentality is erased by the self-regarding content of her song. Even her reaction at Katrin's death is only mechanical. Her illusion that her son is alive is matched by her blindness regarding the unprofitable and destructive nature of war. The poignant scenes we have in the play are meant to make people learn and understand the war situation. Brecht portrays the effects of war on the people in all its dimensions. Mother Courage loses her children to the war without realizing its devastating nature whereas her daughter Katrin is fully aware of the terrifying effects of the war on the people. Contrastingly we see Mother Courage's false consciousness as a mother and Katrin's true consciousness of motherhood. She rather enjoys a universal motherhood because of her selfless service to the humanity. Her capacity to love other people's children transforms her into a universal mother figure.

Brecht's antiwar theme in the play evolves as one concerning motherhood. Mother figures seem to have held a fascination for Brecht. Probably he would have felt that the concept of motherhood would be best suitable to drive home his point of view pertaining to the havoc of war, especially when a mother goes through the traumatic conditions of war, the intensity of narration would acquire better significance in the light of the author's thematic concern which is nothing but to reveal how it destroys the fauna and flora of the globe. Brecht's hatred of war finds a central place in the entire play. Whoever resorts to war is a mistake which inevitably leads to the tragedy of war. Katrin in the play is portrayed as the symbolic figure of suffering and extinction in the theatre of war. Katrin in the play is portrayed as a symbolic figure of suffering and extinction in the theatre of war. Her heroic sacrifice is the symbol of innocent people suffering at the hands of war lords who perpetrate war for further egoistic benefits and exhibit their might. In contrast to her mother, Katrin feels the agony of the wars and sincerely hopes for peace with its normal life and happiness in all spheres of activities. Symbolically it stands for peace. Her instinctive pity and compassion are not passive qualities but active virtues

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which impel to nurse a hurt heagehog, resume a baby from a burning cottage and save a city from the enemy's attack. As an anti war figure Kattrin prefigures the young and heroic. The nobleness that is lost with her in the most positive and desirable value that the play posits, hence the poignancy of her martyrdom.

Brecht's aim was to show the horrors of war which inhumanly destroys the innocent people. He wanted that the future world should not witness a war of any magnitude. He shows further that the Human society as historically limited, as condition of life which could eventually be surpassed through benevolent human intervention and social progress. Brecht believed in certain idealism in the human social structure which should be free from mutual hatred and animosity of any kind. If the society frees itself from the clutches of the war lords, a human society would emerge which will have absolute humanism and altruism.

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