

BRECHT'S MOTHER COURAGE AND HER CHILDREN: A PURSUIT IN PEACE AND HARMONY

Dr. Vaishali K. Ghadyalji

Assistant Professor,
K.J. Somaiya I.E.I.T.,
Sion, Mumbai, India.

Abstract

Anthropology and world literature demonstrate that war and peace have always been the significant aspects of human history and culture as if two sides of a coin. War has constantly been synonymous to devastation, destruction, deaths, deadly diseases and violent bloodshed; and world peace is an idyllic condition on earth where all nations and peoples enjoy their freedom. Brecht's Mother Courage and Her Children is identified as a pursuit in world peace and harmony depicting the troubles and tribulations of war and the massive annihilation it precipitates. It's a tale of a shrewd businesswoman and a hard bargainer who obtains profit from the constant warfare that she keeps cursing, eventually sacrificing all her three grown-up children in the process. Episodic structure, historicizing, alienation are a few exceptional techniques Brecht uses to stress upon his pacifist and antiviolence theme. Through this play he wages a war against capitalism, imperialism and dictatorship.

Keywords: War, Peace, Harmony, Capitalism, Imperialism, Dictatorship, Historicizing, Alienation.

BRECHT'S MOTHER COURAGE AND HER CHILDREN: A PURSUIT IN PEACE AND HARMONY

- Dr. Vaishali K. Ghadyalji

Anthropology and world literature demonstrate that war and peace have always been the significant aspects of human history and culture as if two sides of a coin. War has constantly been synonymous to devastation, destruction, deaths, deadly diseases and violent bloodshed; and world peace is an idyllic condition on earth where all nations and peoples enjoy their freedom. As Sun Tzu suggests,

"War is a matter of vital importance to the State; the province of life or death; the road to survival or ruin. It is mandatory that it be thoroughly studied." [1]

As most of the notable writers of the world, Bertolt Brecht, too, was a child of his times who was deeply moved and disturbed by the warfare and chaotic political and social situations in the contemporary Germany. His biography offers a clear idea of the making of Brecht as a militant artist with a combative motto: 'Fight in writing!' He falls among the remarkable authors of the globe who have proved that pen is mightier than sword.

There are three distinct phases of his career: From 1898 (his year of birth) to 1933 when he lived in Germany-his homeland. His writings of this period include: plays like *Baal* (1918), *In the Jungle of Cities* (1923), *Hauspostille*, a volume of poetry (1927), *The Three penny Opera*, a musical with a libretto, (1928) *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* (1930), *The Mother*, Brecht's adaptation of a Maxim Gorky novel (1932). In 1933, the Nazis came to power in Germany. Brecht was among the first few intellectuals to face the blows of Nazi atrocities. His books were burned; the doors of the Deutsches Theatre were closed. After Adolf Hitler's rise to power, Brecht, fearing for his safety, had to go into self-exile. Brecht stayed close to the German border in Denmark and Finland in order to support the anti-fascist struggle in Germany. He was

stripped of his German citizenship in 1935 and a tough period of exile began for Brecht. His exile was a politically active one. During the years 1933-1941 he wandered in Austria, Switzerland, France and the Scandinavian countries, staying longest in Denmark. until the war forced him to leave for the USA and remained there til 1947. His most influential poetry, his greatest plays, his theoretical ideology on the art of socialist realism sprung in this phase. In the last phase, he returned to East Berlin in 1947 and died in 1956 just when he was preparing for a professional visit to London.

In the first phase of his literary career, he was becoming interested in political systems and ideologies. Brecht evidently was a radical. His early plays were about the decay and corruption of the bourgeois society. But at that point, Brecht was a bohemian rather than a Marxist. It was the division of Germany's inter-war Weimar Republic and the rise of fascism that directed him to intensify his political beliefs. While in Berlin in the mid-1920s, Brecht felt strongly attracted towards Marxism. Brecht's inclination to Marxism also altered his approach to theatre. He had always rejected naturalistic style of theatre that tried to present the audience with a perfect illusion of reality. Brecht developed his theory of 'epic theatre' as a response to this. His aim was not to entertain, or to draw the audience into the action. Rather, he wanted to transform audiences into conscious and critical observers of the events developing on stage.

To serve his purpose, Brecht totally rejected Aristotelian concepts of a tightly knit plot and advocated an open dramatic structure, a diffuse kind of play which starts early in the narrative and proceeds through it in many scenes. Another technique Brecht employed in the writing and presentation of his plays was *verfremdungseffekt* i. e. 'Distancing' or 'Alienation'. He did not want his audience to become emotionally involved with the characters in a play or to identify themselves with the characters, because his real purpose was to enable the audience to watch the events on the stage in a detached and impersonal way so as to form their own independent judgments.

Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* can be identified as a pursuit in world peace and harmony depicting the troubles and tribulations of war and the massive annihilation it precipitates. It was written in April 1939, four months before the World War II broke out on 1 September 1939. But it was premiered in Switzerland in 1941 and was sub-titled as '*A Chronicle of the Thirty Years War.*' This European war was raged over almost all Germany from 1618-1648 fought between the Protestants and Catholics with several intervals of peace. But this play

opens in 1624 when the war is already eight years old. The play covers the war till 1636, though it ended in 1648. Despite the fact that the action of the play is determined by the course of the historical Thirty Years War and the decisions taken by historical personalities like General Tilly, it does not fall in the category of a history play as no historical personality appears directly on the stage in the course of the play. Historicizing was adopted by him as a technique for making the present condition look curious and thereby to suggest the need for social change. Hence, he wanted to project the devastation of modern Germany in the light of the destructive Thirty Years War (1618-1648) which he chose to underscore his anti-war ideas. The historian Eric Hobsbawm described the period starting with the World War I and ending with World War II (1914-1945) as 'the thirty-one years World War and as an era of havoc comparable to the Thirty Years War.' [2]

Brecht was anti-Nazi but not at all anti-German; his anti-war thoughts compelled him to give artistic expression to the calamity and suffering of common people through *Mother Courage*. Through this play he wages a war against capitalism, imperialism and dictatorship.

Mother Courage and Her Children is a tale of a shrewd businesswoman and a hard bargainer Anna Ferling nicknamed as 'Mother Courage' who obtains profit from the constant warfare that she keeps cursing, eventually sacrificing all her three grown-up children in the process. Various incidents, songs and dialogues of the play comment on and discuss, diverse issues related to war and peace. At the outset of the play, Mother Courage sings a song while selling drinks and food to the soldiers alluding to the premature deaths which the soldiers are bound to meet. It says:

"So fill the hole up in your belly

Before you fill one underground." (Scene I)

These lines predict the later events and prepare the spectators for what is to come. In the opening scene itself the audience watches Mother Courage's hard and manipulative efforts to forbid the recruiting officer to enroll Eilif's name in the army. This recruiting officer is finding it difficult to get new recruits for the Swedish army and trying to devise new methods such as making young fellows drunk or paying them some money. This points out the fact how young citizens were hypnotized, tempted or compelled to join the army during wartime.

Scene II portrays how the perceptions of crime or heroic act alter in war and peace. In war, numerous murders and even massacres are committed; and they are not thought to be criminal deeds but are given bravery awards. But in peace-time even a single robbery or murder is regarded as a heinous crime.

One of the most important ideas this play brings to surface is of corruption. Corruption is an evil which raises its ugly head in the course of war as much as it does during a time of peace. This play throws glaring light on this issue with various references to corrupt army officers and their deeds. When Mother Courage is asked to bribe the military officer for Swiss Cheese's release, she critically comments on corruption:

"Thanks be to god they're corruptible. They are not wolves, they're human and after money. God is merciful and men are bribable, that's how His will is done on earth as it is in Heaven. Corruption is our only hope. As long as there is corruption, there'll be merciful judges and even the innocent may get off." (Scene III)

This penetrating sarcasm and the irony behind it are comparable with that of Jonathan Swift.

Mother Courage throughout the play is seen to be describing various evils of the war. In scene III, she says that whenever the catholic soldiers get an opportunity to plunder a town, they "jump on top of the women-folk." Not only are the soldiers who actually participate in the military operations get killed in the war but also the innocent civilians. Kattrin herself is attacked and wounded by a drunken soldier. Her condition becomes all the more pitiful as it adds to her previous misfortune i.e. dumbness which is also a consequence of the war because a soldier had thrust something into her mouth causing her to lose her power of speech when she was just a child. Such tragedies and mishaps are very common in wartime and must have happened to countless other families. Finding that Kattrin had been attacked and badly wounded by the soldiers, the chaplain comments:

"The men who start the wars are responsible,
they bring out the worst in people." (Scene VI)

He also makes remarkable comments when asked by Mother Courage whether the present war will end with the death of General Tilly. The chaplain replies that any number of generals would be available to take Tilly's place, and the war would not end just because Tilly is dead. The chaplain ends his speech with a statement that reads like an epigram:

"War is like love, it always finds a way." (Scene VI)

In the course of subsequent action of the play, Mother Courage, Kattrin and the cook are found starving for the want of food. The cook starts begging alms by singing a song to excite the sympathy of the inmates of a personage. The key-line of the song is: "Please help us now; our need is dire!" (Scene IX) which is a very moving scene. This scene underlines the horrors of war

and arouses hatred for the same in the minds of the spectators. It brings to light the sad fact that war leads to shortage of food and other basic necessities.

The theme of the play as a whole is the destructiveness and futility of war; and Katrin's death can be regarded as its climax. Katrin is fired at and killed by a Catholic sergeant because she was trying to raise an alarm in order to warn the townspeople against a surprise attack which the Catholics had planned upon the town. This is another distressing tragedy resulting from the war which still continues and shows no signs of ceasing. At the end, Mother Courage's survival, too, is distressing. She now looks like a tragic figure, lonely and deserted even though she manages to recover her mental equilibrium and gets ready to start her business afresh. George Steiner rightly points out:

“Mutter Courage is an allegory of pure waste...Courage is now a scarecrow giving a grotesque semblance of life.” [3]

The play realistically depicts the catastrophic nature of war through its constant portrayal of the various evils and horrors of the war by way of dialogues, songs and action. It successfully arouses the anti-war feelings in the minds of its readers and spectators. It can be interpreted as Brecht's warning to the nations of the world against the dangers of war which seemed to be approaching. And within a few months of completion of this play by Brecht, World War II broke out. But in the then Germany, Nazi propaganda had unfortunately successfully taken root in the minds of German people that a war is must; war and only war will help Germany to regain its own self-respect and honour as a nation. There were also people ready to take advantage out of the impending war. This mentality of the contemporary Germans is reflected in the character of Mother Courage. Walter Weideli rightly points out,

“In the last analysis, unfortunately, this order is really only organized disorder. Mother Courage's plan is illusory. She would like to live form the war, but is not willing to give anything to it.” [4]

Mother Courage's wagon acts as the most important stage property and a part of decor in the theatrical performance of the play. Mother Courage's wagon is symbolic to her situation. In the beginning, it is full of merchandise and is pulled by her two young and vigorous sons, and herself and her daughter sitting in it. She is at the height of material prosperity and is full of vibrant energy. But in the course of the action of the play, as war becomes more and more bloodstained and she goes on losing all three of her children one by one, her wagon turns emptier

and worn out. The wagon is representative of her economic and material gain and loss. At the end, as Brustein states,

“She is pulling it (Wagon) alone now, but it is no longer very heavy: supplies and passengers have all been destroyed – Courage and the wagon merge – both bruised and battered by war, both somehow still durable.”[5]

Brecht’s use of decor and stage property is for creating the *v*-effect (*verfremdungseffekt* i. e. alienation effect) where the stage should be brightly lit. But Brecht does not seem to be conforming to this principle when the use of decor and stage property in *Mother Courage* is considered. Max Spalter puts forward the evidence:

“When directing *Mother Courage*, Brecht made the stage look increasingly bleak as the play moved along; even *Mother Courage*’s wagon was by its deterioration to attest a destructive course of events which by 1634 had depopulated Germany to the point where wolves prowled empty streets.” [6]

Mother Courage has become Brecht's emblematic drama describing the horrors of the battlefield, expressing patriotic feelings or heroism, showing pity over the waste of innocent lives and along with this darker side of human nature, he also portrays the kind-heartedness and self-sacrificing nature through the angelic character of Katrin, the motherly affection she showers on the children folk and even the contradictory love of *Mother Courage* for her children. At a stark contrast to this dark and devastating picture of war in human history, Brecht marches on in pursuit of peace and harmony when he uses *Mother Courage* as his mouthpiece:

“I’ll not see Swiss Cheese again,
and where my Eilif is the Good Lord knows.

Curse the war!” (Scene XII)

In accordance with his Epic theatre, Brecht designed the character of *Mother Courage* in such a manner that the spectators should not sympathize with her. She learns nothing from her experiences and goes on ruining herself till the end. The comparison of the condition of her wagon at the beginning and at the end of the play gives a precise idea of it. But Brecht wants the spectators to learn a lesson from *Mother Courage*’s condition by preventing themselves to sympathize with her. Thus, Brecht tries to teach practical wisdom through *Mother Courage*. Hence he rightly says,

“Art is not a mirror held up to reality
but a hammer with which to shape it.”[7]

Works Cited:

Primary Sources :

- 1 Brecht Bertolt, *Mother Courage and Her Children A Chronicle of the Thirty Years War*, translated by Eric Bentley, Introduction and Notes by Ruby Chatterji, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985. Print.

Secondary Sources:

- 1 Tzu Sun, *The Art of War, THEORIES OF WAR AND PEACE*, Political Science 522 Jack S. Levy, Rutgers University Spring 20, 15 Hickman 304,732/932-1073 <<http://home.uchicago.edu/~mjreese/CurrentStudents/LevyPS522.pdf>>
- 2 Thomson Peter, *Brecht Mother Courage and Her Children*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.1997.Print.
- 3 Steiner George, *The Death of Tragedy*, London: Faber & Faber.1961.Print.
- 4 Weideli Walter, *The Art of Bertolt Brecht*, English version by Daniel Russell, London: The Merlin Press.1963.Print.
- 5 Brustein Robert, *The Theatre of Revolt, An Approach to Modern Drama*, Boston: An Atlantic Monthly Press Book, Little Brown & Co. 1962.Print.
- 6 Spalter Max, *Brecht's Tradition*, Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins' Press.1967. Print.
- 7 Bertolt Brecht, attributed, *Decade of Prote*
<http://www.notable-quotes.com/b/brecht_bertolt.html>