

The Portrait of the Mother in “Mother Courage and Her Children” by Bertolt Brecht

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Abstract:

The main aims of this paper is to show the reader that the importance of female in any society whether she is a mother, a sister, a daughter or a hard worker. She is a crucial component in any community. The image of woman in general and as a mother in particular has a great impact in all domains of life.

The mother's task becomes more complex. She devotes her life to the demanding task of caring for her children and providing for the family living. As mothers entered the work force they are pulled between two rather powerful and contradicting riptides be more doting and self-sacrificing.

Brecht tries to focus on the idea or theme of mother during his play Mother Courage and Her Children, that deals with a mother as a businesswoman and at the same time how she does lose her children because of her greed and business in a very vivid description, details, incidents, and circumstances that develop throughout the course of the play that Brecht tries to make his dramatic works as an instrument and a source of new ideas for change.

Key words: “Mother Courage and Her Children”, Bertold Brecht, portrait of the mother

INTRODUCTION

Due to the significance of the role of mother in the family and the whole society, many playwrights and critics tackle the theme of mother's role and her relationship with her children.

In any culture, the mother-child relationship is one of the most mysterious and complex relationships. The economic, social and political changes in late nineteenth century and early twentieth century have enormous impact on the role of the mother and her relationships with her children, and stability of the family and its unity. The mother is the essential and the pivot of the family; hence many dramatists depict the effect of these changes on mother's role and her family. They depict social life and the suffering of the family to raise the consciousness of the audience to make them aware of their problems¹.

The playwrights such as Bernard Shaw, Brecht and Tennessee William explore the effect of capitalism, war, poverty on the mother's role and her family. Each playwright depicts a mother who attempts to survive with her children under powerful social and economic forces.

The main aim of this paper is mainly concerned with the analysis of the character of the mother and her role in shaping the life of her children².

MOTHERHOOD

The mother is mainly associated with love, tenderness, sacrifice, kindness, and self-denial. She is the source of life and protection. Human beings could not survive and exist without her support and care. She is the embodiment of life itself.

The mother is a symbol of morality and dignity. Religions all over the world whether Christianity or Islam, accord very important place to motherhood, it is a holy task and a sacred duty. Maternity is widely exalted realm for the

woman. Hence, religious imagery sentimentalizes and idealizes motherhood. Maternity is a powerful spiritual path for women to take³.

The mother's role is not limited to the idea of the responsibility of carrying and birthing a child, but it also includes offering this child all life's necessities, including a safe, stable home adequate education, and unconditional love, and support. Hence, the word mother not only signifies the action of giving birth, but also the action of loving, protecting and nurturing offspring.

Motherhood is a crucial subject in modern drama. Motherhood and family life embody an important dilemma, one which reflects the strains of a changing family structure.

Motherhood is often defined as an automatic set of feelings and behaviours that is switched on by pregnancy and the birth of a baby. It is an experience that is said to be profoundly shaped by social context and culture. The main role for the mother is carrying the responsibility of rising a child with care and love in good manner and condition. This work is seen as a natural duty for mothers to do⁴.

As Toni Morrison said mothering is "a liberating thing", hence motherhood liberates the woman to a free self. The woman by all means and feelings tries to convey the importance and joy of birth. The mother must know how to rear her children with values that she thinks are important⁵.

Literary and artistic works through the ages dwell on the attributes of motherhood and family relationships. The family is the central institution of society, and the household is the main unit of activity, and the family relationships are the chief channels.

BERTOLT BRECHT'S *MOTHER COURAGE AND HER CHILDREN*

Brecht was one of the most prominent figures in the 20th century theatre. Brecht, the German playwright was born in Augsburg, Bavaria on February 10th, 1898. As a playwright, he was deeply influenced by Charlie Chaplin and Karl Marx. This strange combination of inspiration produced Brecht's twisted sense of humor as well as the political beliefs within his plays. He challenged Aristotelian model of tragic destiny⁶.

Brecht examines the different nature of war in his plays. He examines civil war, war of conflicting ideologies, and war between scientific truth and religious certainties. He calls for peace and condemns war in all its forms. The horrors of war are represented mainly in *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1941), *The Caucasian Chalk* (1944), *The Life of Galilo* (1938), and *Drums in the Night* (1919).

Brecht's play touch upon a variety of themes, they deal with the infirmity of the present world. He deals with life in a very realistic and authentic manner. As a dramatist, he is committed to the faithful dramatization of human situation. Other themes that he deals with like religion, war, capitalism, and socio-economic conditions of everyday living⁷.

Brecht as a playwright is very famous for his revolutionary ideas about theatre. He developed his own theatrical style and various techniques. He attempts to create a revolutionary theatre. He began theorizing about theatre and politics in his early twenties. He is well-known for developing a new style of theatre which is termed Epic Theatre. By using this new technique, Brecht wanted to distance his audience from the empathy they felt in dramatic theatre so that they would remain conscious of the problems of the dramatist was exploring⁸.

In Epic Theatre, the social problem addressed should not be resolved in the theatre, but people should be inspired to go

out and solve it. Brecht's wish is to move the theatrical spectator away from empathy or identification with the play's characters. He wants his audience to motivate their minds and not their hearts. Brecht's style attempted to remind the audience of their being in a theatre watching a play⁹.

One of the most important principles was what Brecht called the *Verfremdungseffekt* (translated as "defamiliarization effect", "distancing effect", or "estrangement effect". So, the spectator in the Epic Theatre is an observer, or he questions and analyses what is happening, using reason instead of feelings.

Epic Theatre is a term that the German playwright Bertolt Brecht in 1920s, applied to his plays. By the word "epic", Brecht signified primarily his attempt to emulate on the stage the objectivity of the narration in Homeric epic... to encourage his audience to criticize and oppose, rather than to accept the social conditions and modes of behaviour that frequently, and his Epic Theatre has had an important influence on such playwrights as Edward Bond in England, and Tony Kushner in America.

Brecht wanted his audiences to adopt a critical perspective in order to recognize social injustice and exploitation, making the theatre a spring-board for effective change in the world outside. Brecht attempts in his plays to show the utter rottenness of bourgeois, and capitalist society. He has a belief that audience will see a new society that will replace the old one and this will be achieved by justice.

Brecht wanted to inspire in his audience a willingness to change people's attitude. He wanted the audience not to keep silent, but to take their roles and have their attitude in exposing the ills of society and understanding the difficulties of social changes. By declaring their attitude about these difficulties in order to change, hence one can begin to alter¹⁰.

MOTHER COURAGE AND HER CHILDREN: OVERVIEW

Brecht wrote *Mother Courage and Her Children* in Sweden during his exile for Germany. It is divided into twelve scenes with nine songs. The play had its first performance in Zurich on April 19th, 1941. The play's performance in Paris in 1954 and in London in 1956 brought his international reputation.

Brecht wrote the main plays of his epic theatre, which also represented the high points of exile drama *Mother Courage and Her Children* is one of his exile drama which he wrote in 1938 and 1939. The play was filmed and translated many times. The play is about the thirty years war. Being aware of religion, it is started as a holy one. Poland was catholic while Sweden was protestant. Though it did not remain wholly a religious war because the religious issue became complicated by political and economic considerations¹¹.

The play can be treated as anti-war literature as well as anti-Nazi literature. The action of the play takes place over the course of 12 years presented in 12 scenes. Brecht's hatred of war finds a central place in the entire play. Brecht anti-war theme in the play evolves as one concerning motherhood.

Mother Courage and Her Children tells the story of a travelling woman merchant who earns her living by following Swedish and imperial armies with her cover wagon and selling them supplies such as clothing, food, brandy etc. As the war grows heated, Mother Courage finds that this profession has put her and her children in danger.

Mother Courage and Her Children is among Brecht's most famous plays and it is considered one of the twentieth century's landmark drama and a potential condemnation of war. Brecht used an epic structure so that the audience focuses on the issues being displayed rather than getting involved with the characters' emotions. The play tackles many themes to show the dreadfulness of war and its impact on society and the poor particularly. The play also deals with the idea that virtues

are not rewarded in corrupt times. In addition, the play deals with the theme of motherhood and capitalism¹².

The protagonist in this play is a woman whose name is Anna Fierling, but she is generally known as Mother Courage. She has three children two sons and a daughter. Each one of her children has a different father. Eilif her eldest son and the second is called Swiss Cheese and the daughter is Kattrin, she is dumb but not deaf.

Though Mother Courage is accused of not willing to send her sons to war which feeds them, yet she attempts to profit from the war and is balanced by losses of her children one by one at the close of the play. She spins her hope on trade for which she set out from her peaceful hometown into hell of war.

Brecht intends to show his audience the effect of war. War is a destructive form of capitalist activity. The rich and powerful may profit out of it while the poor people do not make the big profits of it. Brecht's intention is to work against the Nazi attitudes of the Germans.

The mother left her children to the mercy of war, as she herself has chosen to join it in order to maintain the living of the living of the family. The mother exploits the war by profiting from it, but the war exploits all her children, letting her alone with her wagon.

Critics consider *Mother Courage and Her Children* a tragedy, from the point of view that Mother Courage fails to learn. And also the play is perhaps Mother Courage's tragedy. After all, her children die and she loses all her children by trading during the war. Brecht used many alienation devices in the play; it includes songs to comment on action. The songs are used to illustrate the action and are regarded as an ironic commentary on the actions. He believed that theatre must make people aware of social abuses and provoke them to change the society, moral diseases, and social ills¹³.

The song that Mother Courage sings at the beginning and at the end of the play is an ironic commentary on the war

on "religion" while the "Song of the Grand Capitulation" describes life as full of broken hopes and dreams.

Brecht uses historical material in his plays as an important part in his Epic theatre. He believed that the distancing effect of history can make the audience more aware of the modern world. Brecht did not choose World War I for his sitting, he thought that the war was still too recent for audience to observe the events on the stage dispassionately and to learn from the play. The thirty years war was the most destructive war in German history before World War I.

One of the most important themes in *Mother Courage and Her Children* is the maternity motif. Motherhood is a central theme in this play. The play examines not just a capitalistic system, but also the domestic level. Brecht deals with the impact of war on the family, particularly on the mother and her children and especially when this mother is a breadwinner. The mother is the pivot of the family who takes two roles as a mother who takes care of her children and maintains their living. Brecht tries to illustrate how the individual lives in this society and how the capital system affects the individual and the family as a whole.

THE PORTRAIT OF MOTHER IN *MOTHER COURAGE AND HER CHILDREN*

The play opens with the conversation between recruiting officer and an army sergeant. The recruiter complains bitterly about the difficulties of recruiting an army. While they are standing and talking in the freezing now, Mother Courage, the protagonist enters the stage with her three children. She is on cart with her daughter, while her two sons pull the cart. Mother Courage introduces herself through a song as a businesswoman, she sings:

Mother Courage: It's Mother Courage with her wagon full of the finest boots they make. With crawling lice and looted

cattle. With lumbering guns and struggling kit. How can you flog them into battle unless you get them bats fit? (Sc.1, P.4)

It is clear that from the song, the mother is a businesswoman and her business deals with war as a breadwinner: "Mother Courage is a small or not very big business person, parasitically living off the war with her wagon. She is committed to the business of war and is meticulous of the profit from war".

Mother Courage tells her story; how she gets her nickname, she runs through the bombardment to sell her loaves of bread before they spoil. Her thoughts are not on courage, but on business. This is the first fact about Mother Courage's thoughts and character. So, she got the nickname, under peculiar circumstances, risking her life to protect her goods and thus she earns her a nickname.

Mother Courage tries to make a sale for the recruiting officer, but he is more interested in her son than the belt buckle she tries to sell him. With great resistance, Mother Courage insists that she will not let her son serve in the army. She reacts violently, pulling a knife and informing the soldier to keep away from her children. With anger, she tells the sergeant that:

Mother Courage: pulls a knife: Go on... I'll slit you open, trash. I'll teach you to make war with him. We're doing an honest trade in ham and linen, and we're peaceable folk.

Sergeant: Peaceable! I don't think, look at your knife... you were admitting you live off the war, how else should you live, what from? (Sc.1, P.9)

Brecht depicts the mother a businesswoman hopes to profit from the war while keeping her children out of it. Her maternal instinct leads her to pull the knife in order to make aware to the sergeant's temptations¹⁵.

Mother Courage is a trader serving with the Swedish army. She is trying to make a profit out of the war to maintain her living and her family living. She finds the war her only way

to live. Mother Courage resolutely asserts that she is not interested in politics and only is interested in the survival and care of her family.

Mother Courage loses her eldest son, Eilif, who is taken away by the recruiting officer who tempts him with tales of glory of war, money, and women, so while Mother Courage's attention is diverted by the sergeant who says that he wants to buy a buckle.

Mother Courage's maternal instinct does not protect her son from war because she pays attention to her work. She loses Eilif to war before the end of the first scene, although she claims she is working to maintain their living. The mother is in conflict between motherhood and business. Mother Courage is busy with her business as Eilif is led away. "Despite her cleverness, the men of war, who locate, as her vulnerable point the profit motive of a trades-woman, eventually, outwit Mother Courage... She loses her brave son Eilif, while engaged on a business deal over the belt."¹⁶

This is the first loss. The mother has to pay for the war, hence she profits from war as her business deals with war. The price here is her oldest son. The mother has failed to achieve her stated aim even before the end of this scene.

Brecht depicts the mother's character to be a ruthless businesswoman and a protective mother who is determined to make a living from the war, while at the same time keeping her children out of it. She is portrayed as a strong, shrewd person her motivation is to survive at all costs.

The play is considered a parable and didactic to teach the audience the lesson that Mother Courage failed to learn. The events in scene two took place during the years 1625-1626. Mother Courage crosses Poland in the train of the Swedish armies. Two years have passed and Mother Courage is about to meet her son Eilif again.

Mother Courage is a clever businesswoman. She is strong and has influential presence from the moment she

appears. After considerable bargaining, the cook buys the bird from her. The cook admires her ready tongue and the shrewdness with which she exploits for business purpose¹⁷.

Eilif is a hero, the general glorifies him for his heroic deeds. He killed some peasants and stolen their oxen. The general is very happy and delighted with Eilif's heroic deeds. He invites him for dinner. In the context of war, Eilif's courage, shrewdness and murderous activity are glorified and rewarded by the general. Eilif's illegal robbery is considered a heroic deed and he is rewarded, but these deeds will lead him to his downfall in peacetime.

Brecht condemns war; the general is living in luxury while his army eats moldy bread. Eilif slaughters the peasant's oxen in order to feed the hungry army. The first military deed the play introduces is not a military activity, but an illegal robbery to support the hungry army.

As a businesswoman Mother Courage puts herself in danger to sell her bread before they get moldy for that she is called courage, but as a mother she does not want her son to put himself in danger for courage. She scolds her son for engendering himself.

Mother Courage is still in Poland, accompanying the second regiment of the Swedish army. She is making a good business, her son Swiss Cheese has become paymaster for the Regiment because of his honest personality.

After hearing the story of Yvette Pottier, faller woman, Mother Courage's wisdom makes her advise her daughter Kattrin. She also warns Yvette not to mention any love affair in front of her daughter, she is innocent girl. As a mother, she is worried about her son as well as her daughter, she puts some ashes of dust on Kattrin's cheeks in order to make her look dirty so that no soldier will feel sexuality toward her. The mother is worried; her son's honesty makes her afraid that he would risk his life in order to save cashbox. Swiss Cheese considered himself responsible for saving the cashbox¹⁸.

Mother Courage leaves to buy Catholic flag. She is a practical woman. She is a flexible kind of person who can adjust herself to the changing circumstances. She is not fanatically devoted either to Sweden or to her religion. She wants to buy a Catholic flag she changes her attitude.

Swiss Cheese not listen to his mother's advice and the Chaplain also advises him to beware of a spy whom he had been two days before. His worry and honesty putting his life under threat, he is taken into custody by the enemy while trying to save the regimental cashbox. Swiss Cheese will be free, if they pay the enemy two hundred guilders¹⁹. Mother Courage must buy Swiss Cheese's freedom. But she is thinking about the amount of the money and the source as well as, she states that:

Mother Courage: But where's money to come from? Hasn't Yvette been around? I ran into her, she's got her hooks on some colonel, may be, he'd buy her a canteen business.

The Chaplain: Do you really wish to sell?

Mother Courage: Where's money for sergeant to come from?

The Chaplain: What'll you live on, then?

(Sc.3, P.37)

Mother Courage is torn by the question of the Chaplain "what'll you live on, then?". The possibility of saving her son by selling her wagon is hard situation for her and also hard decision to take.

Using Yvette as a messenger to free Swiss Cheese's life from the sergeant and the soldier who is called the one-eyed man. Mother Courage is bargaining for Swiss life, she offers only hundred and twenty. Mother Courage complains the years working alone without a husband to support her.

She is confronted with genuine dilemma between rescuing her son and the responsibility of her family in future. Moreover, she has an unemployable daughter round her neck. She is forced to haggle for the life of her son, because she is thinking of her living and her daughter living as she is a single

mother; she has a responsibility to maintain her living and her daughter living.

Mother Courage is too late, as she says "I bargained too large". Her greed for profit takes over. Concern for the family comes second. The safety of her son's life comes second after the safety of her wagon and livelihood. She loses the son whom she loves because she is focusing on the superficial aspect. When she is introduced to Swiss Cheese's dead body, she is forced to deny her son, in order to protect herself and her daughter as well as her future living²⁰.

The notable point here, Mother Courage has sacrificed her son to the wagon, and thus she becomes a distorted human nature. She in fact heartless and her mental strength is denying her son's dead body giving her a heroic stature. Her selfishness leads to the death of her younger son. She deceives herself that making money is the only goal of life.

Brecht clearly shows that war is a big business for capitalism, but not for poor people. Mother Courage is presented in her social situation both as an exploiter and as exploited. As a business person, she wants to get money out of war, which is imposed by the people in power for their own profit. In addition, she becomes the victim of establishment.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SONGS IN THE PLAY

"The Song of the Grand Capitulation", Mother Courage sings this song to advise the young soldier not to curse the captain because his own life is more important than money. This song reveals both Mother Courage's vulnerability and capitulation. The story of the song is the story of Mother Courage's life who has submitted her youthful idealism and self-confidence to the need of the circumstances and compromise with the system²¹.

Mother Courage's "The Song of the Grand Capitulation" describes life as full of broken hopes and dreams. The song and the advice which she gives to the young soldier show the

necessity of surrounding to those who are powerful. It is hopeless to expect justice from the captain.

She is an intelligent woman whose words and her song affect the young soldier. She and the same businesswomen had past experiences make them very sure and complaint or protest to the authority is futile.

Katrin rushes with no moment of hesitation inside risking her own life to rescue the child. Katrin displays more natural maternal feeling than her mother. She really deserved the concept of courage's name than her mother. She does not, Mother Courage, sympathize for those whose wounds need to be bandaged. She says that she has to think more of herself than to think of the others "got to think of myself" (Sc.5, P.49).

Mother Courage is very selfish, she the true mother hesitates to save her daughter's life when she rushes to the burning house to save the crying baby. While Katrin does not hesitate in saving the life of unknown baby. Katrin and her maternal emotion is obvious here. Her action stems from a sense of motherhood while her mother's action is cruel callous and brutal²².

Katrin's kindness makes her very happy to make the baby in her own lap. She is fully aware of terrifying effects of the war on people. Her capacity prove her true consciousness of motherhood. Katrin returns, bleeding from a wound above one eye. Mother Courage responses angrily to find her daughter hit between her eyes.

Mother Courage's response shows that she has a great maternal love. Katrin hopes to be married and have her own family, but her chance to get a husband is not easy after this accident. Katrin has a great desire for a husband and children, but this desire is also hindered because her mother is dealing with war and she may wait until peacetime.

Mother Courage curses war, she is very worried. Katrin looks ugly because the scar is disfigured her face. It is hopeless to find a husband. She feels very anxious about her daughter,

because she has a great desire for family and children. Lamentation of Mother Courage and she curses war. Katrin's dumbness had come from the war because a soldier has thrust something into her mouth when she was a little child.

Business takes Mother Courage away from her children. In every hard situation, she is taken by her profit motive makes her miss her son's arrival. Whenever she is needed by her children, she is busy with her business²³.

Mother Courage has failed to achieve her goal to get her business and her children's safety. Mother Courage attempts to protect her children, but her profit motive makes her lose them. Eilif, the hero is executed for his heroic deed. Swiss Cheese is honest, he lost his life because of his honesty and his mother did not pay for the captain money that he asked her for. And her daughter Katrin also has lost her life for her own kindness, all she wants to be a mother and to have a family. She does not want to be like her mother unsettled and movable from one place to another in horrors and unstable life.

Mother Courage loses her dumb daughter, Katrin when she has been on business purchase in the town. The dearest child has gone, now she is alone, but nothing stop her. She hardens herself to follow the army once again to start up again in business, without realizing the unprofitable and destructive nature of war.

Despite her claims to protect her children from war, she loses them from it. Mother Courage actually destroys herself, family and learns nothing from the travails of the situation which she encounters²⁴.

CONCLUSION

The role of the mother in the family and her relationship with her children is a crucial topic in literature as it is in real life. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, witnessed enormous changes which affected life in its different aspects. In

an era of wrenching social, political and economic changes, the dramatists write to explore social realities and problems.

Brecht's *Mother Courage* benefits from war. Brecht explores that war is a great capitalist system; the false hope of the mother can profit like the rulers who profit from the system of war. *Mother Courage* represents the world of capitalism who makes use of its essential contradictions. She finds her personal profit in the destruction, misery and exploitation of the others. Poverty is the core of the issue, the issue that leads most of women to abuse their children for their profits.

If she had not made the mistake of haggling too long over the price of her son's release, she could have saved him and the Canteen, the means of her survival. The mother and the children are victims of the society. Born in poor conditions lead the mothers to occupy immoral professions or working with ill payment midst of living and opportunities for good living.

The lack of financial support, war and poor conditions affected the mothers and their children. Each mother bears the burden of a family alone without a father to share the responsibilities. The mother's economic requirements drag them to lead unhealthy life.

Finally, the mothers face their tragedies, although they strive to survive and maintain their children's living. The restless and the confused life which the mothers lead had shaken the audience's senses and minds.

Notes

¹ Carl Martin and Henry Bial, *Brecht Source Book*, (New York: Routledge, 2000), 1.

² *Ibid*, P.2.

³ Shari L. Thurer, *The Myths of Motherhood: How Culture Reinvents the Good Mother*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 2.

⁴ *Ibid*, P.5.

⁵ Ibid, P.6.

⁶ Martin Esslin, Brecht: The Man and His Work, (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1961), 5.

⁷ Ibid, P.7.

⁸ Ibid, P.10.

⁹ Bertolt Brecht, Brecht Epic Theatre, Trans. John Willett, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 33.

¹⁰ Ibid, P.35.

¹¹ Louis Joseph Chandra, "Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children*: An Anti-War Drama", Lapis Lazuli- An International Journal, Vol.31, No.11, Spring 2013, 6.

¹² Ibid, P.8.

¹³ Ibid, P.11.

¹⁴ Bertolt Brecht, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, Trans. By John Willett, (London: Methuen, 1980), 4. all subsequent quotations cited in the text are taken from this edition.

¹⁵ David Wilson, Complex Seeing: An Inquiry into the Selected Plays of Bertolt Brecht, (Germany: Lambert Academic Publishing Company Ltd, 2012), 74.

¹⁶ Ibid, P.80.

¹⁷ Ibid, P.82.

¹⁸ Ibid, P.88.

¹⁹ Noorbakhash Hoot, "The Swamp of Self-Deception in Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children*", International Journal of Business and Social Science, Vol.2, No.24, 139.

²⁰ Ibid, P.140.

²¹ Ibid, P.142.

²² Ibid, P.150.

²³ Ibid, P.151.

²⁴ Ibid, P.153.

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