

A Defense of Mother Courage

Maryam Karaminezhaad Ranjbar

Department of English Literature, Faculty of Humanities, Vali_e_Asr University of Rafsanjan,
Main Administrative building, 22 Bahman Square, Rafsanjan, Kerman, Iran.

Soheila Faghfori

Ph.D., Professor, Department of English Literature, Faculty of Humanities, Vali_e_Asr
University of Rafsanjan, Main Administrative building, 22 Bahman Square, Rafsanjan, Kerman,
Iran.

Abstract

This paper has been done in the attempt to defend Anna Fierling, nicknamed Mother Courage, the title character in Brecht's epic drama Mother Courage and Her Children, who has been vastly criticized for her choices. The fact that she is absent when she loses both of her sons and her only daughter because of an extreme devotion to her job and a presumed strong love of money makes her a proper subject for condemnation. What this paper intends to do is to clarify the turmoil of a woman in the time of war and her confusion about her true identity according to the views of Bertolt Brecht. Living in a time and place that everybody is fighting for survival, Courage is definitely confused whether to take the role of a man or a woman in her family. This identity crisis and the problems and difficulties that are embedded in the nature of any war, definitely has an impact on the people who endure it, making their decisions hard to understand for an observer. As a result, this paper at least will explore some of mother's Courage's shortcomings based on the problems she had to overcome singlehandedly and it will be accepted that the name Mother Courage does in fact suit her. To do so, this study consists of three parts, the first is the introduction which aims to introduce Brecht's ideas of war and position of women in it, the second part tries to show how he utilizes the elements of epic theatre in order to express these ideas, and in conclusion the play Mother Courage will be analyzed to point out that much of the wrong decisions that courage made is the outcome of war.

Key words: Bertolt Brecht, Mother Courage, women in war, identity crisis

"Parachutists are dropped like bombs, and bombs do not need courage. Real courage would be refusing to get into the plane in the first place." (qtd in Thomson. 27)

Bertolt Brecht

Introduction: War and Women

Mother Courage is a play set in the European thirty years war, giving its writer Bertolt Brecht a platform to voice his hatred of war, his pro-Marxism ideas and his deep detestation of capitalism. One of the ways he chooses to reflect the ugly face of a society afflicted by war and the urge for social reform is through the character of Mother Courage. Among all the problems that Brecht masterfully reflects in his play Mother Courage and Her Children, the problem of women during and after war seems to have a greater significance. Trapped in an environment that mostly men are expected to provide the family with their financial needs and mothers are seen as a source of emotional support for the children, Courage is clearly in the middle of an identity crisis playing the roles of both a man and a woman. Under the weight of her responsibilities she does everything in her power that she believes can keep the family going, even wish for the war to go on.

Anna Fierling Known as Mother Courage throughout the play is a sample of those few who are wrongfully under the impression that they can profit from the war. There is an interesting part in the play which clearly displays how deeply are the lower class in the dark about the true nature of war and it is when in scene one the sergeant says,

“What they could use around here is a good war”....“You know what the trouble with peace is? No organization. And when do you get organization? In war... In a war, everyone registers, everyone’s name’s on a list. Their shoes are stacked, their corn’s in the bag, you count it all up – cattle, men, et cetera – and you take it away! That’s the story: no organization, no war! (Bentley, Scene one, 13)

Brecht however, lived in Germany most of his life and experienced two World Wars and believed that war is only there to destroy. He states in his commentary on Mother Courage that no effort was too great in the struggle against war. Brecht chose to write Mother Courage and Her Children with the theme of the devastating effects of war and completed it on the outset of World War II.

Throughout the story of the play it becomes clear that Brecht believes war deceives people. Being a lifelong socialist and a strong believer in Marxism, Brecht blames the super powers for making people accept that peace is not the best way to live. People are therefore blinded to the fact that war is completely futile and a vicious loop of capitalism in which there are no winners. They make people like Mother Courage believe that war is the best and most organized way of living. Brecht argues that only in a capitalist society people would be so much separated from humanity that their preoccupation with money would even take them away from their children or as he puts it, Mother Courage haggles while her children die.

The war also encourages soldiers deceptively into believing that, “It means money. It means fame.”(Bentley, Scene one, 18) And this wrong perception of war made soldiers willingly fight a war they did not believe in. Mother Courage’s son went to fight the war not for his strong

Protestant beliefs but because he did not have anything other than ambitions. Eilif the older son in particular, fought the war for the love of becoming a hero and having more money than what they currently had. These misleading representations of war caused Brecht to make it his duty to point out the horrors of war and emphasize that virtues are not rewarded in corrupt times using epic structure. He masterfully renders the life of Mother Courage in his play and how she loses all her three children as results of their virtues, bravery, honesty and kindness.

As far as the question of women is concerned, Brecht considerably changes the stereotypical view of a woman and gives Mother Courage male characteristics. Dragging a carriage on to the battle field, doing business and neglecting the anguish of losing her children in the end, is even more than what a typical man can bear. At the same time she does look after her children, which is considered the most feminine duty that is expected from a woman. She has chosen to lead a decent life of a woman enduring the hardships of a war living in a canteen, as opposed to becoming a prostitute or abandoning her children. Although this can be taken as a proof that women are capable of doing anything that a man can, it seems as if her desire for financial survival manifests itself more strongly than her maternal instincts. It is true that any woman would drown herself in despair having lost all her children but it is her strength and courage that keeps her moving on knowing that life goes on. Therefore a redefinition of the role of women is one of the important themes of the play.

In order to enrich the theme of women's conditions in war time, Brecht creates another character who might be considered the most heroic of them all, Katrin, courage's mute girl. Katrin is by far the most sympathetic character of the play who completely loses herself to the war. She lost her voice during war as a child because of something that a soldier did to her. Her deep desire to find a suitable husband and start a family of her own has to be put off until after war. When in an attack by the soldiers she gets a scar on her face and loses her beauty to the war, her last hopes of marriage and having children shatters. She who loves children deeply, sacrifices her life by making noise using her drum informing the town's people that the soldiers are coming after them and their children.

Katrin is a perfect symbol of real virtue and goodness and her being dumb indicates Brecht's belief that real virtues are silenced in the time of war. Although she cannot talk, her death while warning the people in danger is the most eloquent act of the play. Katrin is the only character in the play who protests violently against war and could not remain silent. Even without having children, Katrin appears more motherly than Mother Courage who is not only the mother but also the financial provider of the family. Although Katrin loses her life saving the children, her death makes her the tragic hero of the play. Brecht introduces Katrin as the ideal person who despite being unable to cope with the harsh world of war, succeeds in saving the lives of the town's people and gets nothing in return.

Epic Theatre the Best Choice

Brecht found epic to be the best way to write his play since his main aim was to indicate and explore the difficult social situation at the time of war and not the personal emotions of the characters. Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* has all the elements that he believed a play with such a great social function should have. Instead of focusing on Mother Courage as the central character, the attention of the audience is mostly drawn to link all the characters affected by war to the main themes. The basic themes of the play are war, religion, family and how the characters interact through these themes.

Epic theatre is also called didactic theatre which aims to teach and instruct. Therefore it requires its audiences to think with mental and emotional maturity and judge without being biased and emotionally attached to the characters. One of the key elements that is used in the Brechtian epic is the alienation effect which can evoke the audiences' active involvement in judging the social situation presented in the play. Brecht is completely against the Aristotelian idea of imitation of life in the play which is a mere representation of world as it is. Aristotelian drama counts on the audiences identification with the characters for its ultimate goal of catharsis. On the contrary, Brecht believes that letting the audiences identify and bond with the characters of the play makes them biased in analyzing the situation and leads them to judge more emotionally rather than rationally.

As a solution, in order to eliminate identification he suggests constantly reminding the audience that what they are watching is a play being acted on the stage and it is not reality, using various means. Brecht believes that this technique makes each audience to take a step back and look at the situation objectively. By the use of alienation effect each audience can become a critique of the society and a potential reformer. In Brecht's own words, "Art is not a mirror to hold up to society, but a hammer with which to shape it."(qtd in McLaren and Leonard, 80).

To serve his objectives, Brecht also had to find a way to make the audience focus on the course of the events instead of anticipating what will happen in the end. Therefore he created another technique for which epic theater was perfectly suitable and that was jumps in time in various parts of the play. For example one of the most passionate parts in the whole play is the death of the younger son, Swiss cheese, but the writer does not save the best for last and the incident is presented on the stage in scene three. Brecht wants his audience not to see each event as something that happens at a certain point in time but a general bitter truth that generally takes place and something has to be done about it.

Another technique that Brecht uses to decrease the emotional involvement of the audiences is historicization. In this technique Brecht uses events from the past to create parallels to contemporary issues which also helps him in his attempt to decrease emotional response to the work. Even though the play's setting is the European thirty years war, a fight between the Catholics and the Protestants, it was actually written in the context of World War II and it indicates the consequences of war in general. The play even lacks the information about the cause of the war because what Brecht believes needs to be made clear is the war itself as a

catastrophe and its impact on the people living through it. He believes that there are no acceptable excuses to start a war. He does not want the problems that he points out in the play to relate only to a certain war but war in general. People at all times can relate to the hardships presented in the play. War for Brecht and Mother Courage as she perceives at the end of the play, is hell and a phenomenon that devours life.

Conclusion: Mother Courage a better mother or a businesswoman

Mother Courage is certainly not presented as a noble character. In fact Brecht deliberately created a character that is not heroic or above the average as were the main characters of Greek tragedies. He wanted his characters to become the subject of the audience's criticism and capable of evoking their active response. In the case of Mother Courage, Brecht invites the audiences to judge the actions of a woman who lives in a war stricken world. She keeps on making wrong choices and lacks the ability to learn from her mistakes. But what should not be overlooked is that her choices are always tremendously hard, brought about by the grotesque nature of war. The disturbing conditions of war time and the weight of her responsibility toward her children, also adds to the confusion. Needless to say that being a woman in a male oriented environment, she is faced with a whole range of other problems that a fair judge of Courage's personality should take into consideration.

Being under the pressure of a hard war life, Courage's choices and her beliefs are constantly contradicted by her. She simultaneously loves and hates war. She thinks that the peace time does not offer the same economic benefits, and she hates it because it destroys everything and has an unpredictable nature. What is quite clear throughout the play is that all Mother Courage wants is to take care of her children, not just their safety but also their financial needs. The main problem is probably her inability to prioritize or balance the amount of time and attention she attributes to fulfilling each of their needs. In the case of Swiss Cheese for example, she is asked to pay a price for his freedom. Although one most likely would think that being given a chance to buy a son's life, a mother would give her life to do so, Mother Courage ironically haggles so much over the price till it is too late and she loses her son. Brecht's intention through this situation was to make the audience aware that there is no way you can do business with the army in war.

In judging the character of Courage and her love for her children it should not be forgotten that as much as she would love to die instead of her son, she has another child to take care of. As both a mother and the bread winner of the family she has to be strong enough to cope with the death of her son and keep on going with the money that they can survive on. It is however true that she is mostly obsessed about the consequences of losing the material belongings that she has, rather than the consequences of hanging on too hard to them. She lost Swiss Cheese which is unbearably painful for a mother but at the same time she is thinking at least she will not have to sell herself as long as she has boots, buckles, beer and black market bullets to sell instead. Holding on to the dignity of herself and a daughter who is in her opinion in constant danger of

being physically abused by the soldiers, with a high price of a beloved child is nothing less than heroic.

The depiction of Anne Fierling in the play *Mother Courage and Her Children* is without a doubt that of a strong, amiable character. But what prevents the audience to empathize with her is that she has an awfully contradictory nature. Brecht portrays Mother Courage as a very complex character who does not surrender but at the same time acts cowardly. She believes herself to be clever who has gained all that she has because of her intelligence yet she seems to be blind in many cases. She is a tragic character who is torn between being a caring mother and a successful tradesman. She is a perfect example of those who believe they can prosper from war but the shattering of this illusion leaves them lonely, bitter and self-loathing. No matter how hard Brecht tries to reduce the emotional response of the audience, one cannot help sympathizing with Courage as a single parent in the time of war. She does not choose to take her children to the battlefield, she does it because she sees it as the only option she has. What she did and the choices she made were the indications of her struggle to survive and to take care of her children in the best way possible. Perhaps Martin Esslin gave the best description of the play when he wrote that audiences at *Mother Courage* were “moved to tears by the suffering of a poor woman who, having lost her three children, heroically continued her brave struggle and refused to give in, an embodiment of the eternal virtues of the common people and left the audience inspired by the woman’s courage and sent home admiring her fortitude, encouraged emulating her ineffably good qualities”(Brecht: *The Man and His Work*, Anchor, 1961)

References:

- Bentley, E. (1963) *Mother Courage and Her Three Children, A Chronicle of the Thirty Years' War*. Gover Press.
- Esslin, M.(1961) *Brecht: The Man and His Work*. Anchor.
- Esslin, Martin. (1963)"Brecht, the Absurd, and the Future." *The Tulane Drama Review*: 43-54.
- Friedrich Dieckmann and Marta Ulvaeus. (1999)"Brecht,s Modernity: Notes on a Remote Author." *The Drama Review*: 12-15.
- Mahmoud Daram and Abolfazl Ahmadinia.(2014) "Bertolt Brecht’s Mother Courage and Her Children: Marxist Concept of Alienation." *International Journal of Comparative Literature & Translation Studies*: 30-39.
- Martin, Carol. (1999)"Brecht, Feminism, and Chinese Theatre." *The Drama Review*: 77-85.
- McLaren, Peter and Peter Leonard. (1993) *Paulo Freire: A Critical Encounter*.

Noorbakhsh Hooti and Meisam Esmaeeli.(2011) "The Swamp of Self-deception in Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and her Children*." *International Journal of Business and Social Science*: 137-141.

Pollock, Delia. (1989) "New Man to New Woman: Women In Brecht and." *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*: 85-107.

Silberman, Marc. (1993)"A Postmodernized Brecht." *Theatre Journal*: 1-19.

Squires, Anthony.(2012)*The Social and Political Philosophy of Bertolt Brecht*. michigan: Scholar Works at WMU,.

Thomson, Peter. (1997) *Brecht, Mother Courage and Her Children*. Cambridge University Press.

Wilke, Judith. (1999)"An approach to Brecht's "Fatzler" Fragment." *The Drama Review*: 122-128.