

Marxism, Brecht and Epic Theatre

Jyotishman Kalita

Assistant Professor,

Department of English, DDU College, Delhi University, Delhi

Abstract: *In this piece, I will examine the relationship that Brecht shares with Marxism through his life and its influence on his dramatic form. And I shall try to explore if the dynamism of Marxism reflects itself in Brecht's 'epic theatre' or not. In other words, does the spectator produce himself and his history during the course of the action and become a catalyst of change in the real world or does he just stick to his position as mere a spectator?*

Key Words: *Brecht, Marxism, Epic Theatre, The spectator, History, Dramatic Form*

Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) is always the mentor to look up to for any budding dramatist or director. He is the man to worship if one wishes to make a career in the field of acting and direction. And he is the writer to study and read if one is inclined to effect a change in the society, as there is an ocean of inspiration and motivation stored up in his dramatic literary works.

Brecht was a man of distinct instincts. He wanted to do things differently and uniquely. He wanted to carve a niche in a society full of literary and dramatic conventions, traditions and limitations where to defy any single of them was like axing one's feet or committing suicide as there was the least chance to emerge as a dramatist or a writer in the public if one abused the predecessors and their works. Nevertheless, Brecht acted as per his instincts and came up with a novel and unique dramatic form, currently known as 'epic theatre' or 'modern theatre'. 'Epic theatre is the modern theatre', said Brecht. It was 'non-Aristotelian' in all its principles and methods. It was a clear break from the traditional theatre of Aristotle in the sense that 'it appealed less to the spectator's feelings than to his reason' (Brecht on Theatre).

Since we are talking about Brecht's 'epic theatre', his unique dramatic form which he picked from Epic Theatre and extended to such a high level that it became a platform upon which political battles could be fought dialectically; it would be unfair not to mention the real foundation upon which he erected such a solid edifice – the 'epic theatre'. It is Marxism. Brecht has been a life-long committed Marxist since his adult years. In almost all of his dramatic vis-a-vis poetic works, we notice a Marxist socio-economic-cultural theory working and shaping his art. To expose the superstructure and then reconstruct it was his goal that he pursued until his last with determination and utmost optimism.

Brecht based his theater on this Marxist proposition that this world is in its perpetual state of flux, change; and dynamism. Flux is an essential requirement for the humankind since it carries the seeds of further growth and development. It is a never-ending process, where the progression is possible only through a critical analysis of the world- man's social relationships add the base – the real source of social existence. And, to Brecht it seemed that such a critical analysis of the contemporary world was possible only through the 'epic theatre' since here the spectator is confronted and situations, and being distanced from the action thinks rationally critically over the course of action and leaves the theatre activated, charged-up and awakened unlike clam and peaceful in the Aristotelian Theatre – 'the Catharsis of pity and fear'.

In this piece, I will examine the relationship that Brecht shares with Marxism through his life and its influence on his dramatic form. And I will argue if the dynamism of Marxism reflects itself in Brecht's 'epic theatre' or not. In other words, does the spectator produce himself and his history during the course of the action and become a catalyst of change in the real world or does he just stick to his position as mere a spectator?

Brecht started giving shape to his literary works in 1918 when Modernism was at its peak. It was a transcontinental movement which gave birth to new ways of thinking, new styles and methods of writing and new outlooks to perceive life and its mysterious function. It was a movement that awoke people from their slumber and activated them into catalysts of change in and around the society so that a better and oppression-free world could be built. 'Epic Theatre' of Brecht is one such outcome of this major movement which aims at cleansing the world by revolutionising the audience politically. As Brecht puts it, 'For art to be "unpolitical" means only to ally itself with "The ruling Class" (Brecht on Theatre).

Brecht's epic theatre is the opposite of the old "dramatic" or "Aristotelian" theatre where the audience is detached from the action onstage; where the audience does not identify itself with the actors performing on the stage but rather distances; where there is no arousal or Catharsis of pity and fear, but of critical inquiry where reason is active; where the spectator does not empathize with the actors and feel in the same way as they do, but critically examine the action; where the spectator does not get transported into a foreign land or life as depicted onstage, but rather knows consciously that he is in theatre; where the events or action are not linked and do not proceed in a linear; manner, but rather proceed in curved and with interruptions and where there is no suggestion but argument, and where man is not shown as a fixed point but as a process. Thus, we see that Brecht rejects almost all traditional dramatic conventions dating back to the time of Aristotle and proposes new, or to say, 'modern' guidelines for the theatre that is very Brechtian in nature. *Walter Benjamin* calls such a watershed moment, 'the unseating of supremacy of tragedy and tragic inevitability.' while, we may call it 'a new theatre for a new world'.

Brecht always believed that reality is not static or fixed but changes everyday. Since reality changes its meanings and values at every other day, there must be a form or technique

which can capture that 'in-process' or varying reality and the 'epic form' was born. It could easily capture the progression that is integral to reality since this form is dialectical at root i.e. it works through arguments and contradictions that promise the perpetuation of new practices and values, hence keeping pace with reality.

This is why the Hungarian Marxist critic Lukacs was against Brecht and his 'unconventional' dramatic form. He wanted to see reality in "totality" that is to say, in a fixed and static form. He wanted the literature to be a 'realistic reflection' of the life outside so that it created an illusion, and we know that Brecht is dead against illusion since it negates the very Marxist proposition of 'dynamic variation'.

What is core to the 'epic theatre' is its alienation- effect or 'Verfremdung.' As Brecht Points out in 'A Short Organum for Theater', 'Verfremdung constitutes the central business in epic theater.' It's operation in epic theatre helps maintain a gulf between the actor and the spectator and historicise the event shown onstage. It gives sufficient time to the spectator to set up a critical mind set about the action played on stage. As Peter Brooker Points out in his essay "Key Words in Brecht's theory and Practice of Theatre", 'The new narrative content signalled by the term 'epic' was to be communicated in a dialectical, non-illusionistic and non-linear manner to reveal the workings of ideology'.

What Brecht intended was isolate the audience from the dominant ideology of the ruling class – Fascist regime in Germany to trigger a revolution and a monumental change in the society that, to him, was only accessible and feasible through epic dramatic form, since it motivated the audience to question, to argue, to assess the contemporary scenario of life around them. 'Alienating or estranging an event or character means first of all stripping the event of its self-evident, familiar, obvious quality and creating a sense of astonishment and curiosity about them'. (Brecht on Theatre).

In Aristoleian theatre we find that the audience rather experienced the feelings and emotions aroused by the action than examined them critically. *Oedipus Rex* can be taken as a good example or any Shakespearean tragedy, let's say, *King Lear*. It was so because the audience was already aware and familiar with the action and the dramatic form- fixed in time and space, linear is progress and bringing a downfall of a high stature man in the end – hence, beyond any astonishment or turning effect. It were the feelings and emotions that dominated the mind than reason – the rational faculty. Since Brecht's theatre is a left wing committed theatre, hence politically motivated that has an agenda to liberate and unfetter the people who languish under the ideological tyranny of the ruling class. It is utterly necessary for the people to think and take a stock of their present state of being, since it is only if they can think, they can exist as says *Descartes*. Here we see that thinking becomes the weapon to break off from the shackles of tyranny and dismantle the whole superstructure. It is this thinking to which *Raymond Williams* calls "intention" and in some sense "the process of determination" as the revolution of the proletariat will determine the course of further development in society.

To be more specific, the task of A-effect is to suggest new alternatives and possibilities or 'emergents' as Williams says that herald a new and a much better world where there is equality and liberty. Here we can also notice the dynamism in Brecht's theatre which corresponds to the original Marxist proposition that "the base" is never static or fixed but dynamic, always variable and adjusting itself. That the world is in a process to something more advanced, developed and refined state (Raymond Williams).

Since Brecht lays too much emphasis on reason and thinking ability of man, I would like to cite an example from Brecht's poetic works that makes it clear how much the word 'think' valued for Brecht. The name of the poem is '*General, Your Tank*' from Brecht's 'German War Primer' where he advises the soldiers to think in favour of humanity and give up warfare. The lines are:

"General, man is very useful
He can fly and he can kill
But he has one defect;
He can think."

Martin Esslin confers an alternative term to Brecht's 'epic theatre' that is 'open' theatre: He calls it an open theatre because it openly states its opinion regarding a particular issue however controversial or disputable, especially political. He further comments, 'what Brecht essentially created after a long experiment was a dramatic form in which men were shown in the process of producing themselves and their situations. This is, at root, a dialectical form, drawing directly on a Marxist theory of history in which within given limits man makes himself.' The relationship between base and superstructure is not that of "predicted, prefigured and presupposed content but of setting limits and existing pressures" in which "man produces himself and simultaneously his history" (Raymond Williams).

Brecht's this form, here, can be pitched against the naturalistic drama where man discovers himself in a given situation with a subjective and somber attitude. August Strindberg's *Miss Julie* can be a plausible example to prove the above point as we find here that both Miss Julie and Jean, her ambitious servant, discover themselves during the course of action of the play, whereas in Brechtian drama, we discover a critical and objective state of mind, both of the actor and the spectator where the act of 'making' or 'producing' happens than of discovering. 'The Good Person of Sechzwan' could be a good example for this as the act of acting out alternative roles for Shen Tech becomes an act of making or producing herself as well. Further more, the action is shown in the process of being made where the audience participates in the action from a distance and learns something new and uncommon. All of Brecht's plays closing with an open dialogue between the actor and the audience – with an open and formal invitation to consider or reflect on it as happens in the *Three penny Opera*, *Life of Galileo*, *Mother Courage and Her Children* and many other suggests this clearly that the spectator definitely ends

up shaping himself as well as his history which is central and integral to the Marxist cultural theory. Putting it in one way, the action is rather a process than a product or an 'object' as Williams mentions in terms of literary art form; an action that neither closes the characters in a closet nor fixes them in the conventions of time and space. The action flows and urges for participation, not involvement, of the audience and thus, the action stretches beyond the boundaries of the theatre and becomes a catalyst of change in society.

Another important thing that is inseparable to 'epic theatre' is 'gestus'- something distinct from gesture' as stated Lessing. To Brecht, it means 'attitude' that a performer must have towards his role or character. It conveys not only the meaning of the action but its point of being there as well. According to Brecht, every actor should develop an attitude or gestus towards the character he/she is going to play on stage. It helps take the audience in confidence that the action being performed has some significance and truthfulness in it, and the lines and dialogues spoken by the actor are not merely 'quotations' or derivations from the book but authentic, as if coming from the actor spontaneously. That is why Brecht always encouraged his actors to rehearse parts in their own accents rather than in character. He asked his talented actors to read dialogues in 3rd person account or in past tense so that they maintain an objective and critical relation with the role assigned and do justice with it.

Such an approach pitches him right opposite to *Stanislavsky*, a Russian critic on drama who unlike Brecht, encouraged his actors to 'live the part', to 'become the character', to empathize with the character' to develop an attitude for it whether on stage or off it. As Brecht wrote.

"He has merely to show the character not to experience it; but it does not mean that when he has to act passionate people he must himself remain cold. It is only that his feelings should not be fundamentally the same as those of his character, so that the feelings of his audience do not become fundamentally those of his character."

(Brecht on Theatre)

This further suggests that Brecht does not dismiss empathy or emotions completely from his unique dramatic form but uses it very rationally and objectively. The arousal of pity in his didactic plays has this function but unlike that of Aristotelian pity. Brecht's pity motivates people to think and ponder over the action than to drift away with it. *Mother courage and Her Children* is one such play where the pity for mother courage's plight works as a catalyst, as an awakener for the audience about war and its ravage them to numb the mind of the spectator to act rationally. This further proves that Brecht does not abolish emotions from this dramatic form but limits it since plays are not 'ice-cold intellectual exercises.' I would like to close this argument with Alfred D. White's comment who says, 'Emotion is allowed to exist in Brecht's theatre, but subordinated to reason.'

Brecht's theatre is non-realistic and non-illusionistic as we saw in the case of Lukacs. The play is just a 'representation' of reality, not reality per se. Actor's direct address to the audience,

harsh and bright stage lightings, the use of songs to interrupt the action, explanatory placards and rehearsals in third person or in past tense are all modern techniques employed by Brecht in his theatre attempt to inject this point in the mind of the spectator that he is sitting in a theatre, not in a real-life situation, hence not to give in to the action but to take over it. This, in turn, results in the critical analysis of the reality outside, since the represented reality' has some correspondence with the outside reality. Alfred D. White, on this remarks, 'Brecht's distortion of illusion by distancing is radically different and breaking because it refers the stage action to public's reality. The world of the stage no longer claims autonomy, and is 'merely' an art put on for the public, but continues to claim truthfulness and relevance. The actor's aim is not to hypnotize the audience into sharing what he feels, nor to address it with a voice of authority as we see in naturalist drama, but to make suggestions how to see things.

Brecht's 'epic theatre' provides both entertainment and learning. It is somewhat like what Philip Sidney remarked about 'poesy' that, it not only delights but teaches as well.' Epic theatre moralizes the audience less and instructs it more. It aims at entertaining the people via criticism and laughter and then moralizing it. In Brecht's words, 'we speak not in the name of morality but in that of victims who are often told that they ought to be contented with their lot, for moral reasons : (Brecht on Theatre). Galileo, speaking against religion in his thesis as it operates in perpetual exploitation of the working class in *Life of Galileo*, makes it clear enough. This outlook of Brecht stands him apart from Friedrich Schiller to who stated that theatre should be a moral institution than a suggestive and argumentative one. Brecht makes his frame of mind even more clear when he claims in the play, the Threepenny Opera that 'what we need first is grub, then morality follows.' All this is suggestive of his sincere commitment to Marxism and its principles to construct a classless society where all live with liberty and equality.

According to Walter Benjamin a contemporary Marxist and a good friend of Brecht, in his essay "The Author as Producer" states that Brecht's commitment to Marxism is original and authentic. He has a 'teacher's attitude, while giving expression to his art which is exceptional Benjamin comments, 'A writer who does not teach other writers teaches nobody' and he perceives Brecht as a 'true writer' who teaches everybody. Also, Brecht's dramatic form is a deliberate unseating of the supremacy of tragedy, tragic inevitability and historical inevitability. Through his theatre, Benjamin maintains, Brecht sowed this thought in the spectator's mind that history now could be different. *Mother Courage*, the play clearly passes it off where the tragic conventions of drama and historical inevitability that a tragic hero must be above average, high in stature and noble are rejected . Anna Fierling – *Mother Courage* is an average tragic figure.

Since we are discussing Marxism in context to 'Brechtian Theatre', this historical inevitability could also mean the perpetual exploitation and injustice done to the proletariat under the ruling class- Fascist and Nazi regimes in here. As we knew that 'epic theatre' is a catalyst of change and 'upsetting' in the society via a dialectical process that fuels up contradictions and arguments, Brecht believed that the tyranny could be done away with and demolished once the

audience was mentally and psychologically revolutionized and aware of its victimization and marginalization under the fascist regime. And epic theatre was an effective means to accomplish this mission of his. It put 'historical inevitability under acute criticism and consideration so that it could be actively replaced. This is why, *Walter Weideli* calls Brecht's 'epic theatre' 'a theatre of the proletariat which raises voice against the dominant system.'

Since Brecht raises voice against the dominant power structure on behalf of the proletariat, he can be pigeonholed as a propagandist a writer writing for a cause, and his plays can be categorised on 'thesis plays' as they propagate a cause. Brecht's plays indeed propagate a cause, in favour of humanity, but his plays cannot be seen as thesis plays' because a 'thesis play' proposes a problem and then backs it up with a solution. In the plays that Brecht scripted and directed, we do come across a problem, but we never find a solution at hand. It is we who have to work out a solution by putting our rational faculty to use.

Keith A Dickson in the book, *Towards Utopia* comments, Brecht is a utopian in the guise of a satirist.' He not just exposes the vices and follies of the dominant existing system, but aims at their eradication as well by making people aware of them. He puts Brecht in the line of some world renowned satirists namely Dryden who said that 'the true end of satire is the amendment of vices,' Defoe that 'the end of satire is reformation', and Swift that the satirist is inspired by a 'publick spirit', promoting men of genius to mend the world as far as they are able. Brecht can be prescribed as a composite of all these above mentioned satirists whose sole motive in life was the abolishment of vices vis-a-vis the reformation of the world. Brecht was committed to a social cause that was to capacitate and activate the proletariat to effect a monumental change in the society and reconstruct a classless society. And what made him successful in his mission utopia' was his 'epic theatre' which functioned as a motor or starter for the long-sleeping audience or 'the relaxed audience' as Benjamin puts it.

To conclude my marathon discussion on Marxism and 'Brechtian Theatre', I would like to state that what Brecht did or achieved, in his life time only he was capable of achieving it. He deposed Aristotle and his widely – acclaimed dramatic form from the throne to whom even Shakespeare had surrendered. He rejected almost all dramatic conventions and traditions and replaced them with extremely modern techniques and styles which ushered in a 'new era' a new theatre for the new world. As far as his commitment to Marxism is concerned he can be seen as a defiant, a challenger, a threatener to the established norms and values, and an awakener as well since the time he proposed an unconventional and unique theory of drama. His 'epic theatre' can be seen complementing Marxism and its main tenets. The dynamism or never ending process of history that gives way to new alternatives and possibilities which is heart to the Marxist theory of culture and society, reflect itself clearly and profoundly in Brecht's theatre. A-effect, appeal to reason than to feelings, free time and space conditions and critical inquiry on the part of the spectator, all this bear a testimony to the above fact.

To sum it up in one sentence, I can say that Brecht brought the contraries close together so that there would occur a head-on collision between them, resulting in something new novel and utopic as suggested William Blake "Without the contraries, there is no progression".

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