

THE CONCEPT OF SOCIALIST CRITICISM: READING BRECHT'S *The Threepenny Opera*

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ABSTRACT

*This paper is precisely an attempt to study and analyze how Bertold Brecht had upheld the socialist ideals in many of his writings in order to address the voice of the oppressed, particularly in his famous play *The Threepenny Opera* (1928). Bertold Brecht is best known for debunking and defamiliarising the parochial normative institutions such as religion and the capitalist system being established in favour of the oppressors. Brecht, therefore, makes a scathing criticism on the modern capitalist values and on the morals of the religion through powerful protagonists such as Macheath and Peachum. We can also understand how Brecht exposed the question of contradictory morality. He categorically presents that morality is a tool of the rich and the powerful to maintain their privileged status. Moreover, survival has to come before morals for the lower class citizens. Brecht's deep desire, therefore, is not to replace one set of hallow moral values with another. Instead, he categorically emphasizes the focus on the wellbeing of the poorest in society. He finally makes an apparent political note that the competitiveness of capitalist system would drive the people to do anything ruthlessly to make money such as stealing, killing, selling the body as though these acts are very normal.*

Key words: *defamiliarise, capitalist system, morality, religion, proletarian, authoritarianism, sociopolitical.*

BRECHT'S EARLY LIFE

After the First World-War, Brecht returned to university and started studying literature as he was interested in it and produced his first play *Baal* in 1922. Sociopolitical context is the main objective in his writings. He firmly explains the structure of the state and the proletarian struggle throughout his career. With the despotic authoritarianism, Hitler forced the people to be under his control particularly during 1933–1945 but in the result, the autonomy of the institutions such as arts, education, religion and politics were deeply affected. The Government kept an eye at the every step of these institutions. The intellectuals of the Left-wing understood the intention of the government and started to exile to other countries in order to protect their scholarship which later spread across the world. In this process, Brecht went into exile to Austria, Switzerland, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, England, then Russia and finally to the United States. While he was in the exile, he personally experienced political, sociological and different cultural issues and finally he was motivated towards the field of the theatre. Through his theatre, he wanted to politicise the audience rather than providing entertainment and wanted to stimulate their consciousness with his thoughtful dialogues and dialectical aspects. In Brecht's plays, it is clearly visible

that he was influenced by the theories of Karl Marx, Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci. Maria S. Redondo reminds that Bertold Brecht's evolving theatre aesthetic postulates the analytical and critical model which fundamentally disrupts and exposes the traditional drama and theatrical social practices. She also observes that Brecht's dramaturgy is a model for intervention and changeability which itself based on contradictions and his desire to stir up controversy and doubt. In other words, she says that his whole theoretical body focuses on the spectator, specifically on the spectator as (self) producer, i.e., as agent, as subject. She also points out that Brecht develops a series of techniques to encourage the spectator to think critically, to feel, to imagine, that is, to produce her/himself (Redondo 81).

BRECHT AND MARXIST IDEOLOGY

Even many of Brecht's poems also precisely convey the strong voice for the voiceless people. In his writings, he always talks about the issues of common citizens. He argues that the capitalist system exists on the pillars of entertainment, education and law and order to hide the exploitation of the working class. For this reason, Brecht's theatre exposes this kind of exploitation to persuade and inspire the spectators to question the state with his unconventional aesthetic style. Brecht's firm understanding is that Capitalism is fundamentally an agonistic form of economic and social organization, based on internal class warfare between the exploiters and the exploited and on external aggression towards competitors for markets or for sources of raw material or cheap labour. Brecht believes that the theatre provides entertainment for the spectator and also engages the spectator's reasoning rather than their feelings. Therefore, he uses a dialectic theatre that intellectually engages his audience through methods that echoed Marx's theory, man and society should be re-examined in order to create an equal society.

Brecht's plays are the modern tools for dialectics as they present a situation and give opportunity for rational debate among the audience and encourage workers to unite and rebel against the controlling capitalism. Carol Martin points out that theatre is an occasion for rational thought for Brecht and it is not emotional catharsis. She observes that it does not mean that Brecht's theatre is bloodless or without passion but she emphasizes that his theatre is an intellectual theatre that carries the feelings and emotions. She also states that Brecht's early productions are both riotous approval and disavowal and the plays are booed, cheered, yelled at one another, and discusses the plays well beyond the performance. Moreover, she believes that Brecht loves his theatre and wants his theatre has to be politically engaged, economically viable, and aesthetically 'entertaining' (Martin, 2).

BRECHT'S INFLUENCE ON ENGLISH THEATRE

English Drama seems to have been influenced by Brecht. As per the understanding of Martin Esslin that the future historians will definitely consider that it is possible the period since 1956 is the era of Brechtian influence on the field of the drama in soil of English. He states that the 'Brechtian' era in England stood under the aegis not of Brecht himself but of various second-hand ideas and concepts about Brecht, an image created from misunderstandings and misconceptions (Esslin 145).

Because of Tynan's frequent writings in *Observer*, the false notions against Brecht in the mind of the British had gradually vanished and also they recognized him as a great dramatist. Bertolt Brecht began to influence left-wing British dramatists from 1956 onwards both in the field of theatrical techniques and also in matters of ideology. Brecht's belief was accepted as though each play should be approached as a piece of history. The dramatic action was no longer centered on the great hero; on the contrary, his character was constructed to be little so as to invent the new catharsis unlike in the plays of bourgeois. Through Marxist point of view, Brecht ignored the concept of a hero in his plays. Faisal Al-Kasim emphasizes that Brecht's Marxist treatment of the hero influenced British playwrights such as Edward Bond, Arden, Howard Brenton, and Caryl Churchill and offered the theatrical means by which the above dramatists could convey critical attitudes towards idolatrous characters (Al-Kasim 118).

The state was giving subsidies to the theatres for more than a half century and also these theatres were used as tools in order to propagate importance of the state and how people had to obey it. At that time, the Berliner Ensemble, a German based drama troupe consisting of young, vigorous actors and actresses, came to England with radical ideas of antiestablishment became a historical moment in the modern British drama. Moreover, Brecht was the focal point and the young artists had realized and understood that the future of the modern drama would be an ideological tool to enlighten the audience.

It seems that the main intention of the Berliner Ensemble was to make the audience to think rationally and also to defamiliarize the conventional aspects of the traditional drama. In this way, Brecht was labeled as a cultural hero of Communist East Germany and eventually, he pleased the political right wing. Carol Martin asserts that the year 1956 was a significant one in development of left-wing movement and also opening the Royal Court in the month of April as a nursery of angry young playwrights and in late August and early September the first visit of the Berliner Ensemble to the Palace Theatre on Cambridge Circus (Martin 146).

BRECHT AND HIS SOCIOPOLITICAL ORIENTATION

As Brecht had been using radical political idealism in his writings, he never hesitated to question the inequalities and social evils throughout his life. In his late twenties, Brecht started to visualize a new theatrical system which would serve his political and artistic sensibility. He believed that the theatre is an ideological forum in order to disclose the ideology of Left and also the day-to-day unusual experiences of human beings. Carol Martin says that Brecht has very much interest in Piscator's productions at Berlin's Volksbuhne and also she tells that Piscator defined epic theatre as the text of the play disclosing its sociopolitical circumstances. Apart from that, she argues that his productions featured technical innovations such as the use of film and dramaturgical agitprop devices such as placards to disrupt conventional narratives. In the result, she clarifies that Brecht took from Piscator the term 'epic' and used it to describe the theatre form he had been developing. This is not just a matter of playwriting and dramaturgy, but also of acting and staging (Martin 2).

Brecht was very conscious to address contemporary social realities through the theatre of rationality. For that reason, Brecht challenged Aristotelian assumptions of drama and also developed theories which are very compatible to the present society. He emphasizes that stage-acting should make the spectator to be conscious, critical and also make them as active participants rather than passive spectator. In this context, Carol Martin remarks that Brecht was influenced by the philosophy of Marx in 1920s and understood that history is fluid, negotiable and controllable. Brecht, instead of the Aristotelian model of tragic destiny, believed that life is dialectic between rudimentary existence and the complexity of living 'First eating then Morality' is the Brecht's famous maxim which is propagated in many of his plays in different possible means (Martin 1-2).

Brecht put his maximum effort to dismantle the stereotype-sentimental participation of spectators and instead of that he gave the clarion call to his actors to address the spectators regarding social disturbances. He also believed that the situations of the characters had to be informed by historical and material way than the psychological and spiritual conditions. He used non-linear structure in his plays in order to keep spectator more conscious and more active.

BRECHT'S CONCEPTS OF HUMAN SOCIETY

The Threepenny Trail and *The Street Scene* are some of Brecht's well-known plays. In *The Threepenny Trail* he directly comments on the public sphere during the last years of the Weimar Republic and also exposes the status of the law, the media, the production and consumption of mass culture and the artistic freedom of expression. The purpose of writing this play is a lawsuit between Brecht and the producer of the film of *The Threepenny Opera*. Brecht gave the movie script to Nero Film AG, the film production company and Georg Wilhelm Pabst was the film production manager who made the film *The Threepenny Opera*. But the original stage version of *The Threepenny Opera* was changed significantly into a commercial aspect. To protect the original story line, Brecht made a legal claim against the film company for depriving him of the author's rights. After huge confrontation, the company settled the issue. At that time, Brecht wrote the play *The Threepenny Trail* for not only exposing the reaction of the mass media but also a complex reflection on mass culture in the public sphere.

Astrid Oesmann opines that by suing the film company, Brecht intended to unmask democratic institutions such as the judicial system and the press as essentially antidemocratic tools of capitalism. He also points out that though the bourgeois' ideology asks for equal protection of material and intellectual property, Brecht insists that his trial shows that capitalism ultimately wins over the artistic freedom in Weimar's courts and also the retrospective justification sheds light on his concept of public sphere. He concludes that Brecht, as a playwright, rewrote the trial and the media's reaction, turning the events into public and theatrical demonstration. Brecht openly called it, a sociological experiment (Oesmann97).

Through his personal experience with the state organized institutions, Brecht does

want to convey that the court of law is unable to give the appropriate and justifiable verdicts. He deliberately argues that the judicial system in Weimar Republic supported the capitalists rather than the people who really deserved justice. Hence, he adopted the theatre as a medium to expose the problematic contradictions of the contemporary society.

In Brecht's plays, day-to-day contradictions of the unprivileged are narrated but he never bothers about the solutions. It is evident that his main intention is to involve the spectator to think critically and find out the solution. He also believes that democratic society is a representation where selected people act for other people and also he adds that although representatives protect the interests of their constituents, they also fight for their own interests whether they might be the same or not. Theatre exposes this kind of arguments. The sole aim of Brecht's sociopolitical plays is to expose the unreal nature of the bourgeois public sphere to the common public. Oesmann points out that "Brecht seeks to drag unacknowledged theatre into the realm of acknowledgment. In response to the social and economic structures of the bourgeois culture in which he finds himself, Brecht locates theatre as social action occurring not within the cultural superstructure, but in society's base – meaning the street, the place where public life is at its most direct and physical" (Oesmann 100).

BRECHT AND EPIC THEATRE

Though the Russian, the American and the German theatres were different from one another, their contribution to the modern theatre was unforgettable. They introduced technical and artistic innovations and, many of the theatrical crew is followed at present time. The epic theatre is one of the modern inventions in the field of performance.

The epic theatre depicted a group of different characters representing the whole social strata that could show the objective reason for the support given by certain sections of German society to political movement on the basis of the entire class struggle; it presented the group of individuals as related to each other in the world of ideas as a result of particular social and political conditions; and more importantly, without the portrayal of a central hero that might have had the audience empathetically involved in an artificial stretching of the character, the spectator could learn about the different struggles of different characters, shown in the multiplicity of episodes, as something he had not directly experienced.

In order to avoid the impression that he denied the dramatic structure for the sake of his postulation of epic theatre, Brecht made a note hereby when he was revising his works in the later stages of his life. In Brecht's comparison of the different points of emphasis between traditional or dramatic theatre and his epic theatre, there are four main points which constitute the guideline of his theory, and serve as a key to understanding of his performance system. Firstly, dramatic theatre emphasizes action which presents a dramatic process such a process is carried out in epic theatre. The actor, as a cool-minded storyteller, narrates and comments upon that which the character portrayed has experienced. Secondly, dramatic theatre involves its audience with the dramatic events performed on stage and feel as if the characters feel, cry or laugh together with them. Epic theatre endeavours to keep its

audience as on-lookers by encouraging them to think and to make independent judgments about those events. Thirdly, dramatic theatre exercises emotional power to create theatrical illusions. The elaborate human emotions it presents are meant to attract its audience, to arouse their feelings in order to incite pleasure in watching the play. Further, epic theatre demands argument or criticism. What it presents is the reason why the audience should be emotionally touched, and what it seeks is its audience's obtaining a rational understanding of the events described. Finally, what dramatic theatre presents is human existence determined by thought. Everything is alterable in this world. In short, what Brecht postulates in his compilation of dramatic and epic drama is that dramatic theatre involves the audience's emotions in the experience of the characters and thereby fosters a passive acceptance of the existing order, while epic theatre distances the audience from the play and thereby promotes critical thinking and the will to change society. From these ideological differentiations, new law is formed while dramatic theatre moves in a causally coherent structure, the 'inevitability of development'. Epic theatre progresses in structural inconsistencies, one scene for the other, the latter one scene against the other and each scene for itself, a montage of such scenes.

The Threepenny Opera: A SOCIOPOLITICAL PLAY

The Threepenny Opera is one of the best adaptations of Brecht. It was originally written by John Gay in 1728 titled *The Beggar's Opera*. It is a comic farce which counters the Italian opera and also attacks the social and political climate of England at that time. It demonstrated a new genre, the 'ballad opera'. It is evident Brecht seemed to have faced acute altercation throughout his life as he posed challenging questions about the conflicts between society and morality are the two different constructs. Moreover, he began to envisage a new theatrical system in his late twenties and also he strongly believed that it would serve his political and artistic sensibility. He believed that the stage as a philosophical forum for thought provoking and he wanted to bring out theatre as a place where the spectator would realize the incidents that took place in their day-to-day life. He also defamiliarized the setting of traditional stage and rejected the conventions of Aristotelian drama. Moreover, he felt that his audience be intellectually stimulated, motivated to understand the strands of the unjust society where people had to feel the responsibility so as to fight for their freedom and their share of the common wealth in the state.

The Threepenny Opera is an early example of his 'epic theatre'. The main purpose of the play is to sharpen the spectator's critical ability with the new theatrical techniques rather than providing the entertainment. Besides, epic theater uses the devices, such as placards, asides to the audience, projected images, discordant music and lighting, and disconnected episodes to frustrate the viewer's expectations for simple entertainment. Brecht composed *The Threepenny Opera* based on his personal experience in Berlin during the Weimar Republic (1919–1933) when the country was struggling to establish a parliamentary democracy in the face of economic devastation, low morale standards and bitter military defeat.

The Threepenny Opera is not just a translation of John Gay's play but incorporation of new scenes and sets i.e., the London setting is replaced by Soho in the Victorian England. Bertold Brecht's main dramatic presentation dwells in transforming Gay's Macheath, a main protagonist, into his own Mackie Messier, known as Mack the Knife. The adaptation was crafted in the Weimar period of Post-World War I. The World War changed the thinking of human beings who started to look at society through a democratic perspective which toppled the kingdoms of Europe. New classes were emerged to replace the aristocracy and peasantry after

the World War I and these new classes were the Bourgeoisie and the Proletariat. New art movements called the avant-garde rose to address the new modern society. One of the big changes was the concept of 'hero' in plays and literature. Earlier, people thought of war as noble and honorable and they believed it was a matter of national pride to fight a war for one's nation. Usually wars raged from six to eight weeks of time. But, World War I lasted for a span of six years and destroyed the generation of European youth and also left a dirty scar across the earth particularly, France and Germany are remembered till today. In times of war, the concept of the hero and heroism was seen in a different perspective in literature and in drama. Mainly, the sociopolitical issues are taken into consideration in order to inculcate the social reality in spectator's mind. *The Threepenny Opera* was one of the plays which carried out great dramatic changes into the avant-garde.

Azher Suleiman observes that Brecht's version of the character bears little resemblance to Gay's *Macheath*. Moreover, he comments that Gay's Macheath is presented in *The Beggar's Opera* as a dashing romantic, a gentleman pickpocket, a Robin Hood type. However, Brecht's Mackie is unmannerly, cynical, and a toughened criminal. He is a gangster who refers to himself as a businessman and he always praises efficiency, organization, and even keeps books. Apart from that, he stated that the only difference between a gangster and a businessman is that the gangster is not a coward. Although he never enters the legitimate business world, he tells Polly, who is Mackie's girl-friend, that in a few weeks he will switch to banking because it is safer and more profitable (Suleiman 19). Brecht vehemently condemned the bourgeois' society of the Weimar Republic and the play stood out as one of the greatest plays even today.

The play is an exposition about society and it sensibly talks about beggars and corrupt officials. Azher Suleiman comments that one of the main questions posed by Bertolt Brecht in *The Threepenny Opera* is that how are goodness and love possible amid so much misery. Indeed, this and some similar moral and sociopolitical questions were preoccupied in Brecht's mind throughout his life. How, for example, can honesty and decency be demanded from people who have nothing to eat? And who, then, will be guilty of the evil they may commit? (Suleiman 23). Another major thing in the Brecht's plays is using the songs, which are very compatible to the scenes. The main intention of incorporating the songs at the beginning, middle or end of the scenes is to bring back the spectator from suspense. Bertolt Brecht's songs are thematically connected to the action and the plot as well.

CONCLUSION

The present paper has categorically analyzed how Bertold Brecht had advocated the socialist ideals in many of his writings as the voice of the underprivileged in the contemporary society. The main intension of the article is how Bertold Brecht criticized the institution of capitalism which is the uncivilized barricade between the capitalists and proletarians. Moreover, the paper defines how the capitalists use morality as a modern tool to maintain their honored status. Finally, the article makes an apparent political note that the competitiveness of capitalist system would motivate people to do anything ruthlessly to make money such as stealing, killing, selling the body as though these acts are very normal.

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