

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ANTI WAR SENTIMENT IN BERTOLT BRECHT'S MOTHER COURAGE AND HER CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

Bertolt Brecht is one of the most peace-loving playwrights of the world for all ages. Through the famous play *Mother Courage and Her Children* of which every event, attitude and emotion are affected by the circumstances of the war, he has called upon all the people and the nations of the world to establish a peaceful world where there will be no war, clash or collision among them. In order to aware the world people of the war he has presented the evils and vices as well as the devastation and destruction of the Thirty Years War of Europe of 1616-1648 that continued between the Protestant and the Catholic as an example so that the people can realize this. The main target of this paper is to present the miserable and distressed conditions as well as the misfortunes of *Mother Courage* and her children, representative of the common people that they suffer during the period of the Thirty Years War and to create an antagonistic feeling among the people to war.

KEY WORDS: Thirty Years War, Protestantism, Catholicism and Common People

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INTRODUCTION

Bertolt Brecht was an ideal socialist. Observing the clash struggle between the proletariat and the capitalist, he followed the views of Karl Marks and brought up an intention in his mind to change the social scenario through his writings. Moreover, having experienced the terrible devastation and destruction of the world and the mankind during the First World War that commenced from 1914 to 1920 and involved all the great powers of the world: that were assembled in two opposing alliances: the Allies (based on the Triple Entente of the United Kingdom, France and Russia) and the Central Powers (originally centered around the Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy; but, as Austria-Hungary had taken the

offensive against the agreement, Italy did not enter into the war) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_II), Brecht was suspicious of the future of the world.

The world and the people of the world were suffering from the restlessness before the First World War due to different social and political reasons, but the restlessness did not end after its accomplishment. In order to solve the existing problems and to establish peace, the world leaders imposed the 'Treaty of Versailles' on Germany and established the League of Nations in 1920. But the situation remained unchanged. Meanwhile, the Nazis Party took the power of Germany and Adolf Hitler became the chancellor of Germany in 1933. Becoming the chancellor of Germany, Hitler

challenged the crucial territorial, colonial and economic losses imposed by the 'Treaty of Versailles' on his country. Moreover, for the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), the Japanese invasion of China in 1937, Japanese invasion of the Soviet Union and Mongolia in 1938 and for other political issues the world experienced an unstable situation. This is for the reason; the world people as well as the world leaders felt the emergence of another world war. In this situation Bertolt Brecht wrote his famous drama *Mother Courage and Her Children* in 1938 and 1939 (Leach, 1994) on the background of the Thirty Years War of Europe (1618-1648). Through this play he has showed how the common people suffer from a war, how the proletariat people are tortured by the capitalists, how a war ruins a family and its member like the family of Mother Courage (Anna Fierling), how a war snaps the children likely Swiss Cheese and Elief as well as Catherine away from the loving care of their mother and compels them to face the immature death and Brecht has showed the world people how a war ruins a sweet dream of a mother like Mother Courage. At last he warns his audiences and the people of the world that the world is very near to another world war and he has urged the world people to be careful so that the professed world war could not be commenced.

DISCUSSION

Brecht has taken the European political situation of the seventeenth century as the background of the very play *Mother Courage and Her Children*. The emergence of the Thirty Years War, a war between the Catholicism and the Protestantism, (also known as War of Religion) that continued from 1618 to 1648 was the most significant issue of this century. Although the duration of this war is thirty years, Brecht has used only 12 (twelve) years that continued from 1624 to 1636 for the action of the play *Mother Courage and Her Children*. In this play he has presented the social scenario of Germany of his own time as well as social and political condition of Germany during the period of the Thirty Years War. He wrote the play in such a time whenever the world was going to face another world war.

When the curtain of the play *Mother Courage and Her Children* opens, it is found that an anti war

sentiment prevails among the common people who are not interested to become soldiers or do not encourage their children to be enlisted as a soldier. As a result the recruitment officer and the sergeant are very much frustrated as they are trying to recruit soldiers for the Swedish campaign in Poland, but have failed. Finding no way, they propose Mother Courage for her eldest son Eilif Noyocki in order to recruit him as a soldier. But she refuses their proposal vehemently and in a state of anger she says,

A soldier's life is not for sons of mine. [Scene-1, Line-158-159]

Rather as an owner of a canteen she calls upon the recruitment officer and the sergeant to have food indicating the premature death of a soldier,

So fill the hole up in your belly.

Before you fill one underground. [Scene-1, Line-67-68]

Through the above lines she indicates a soldier's life is very short on earth. In fact, there is no mother who loves her children. This is for the reason; she does not want her son to be recruited as a soldier.

But in spite of her utmost trying, Eilif decides to be a soldier. In the course of time Eilif proves himself as a competent soldier in the battle fields. But unfortunately, he is executed on the accusation of attacking a peasant family by which a woman of the family had fallen into death, although he has done it what a soldier does during a war time. So it is clear from Eilif's tragedy that a war always compels the young fellows like Eilif to face death, whose bravery can be compared to that of Julius Caesar who was a Roman general and statesman in 45 BC.

The death of Swiss Cheese, the second son of Mother Courage, is one of the most pathetic and heart-rending incidents of the play *Mother Courage and Her Children*. He was very honest that he inherited from his Hungarian father. Like his brother he also joined the army as a paymaster. As a paymaster he showed his honesty in the regiment. But a sudden attack by the Catholic force ruined his and his mother's dream. At the time of the invasion he tried to flee with the cash box of his regiment in order to save it, but failed and was arrested by a Catholic surgeon. By a trial he was executed at the firing squad. His mother tried to save him by any means. Even she wanted to pay

two hundred guilders to a Catholic colonel as a bribe, but all efforts turned into failure. So the tragic life of Swiss Cheese can be compared to the tragedy of the classical Greek philosopher Socrates who had to suffer tremendously for his honesty.

The misfortune of Katrin Haupt, the only daughter of Mother Courage, is also shocking the audiences. She is dumb, but a very soft hearted girl. Chattergi (1997, iv) says about her character, 'from the very beginning we learn of her kindness which her mother regards as a dangerous quality'. Her kindness becomes clear when she saves a child of a peasant family from a ruined farm house that is damaged by the Catholic attack. Even she is humming a lullaby to it having rocked it in her arms. Moreover, she has sacrificed her own life for the safety of the inhabitants and children of the people of the protestant town Hale. While she was beating a drum in order to wake up the town people climbing on the roof of a house, a Catholic captain fires at her and ultimately she embraces the death. Even Katrin's dumbness is the result of the war. During her childhood a soldier threw something on her mouth and consequently, she lost her power of speech. Before her death, Katrin also embraced a terrible experience. She was assaulted by a drunken soldier and was seriously wounded and for a scar created by the soldier on her forehead she looked ugly. For this reason her mother felt worried about her future and she said,

She's all but finished now; she'll never get a husband. [Scene-V1, Line-145-146]

So a war destroys those people who want to serve the people. In this respect Chattergi (Ibid, liv) says, 'Katrin performs the life-saving human miracle at the cost of her own life.' This is how a war snaps the children away from the loving care of their mother. For this reason Mother Courage says,

Curse the war. [Scene-V1, Line-150]

A war always causes a disaster, destruction, and devastation. It not only kills the soldiers and the people but also destroys a village, a town, a country or a civilization and even the earth as well. Besides, during a war time discipline breaks down entirely. In 1631 the Catholic force conquered Magdeburg under the leadership of General Tilly. As a result discipline experienced an unhealthy atmosphere by the adhoc nature of the 17th century financing.

Armies were expected to be largely self-funding from the loot where they operated and it created lawlessness and disorder severely. Consequently, his followers and subordinate soldiers started to plunder the wealth of the common people and destroyed the city. The commander also instigated his soldiers to continue such activities. In this connection the first soldiers says to Mother Courage,

The chief allowed me one hour to plunder the town, it's a swindle. [Scene-V, Line-4-5]

When the Catholic soldiers launched an attack at Magdeburg, a farm house was entirely ruined. As a result a number of persons were wounded. Even a baby was crying in pain which fell in a trap for the aggression. So the play also makes it clear that the children are also victims of the war.

A war also creates starvation and famine. The farmers cannot plough their lands and consequently, they cannot grow food and the ultimate result of this situation is famine which compels the people to face death. In the very play Mother Courage and Her Children it is found that Mother Courage is a canteen woman and she sells foods. But in spite of being a supplier of food, she has to suffer from starvation. She, along with her daughter Catherine and the Cook remain hungry for a long time and become very weak for want of food. As a result they beg alms at the personage. The Cook also sings 'The Song of the Wise and Good' in order to attract the attention and sympathy of the inhabitants of it.

Please help us now: our need is dire. [Scene-IX, Line-150]

Besides, during a war time people become merciless. Due to starvation and want of food they do not hesitate to commit any crime and illegal activity. It is clear when Mother Courage says to the Cook,

I hear the villagers are eating their younger children. Nuns have been caught committed robbery. [Scene-IX, Line-22-24]

This is why, the Cook observing the inhuman activities says,

The world's dying out. [Scene-IX, Line-25]

A war never solves any problem. It creates tension in the human life. If the history of the human civilization is observed, it is found that a number of

wars have commenced in the world, such as, the great War of Troy (which almost destroyed the Greek civilization), the Thirty Years War between the Catholic and the Protestant (continued from 1616 to 1648), the Seventeen Years War from 1756 to 1763, the Napoleon War between England and France from 1803 to 1815, the First World War from 1914 to 1920, the Second World War from 1939 to 1945, the Independence War of Bangladesh in 1971, the War between the USA(United States of America) and Vietnam(also known as the Second Indochina War) from 1955 to 1975 , the war between Iraq and Iran from 1980 to 1988 and so on.

Every war destroys the life of the common people. The common people lose their wealth, children, relatives and power to live on as a whole. The soldiers or the war participators are not only affected by the war but also the civil people are affected. The destruction and the devastation of different wars likely the Thirty Years War, the First World War as well as the Second World War can be taken into consideration to prove this speech.

The Thirty Years War was a destructive war. It was one in which religion and politics became inextricably and confusingly intertwined(Willett,1978,157-158) and Germany was the most affected country of this war that is clear in the very play *Mother Courage and Her Children*,

Germany has lost half its inhabitants [Scene-IX, Introduction, Line-2]

Even the business, commerce and industry as well as agriculture of this country were totally startled. Famine and pestilence broke out severely throughout the whole country. Wolves roamed on the streets. The destruction and devastation of Germany during the war period were so high that Wedgwood (2005, 526) regrettably comments, 'Its effects, both immediate and indirect, were either negative or disastrous. Morally subversive, economically destructive, socially degrading, confused in its causes, devious in its course, futile in its result, it is the outstanding example in European history of meaningless conflict'.

The First World War and the Second World War are two most devastating and destructive wars in the history of the human civilization. During the

First World War some 8,500,000 died as a result of wounds and /or disease (Encyclopedia, 1992, 987).It has been estimated that the number of civilian deaths attributable to the war was higher than military casualties or around 13,000,000.These civilian deaths were largely caused by starvation, exposure, disease military encounters and massacres (Ibid).

The emergence of the Second World War that continued from 1939 to 1945 is a tragedy for the human civilization that caused a large number of people to face death. Estimates of total died in World War II vary from 35,000,000 to 60,000,000-a statistical difference of no small import (Ibid). Besides, the mankind also experienced the use of the atomic bomb in this war for the first time which entirely damaged Nagasaki and Hiroshima, two important Japanese cities at that time.

CONCLUSION

Brecht was an extreme communist. He believed in Marxism wholeheartedly. This is for the reason; he tried to use Marxist views in the play *Mother Courage and Her Children*. The fundamental concept of the play, its overall design characterization, action, dialogue, and structural devices like the juxtaposition of scenes and insertion of songs, as also its attitude to life and values, is determined by this vision (Chattergy, 1997, xlvi-xlvii).His main purpose of writing this play was to awaken the people presenting the horrible scenario of a war as well as the sufferings of the common people that they suffer during a war time through the characterization of *Mother Courage* and her family members as well as other common people likely the Cook, the Chaplain, Yvette Pottier and so on so that they can understand the social condition in which they live, what should they do whether there remains any problem and if they want to change the social condition, and what should they do in the changing atmosphere of their society. Even, due to shape the society Brecht has asked the common people through his writings to revolt against the present social system if there remains no justification in the existing social system. So Leach (1994) correctly says, 'Brecht wanted his theatre to intervene in the process of shaping society'. Having presented the horror, destruction and devastation of the Thirty Years War

in the play *Mother Courage and Her Children*, he has called upon all the people of the world to avoid the occurring of another war. Here Brecht professes the beginning of the Second World War.

The defiance of the 'Treaty of Versailles' by German chancellor Adolf Hitler as well as other social and political issues made the world people frustrated. Though the First World War caused a heavy damage and destruction for the world, the world leaders did not learn anything. Similarly, although *Mother Courage* lost her children one by one in the war, she did not learn anything from these accidents. Even she decided to continue her business and lastly she followed the Protestant soldiers to leave the town of Halle in order to continue her business.

Truly speaking, Brecht started to write *Mother Courage and Her Children* with an intention to protest the rise of Nazism and Fascism. Meanwhile, Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_II) and in response to this invasion Brecht completed the writing of this drama in the same year in order to aware his audiences and readers so that they can take proper initiatives to avoid the breaking out of the Second World War. It should be mentioned that the Second World War began by the German invasion of Poland which can be considered to be the most destructive war in the world history. The commencement of this global war indicates the people of the world have failed to follow the advice of the writer. So the very play *Mother Courage and Her Children* can be regarded to be a play that contains anti war sentiment exuberantly. It is also considered by some as the greatest play of the 20th century and perhaps the greatest anti-war play of all time (Hinton, 2009-2010, 2).

END NOTES

All the textual references have been quoted from *Mother Courage and Her Children*, translated by Eric Bentley from the original text *MUTTER COURAGE UND IHRE KINDER*, 1962.

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