

Capitalist Motives in Bertolt Brecht's Play Mother Courage and her Children

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Abstract: The paper attempts to provide a reading of Bertolt Brecht's play *Mother Courage and Her Children* by opening the realms of capitalist motives, through Marxist Literary Criticism. Instead of moving on to a consideration of play as a representation of fantasy, this paper unmasks the capitalist motives of a working woman during the 'Thirty Years' war at the cost of the death of her children, Swiss Cheese, Eilif, Katrin. This desire of an old woman, her crime, her participation, her desire to share in the profit of the war business finds an explanation in Marxist Literary Criticism.

Keywords: Capitalism, Profit, Alienation Effect, Business.

1. Introduction

The advent of two socialist economists like Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels marked the beginning of the political economy and the critique of capitalism. Like feminist theory and queer theory, Marxist theory is directed at social change, to alter the injustice and inequalities created by capitalist economic relations. Eventually, their ideas spread across Europe grew into a fervor that fed many revolutions and were adapted by Lenin and Stalin. Today Marxism ideologies are employed in the field of Literary Criticism as well. Marxist critics want to investigate how literature can work as a force for social change, or as a reaffirmation or reification of existing conditions. Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* is such a cluster of words that can operate to expose the capitalist motives.

2. To Have an Axe to Grind

Bertolt Brecht is a famous German playwright of the twentieth-century noted for his leftwing political views and pioneering use of Verfremdung's Effect, or Alienation Effect. As a Marxist, Brecht believes that the reason for all things is the capitalist motive of profit-making. Believed by many to be his masterpiece, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, tells this very the story of a profiteering woman during the 'Thirty Years' war. Brecht intention in the play is to show how capitalism can bring people to anything out of their character to protect themselves and their business. We see the same in *Mother Courage* that the saving of a business pre-empts all else. *Mother Courage's* foray into a capitalist mindset drives her every move. According to Marx, alienation as the product of capitalism refers to the situation of modern man, deprived of, robbed of, or alienated

from the totality of human nature which should be his. "It alienates from man his own body, external nature, his mental life and his human life." He believes that under capitalism in a society, a worker is compelled to sell his strength and his skills to the capitalist. The play unfolds *Mother Courage* as a victim of the capitalist way of life, in which war is a way of doing business. Even after losing all her children, she still attempts to carry on with her business. The play, *Mother Courage*, attempts to show how capitalism brutalizes *Mother Courage* herself. Her business with war causes her children's deaths. Inhumanity is revealed in her affinity with participation in the war.

Capitalism is a social system that both gives a rise to war and needs war. Brecht posits a sort of equivalence between war and capitalism, and the "business" of *Mother Courage* ultimately refers to capitalism. The brutality of capitalism lies in its exploitation of the masses. For instance, in this play, Swedish King taxes peasants to pay for his war is an example of the exploitation of the rulers over the ruled.

In the sixth scene, there is a dialogue about the duration of the war, with *Mother Courage* anxiously raising the question of how long the war will last. If it is to continue, she can comfortably invest in new goods for the cart. If it will finish soon, she cannot risk investing for fear of being left with goods that cannot be sold. Then the Chaplain says that the war will continue which makes *Mother Courage* more enthusiastic as she finds it as a nice way to get a living. *Mother Courage* was a woman caught up in the economy of the war— selling food, and just about anything in the mad optimistic belief that "I won't let you spoil my war for me. Destroys the weak, does it? Well, what does peace do for'em, huh? War feeds its people better." (*Mother Courage and Her Children*)

Mother Courage reveals in the third scene: "the rulers carry out war for obtaining one thing— profit." But she is not an exception. She is a capitalist who praises the continuation of the war to gain profit just like the ruling authority she is only motivated by profit. She leads a life of profit to provide a way for herself and her children's consumption. But the problem with *Mother Courage* is that she is never satisfied. Her beliefs in the war so that she gets a share as much as the rulers. Capitalism brutalizes *Mother Courage* and makes her greedy to gain profit. She goes to the extent of exploiting her children as draft animals to pull the canteen and finally to the death just like

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the ruling power who uses soldiers for the war. The business with which she makes a profit is mingled with the misery of others. Her preference for war over peace, death over life, extends even to her children. Like a capitalist, Mother Courage purchases happiness at the price of the unhappiness of another. She is only worried about the prices that have fallen dramatically and pays no heed to the values like her son, Eilif. In the eighth scene, she misses the opportunity to see Eilif for the last time because she gives priority to her profit than to her son. She is obsessed with business and profit by taking a deadly risk to drive the cart right through the bombardment to sell fifty loaves of bread. In a terrible place through bombardment, she hopes to reap her reward. The sense of greed is concrete when Mother Courage refuses to give a soldier a drink because he cannot pay. Her refusal highlights her sense of greed as a capitalist and her thirst for financial gain. Her greed is concrete when she haggles over the bribe needed to free the captured Swiss Cheese, and the delay results in the execution of her son. It is also revealed that Courage's apparent concern for the needs of the soldiers turns out to be a concern for them only while they remain customers, after which she consigns them to the pit.

3. Conclusion

The state is a kind of government formation that arises with capitalism. It is an illusion that rulers are taking care of the rules, and hence masks relations of economic exploitation. There has always been a struggle for existence and the best who exploit the other become fittest to survive. The protagonist of the play is such a fittest survival. Mother Courage and Her Children illustrate the cold, disengaged, emotionless, immoral aspects of the capitalistic machine in the worst possible light. It is no more a noble cause, instead "continuation of business by other means".

References

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