

IMPACT OF WAR ON THE PSYCHOLOGY OF A MERCHANT MOTHER IN BERTOLT BRECHTS'S PLAY. "MOTHER COURAGE AND HER CHILDREN"

Dr. Poonam Choudhary
Lecturer,
Department of English,
Garg Degree College
Laksar, Uttrakhand

Bertold Brecht was greatly influenced by the horror of 'The First World War' and by the sufferings of middle and lower classes. He wanted to draw the attention of his readers towards archaic social conditions and bring needed changes in such type of conditions. Mother Courage is one of the most outstanding and memorable characters in the twentieth century. Mother Courage appears as a noble figure on some occasions but many times she proved very cruel by nature, when she appeared as she is desirous for the continuance of war.

The play unfolds before our eyes in a manner that we develop an anathema for war and its horrors. There are various episodes in the play which graphically depict the death and devastation caused by war. It reflects the miseries of little and helpless people like Mother Courage who loses all her three children during the 'Thirty Years War', fought in the name of religion. In it the author has fully succeeded in his aim to fill us with horror and disgust by focusing our attention on the cruelty and brutality of war. In Brecht's own words,

"What is a performance of Mother Courage and Her Children primarily intended to show? That in war time the big profits are not made by little people. That war, which is a continuation of business by other means, makes human virtues fatal even to their possessors".

This paper is an attempt to study the writer's concern to write for the common people, Nick named as Mother Courage, Anna Firling is the most dominant character in the play. She is self-confident, self-assertive and yet somewhat timid. The most interesting facts about this woman is that each of her children was begotten by a different man in a different country. Thus her three children represent three different nationalities.

During the war half of its population killed and the other half was on the brink of starvation. The conflict between motherhood and business is immediately brought into focus by the wagon. Mother Courage is distracted by business as Eilif is led away, and we see how her trade and her family life are irresolvable of odds, her interest as a mother and her interest as a business woman damage each other. Her children tread by a string of military men might be thought of as "Children of the War".

Mother Courage understands the nature and the character of each of her children. She describes Eilif as a brave man just as his father was and says that he would meet a sad end in the course of the war, if he does not use his head. She describes her younger son Swiss as an honest boy who can survive the war if he remains honest. And she describes her daughter Kattrin as a

deeply sympathetic kind of girl and her advice to Kattrin is that she should not be too kind if she wants to survive.

The play highlights the widespread corruption that prevails during the war among the officers and men on both sides. All the children of Mother Courage become victims of war one after another. Her daughter Kattrin becomes dumb because of war. A soldier struck something into her mouth while she was a child. Later she is attacked and wounded by a drunken soldier when she is sent by Mother Courage to get more supplies from the town for her canteen wagon. The stage directions in the play reinforce our hatred for the war. They pointed that war has become an endless affair despite the deaths of General Tilly and king Gustavas. The stage direction in scene nine are thus, -

“The great war of religion has lasted sixteen years and Germany has lost half of its inhabitants. Those who are spread in battle, die by plague. Over once blooming countryside, hunger rages.”

Further, the story depicts the pathetic condition of a woman called Mother Courage. She travels with her family and canteen wagon from place to place, and from country to country. Different things happen to her at periods of time in different places. It presents the social realities of the situations being presented in the play. No one is able to alter the course of events and their living conditions. Each of the character is a victim of the prevailing circumstances and helpless condition against the social and political conditions of the time. About war Brecht believed, -

“ Teaches mankind about itself, as it were, it reads a lesson, a test to which the thunder of gun fire and exploding bombs merely provide the accompaniment ”.

The war causes so much destruction and devastation that Mother Courage, Katterin and the Cook are reduced to beggary. Later on Kattrin’s supreme act of self-sacrifice in attempting to save the towns people and children caught in a house there from the fiendish attack of the catholic soldiers provides tell tale evidence to the evils war taking a toll of innocent people who have nothing to do with it.

Many of the scenes in the play makes pointed references to war being a destructive and degenerative process. In the opening scene the sergeant compares war to a dice-player who will play the game both when he wins and losses. Once people begin to taste the forbidden fruit of war, then there is no stopping of it. The song sung by Mother Courage while offering drinks and victuals to the soldiers against cash, refers to the premature deaths to which the soldiers are marching forward,

“ Let your men drink before they die! Sabres and sword are hard to swallow First you must give them beer to drink. Then they can face what is to follow But let ‘em swim before they sink”.

She refers to the Sergeant who is recruiting soldiers for the war ‘a corpse on furlough and predicts death for the common soldiers participating in the war. Mother Courage’s dumb daughter Kattrin distinguishes herself as the character who most obviously suffers from the traumas of war. She wears these traumas on her body, since the war robs her of her voice as a child and later leaves her disfigured. She becomes dumb when a soldier thrusts something in her mouth while she was a child. Later on as an adult when she goes to procure wares for her mother’s wagon from the town during a temporary lull in the war, her face becomes disfigured when a drunken soldier wounds her on her face and eye.

Throughout the play, she figures as war's helpless witness, unable to save her brother Eilif from recruitment and Swiss cheese from the Catholic spices. On the both occasions she tries her best to avert the calamities by drawing the attention of her mother and brothers by crying indistinctly in vain. As Mother Courage continually notes, Kattrin suffers the virtues of kindness and pity, remaining unable to brook the loss of life around her. This kindness manifests itself in particular with regard to children, Kattrin's maternal impulses perhaps standing against Courage's relentless dealing and her resulting failure to protect her children. Her maternal instinct is revealed when she rushes into a burning house and saves a child and sings a lullaby to it by putting it on her lap. While Mother Courage loses her children due to foolishness but she herself remains alive. Kattrin on the other hand, as a mother figure, sacrifices her life in saving children from the war.

Mother Courage is worried about the safety of herself and of her dumb daughter Kattrin. When she notice that her daughter Kattrin sporting the hat and red boots of Yvette and imitating the gait of the later. She becomes angry with Kattrin and asks her to remove the harlot's hat and boots at once she says (186-page)

“I'll swear to it ! (seeing kattrin with the hat) What on earth are you upto – with a whore's hat Take it off this minute ! Are you mad ? With the enemy Coming? (she tears the hat off her head.) Do you want them to find you and make a whore of you? And she has the boots on too, straight from Babylon. I will soon fix that (she tries to get them off).”

Mother Courage's concern is to save her dumb daughter from the hands of the preying enemy soldiers. Here Mother Courage adds Biblical authority to her rebuke. Kattrin's imitation of Yvette's sexy walk, donning her hat and boots-suggests the sexual frustration of the dumb, grown up girl. In war time her only possible career would be prostitution. Mother Courage tries to save the honour of her daughter by smearing ashes over her face so that soldier would not fall far an ugly looking girl.

Mother Courage highlights another evil resulting from war when she speaks about the corruption, which prevails among the army officers and men on both sides. A Catholic sergeant has demanded two hundred gilders as a bribe for the release of Swiss Cheese and Mother Courage hopes to obtain her son's release by paying a bribe to the Catholic Sergeant. In this connection she says;

“Corruption is our only hope. As long as there is corruption, there'll be merciful Judges, and even the innocent may get off”.

Mother Courage tries her best to prevent the recruitment of her elder son Eilif manipulating the draw of lots in such a way that everyone wear a black cross signifying sure death in the war. Symbolically she draws the lot using the helmet of the Sergeant-the helmet ominously standing for human skull drawing of the lot provides ominously even though it has been manipulating. When her younger son draws a black cross, she mourns, “O Swiss Cheese, you will be goner too”. Mother Courage also accuses the recruiting officer that he is keen on enlisting young men just for the sake of money that he will get out of it. Later on we find Eilif is commended for his bravery in war for killing the peasants and getting their bulls for feeding the army. But for the same act during a short lived peace time, he is arrested and executed. This shows how war brutalizes people in the name of religion, honour and patriotism.

As a matter of fact, Mother Courage's very contradictions have an authenticity which appeals. She is a highly complex figure indeed. She is intelligent yet blind, indomitable yet unsuccessful. As Brecht wanted, she achieves a consistency through her contradictions. But Mother Courage is no psychological mystery. She is rather the human embodiment of a complex social phenomenon. Her main contradiction is to be located between her individual and personal role as a mother and her social and public function as tradeswoman. In her social situation she may also be seen as both exploiter and exploited, as a businessman she wants to get her out of the war. To that extent she acts as a small tradeswoman, she is a victim of establishment, the people in power who have unleashed war for their own profit. Thus she is both a product of the society and exploited by it.

Family and business -an irresolvable conflict which is to cost Swiss Cheese. His life at the end of the scene, expresses tensions from the start; Mother Courage's domestic and professional lives are always inextricably linked. All the three children of Mother Courage are lost due to war. What remains to be seen is whether or not courage will realize tragically that her own involvement in the war as a business empire is something conducive to the desolation of her family. But the shattering anti climax of the ending is that she never does. The writer gives a chance to see and consider this tragic situation ourselves, not distracted by either silent or loud scream.

Based on the opinion of the Chaplain that the war will drag on, Mother Courage decides to stock more products in her wagon. She sends Katrin with the regimental clerk to the town to procure them from a store called 'Golden Lion'. The chaplain asks Mother Courage if Katrin would be in no danger in the Clerk's company. She replies to the chaplain that Katrin is not such an attractive girl that anyone would feel tempted to rape her. The Chaplain then compliments on Mother Courage that she is really a shrewd woman who knows how to run her business. Mother Courage tells him that the poor people like her cannot survive without courage. The poor have to get up early in the morning to plough the land even in war time.

"The poor need courage. Why? They're lost. That they even get up in the morning is something – in their plight. or that they plough a field – in war time. Even their bringing children into the world shows they have courage, for they have no prospects. They have to hang each other one by one and slaughter each other in the lump, so if they want to look each other in the face once in a while, well it takes Courage."

This is one of the major expressions of social criticism in the play. The poor need courage for their very existence, given their state of deprivation and wretchedness. As a result of unnatural exploitation by church and state, Mother Courage here identifies herself with the have – nots and their courage born of despair. In the play, we find ourselves constantly questioning the role of Mother Courage what kind of Mother is she? Why she is called courage? How is she courageous? The audience questions the presentation they see before them. This is evident in the novel when we see mother courage singing a song to her daughter Katrin and then later paying for her funeral without any emotion.

Mother Courage has quite literally brought into the capitalist system of war. She still needs the war to be able to recoup her investment. She keeps to this system despite the fact that, under her nose in the same scene, the war also kills her son. Eilif's death establishes in audience's mind that, true to the inevitability of an Aristotelian tragedy, all of Courage's children

are to be lost to the war. What remains to be seen is whether or not courage will realize tragically that her own involvement in the war and her business empire is responsible for the destruction of her children and family. It is quite clear that Mother Courage shows herself to be more of a trades woman than a human being .

War involves a capitalist structure we in this play. The lower classes, the peasants, the soldiers and the traders, however, have no real way of gaining from its. If they enter willingly, like courage, into its market, they risk its dangers. In Brecht's own words.

“Those in war time big profits are made by little people that war which is a continuation of business by other means makes human virtues fatal even to their possessors. That no sacrifice is too great for the struggle against war “

The conflict between motherhood and business is immediately brought into focus by the wagon. It is both home and a place of business. Mother Courage is distracted by business as Eilif is led away, and we see how her trade and her family life are irresolvable at odds – her interest as a mother and her interest as a business woman damages each other. Like the black crosses, her fate is in her own hands, but she does not realize this before having paid the price with Eilif.

Work Cited

- Brecht, Bertolt. (Trans. Eric Bentley). *Mother Courage and Her Children*. New York : Grove, 1966.
- Brecht, Bertolt (Trnas. John Willett) *Mother Courage and Her Children*. London : Methueh, 1980.
- Chatterji, Ruby.Ed. Bertolt Brecht. (Trans Eric Bentley). *Mother Courage and Her Children*, New Delhi : Oxfore University press, 1985.
- Thompson, Peter. Plays in Production : *Mother Courage and Her Children*. Cambridge : Cambridge University press 1997.